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Rethinking the reader-author dynamics in if on a winter's night a traveler: A Lacanian reading

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ABSTRACT

The paper offers a critical re-examination of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* using the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. While existing scholarship on Calvino's novel largely conceptualizes the text as one of the earliest and most celebrated representations of the "death of the author" and the subsequent and inevitable autonomy of the reader, this study investigates the "return of the author" in the novel through Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. Extending Lacan's theory into literature, the paper examines how the subjectivity of the reader and the author are constituted through their encounter with the text. It argues that the reader's subjectivity is structured by the paradoxical presence of an author who is always there yet never fully accessible. In other words, the paper attempts to suggest that the "dead figure" of the author maintains its status as the prohibited "object of desire" and reappears in parts in the text according to the reader's unconscious desire for them. The literary text is treated as analogous to the repository of signifiers that constitute the symbolic Other, with the writer and the reader functioning as the literary equivalents of the psychoanalytic mother and the child. This approach challenges the existing binary of authorial presence and absence, offering instead a psychoanalytic model of subject formation facilitated by the triadic relationship between the reader, the writer, and the text.

Contribution/ Originality: The study offers novel insights into Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and attempts to revisit the discourse on authorship and readership. It uses a new interpretative framework grounded in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. It contributes to interdisciplinary studies by fostering a productive dialogue between literary practice and theoretical discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, a novel that deploys the literary technique of meta-reflexivity, explores the dynamic and intricate entanglement between the reader, the author, and the text. The work of fiction thematizes the very process of the production of the novel by fictionalizing the reader and the writer as characters within the fictional space. It is a novel in the form of a pastiche consisting of a series of narratives that are abruptly interrupted and left unfinished. The chapters chronicle the literary journey of the characters, namely, the unnamed male reader (or the Reader) and the mysterious female reader named Ludmilla. These character-readers find themselves caught in a series of adventures following their decision to purchase Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and their subsequent plan to replace the "defective *Traveler* with a brand-new one in mint condition"

(Calvino, 1998). However, their decision to get hold of the original and uncorrupted copy of the book that they initially began reading sets them on a trail through ten such novels that are incomplete for various reasons, including "an error of the bindery" or "mixed-up signatures," resulting in the text coming to an abrupt halt or it getting stolen (Calvino, 1998). Calvino's text, therefore, offers a wide spectrum of conceptual positions, as it is clearly an attempt at redefining the relationship that binds the author and the reader to the text. The paper seeks to explore how *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* reconfigures the author-reader-text relationship vis-à-vis the Lacanian notions of desire and subjectivity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing critical studies on Calvino's novel predominantly interpret the text as exemplifying Roland Barthes's formulation of the "death of the author" and the subsequent and inevitable autonomy of the reader. Such studies, as Panigrahi (2016) notes, continuously dismantle the figure of the author as "the uncontested creative genius" and recast the author as "a mediator through which the infinite play of language precipitates into the text" (p. 3677). By dissolving the author-characters like Italo Calvino and Silas Flannery into textual constructs, these studies "relegate the author to the role of a mere creator of the text," thereby foregrounding the reader's participation as co-creator of the text (Mihailescu, 2015; Subramanian, 2017). These scholars, like many others, have established how Calvino's text subverts the traditional literary roles assigned to the reader and the author. In other words, these studies position *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* as a compelling illustration of the post-structuralist claim later developed more fully within reader-response theory that emphasizes the integral role of the reader in the creation of the meaning of a text. As Iser (1978) contends, "a literary text can only produce a response when it is read" (p. ix), underscoring that a text acquires meaning through the reader's interpretive engagement with it rather than existing as "a detachable message" (p. 7) or as "a finished and neatly parcelled bundle of meaning" (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005). Calvino's self-reflexive strategy of "opening and closing the book with a reference to itself being read" (Fink, 1991) along with the technique of "fictional recentring," through which "the actual reader from the actual world steps into the role of the substitute reader and is relocated to the textual actual world" (Moosavinia & Baji, 2016) have prompted many critics to "celebrate the novel as an incarnation of the teachings of reader-response criticism" (Fink, 1991). These studies are emblematic of the kind of scholarship generated by Calvino's enigmatic text over the years. However, at a closer glance, such interpretative attempts seem to structure themselves around a central, often reductive and uncontested, notion that draws inspiration from Barthes (1977) initial discussion on the binary logic of "the death of the author" and "the birth of the reader" (p. 148). Though the dyadic model introduced by Barthes was the subject of much contention and modification later, these studies fail to address those aspects in any significant manner. In completely negating the authorial presence or agency within the text, these studies tend to overlook the more nuanced dialogue or interplay between/among the reader, the author, and the text.

The present study, however, is a critical re-examination of Barthes's pronouncement of the author's death. It posits that the re-inscription of the author or the lingering presence of the author both as narrator and characters within the novel strictly undermines the possibility of a truly authorless paradigm. Barthes himself revises his original claim in his later work "The Pleasure of the Text." Commenting on the paradoxical return of the author figure, he remarks: "...lost in the midst of a text (not *behind* it, like a *deus ex machina)* there is always the other, the author" (Barthes, 1975). Even though Barthes famously dismissed the authority of the author in his early writing, his later assertion reveals how traces of the author that persist within the text continue to shape the text. The author, according to Barthes, reappears in the text not as a sovereign subject but as a "lost" entity, that is absent in its biographical and institutional form. Jane Gallop, developing upon Edmund Burke's close reading of Barthes's paradoxical claim, provides a compelling comparison between this lost author and the Lacanian *objet petit a.* In her opinion, Barthes did not restore the author to its former position of authority and biographical presence. Instead, the author, who appears "lost in the midst of the text," has indeed passed through death but re-emerges transformed

elevated to the object of desire (Barthes, 1975). Barthes's statement, therefore, is not a negation of his earlier stance but rather a theoretical extension of it. The author, though dead, resurfaces not as a presence to be located but as a perpetual object of pursuit that sustains the reader's desire and textual pleasure.

The study also distinguishes itself from more recent critical interpretations of the novel that disprove the notion of "the death of the author" and emphasize the sustained authorial presence and control within the narrative. Salvatori and Calvino (1986) analyze the novel as a commentary on "the general question of writers' authority and readers' autonomy and the more specific question of whether readers can claim autonomy from a writer's authority when that authority is inscribed in the text" (p. 185). She argues against the celebration of reader emancipation in the novel and instead posits that readers are "subject to the framing of the frame" set by the author in advance (p. 187). The reader's response, therefore, according to Salvatori, is programmed by the authorial and narrative design. Similarly, Watts (1991) examines how "the power that Barthes presumes the reader can exercise over a text is inverted in the story of Calvino's Reader" (p. 711). In her article titled "Reinscribing a Dead Author in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*," she contends that Calvino deliberately uses metafictional strategies not to erase the author, as prevailing scholarship suggests, but to reinscribe the dead author under a different guise. This idea is further emphasized by Ali (2009), who argues that Calvino's text does not stage a complete erasure of the author by attributing supremacy to the reader but instead highlights how the dynamic interplay between the writer, the reader, and the text is integral to the ongoing act of interpretation. He draws inspiration from Wayne Booth's theory of the "implied author" and Iser's theory of aesthetic response to maintain that "the reader's perception of the novel is not independent of the author's since, in Calvino's vision, they both share in the process of weaving the events of the novel" (p. 53). These critical studies, even when they collectively challenge the reductive poststructuralist readings of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by engaging with questions of authorship and inversion of authority and agency, often situate themselves within the binary framework of presence versus absence or control versus autonomy.

The paper, on the contrast, is founded upon the paradox articulated by Barthes and expanded by Jane Gallop, who interprets the author's position not as an external controlling force "pulling the strings" from behind the text but as a figure embedded within it (Johnson, 2013). Calvino's textual framing of the author figure as neither fully present nor completely absent, an elusive and unreachable figure concealed within the text, demands an inquiry that goes way beyond the debate surrounding the "reader's autonomy" and "writer's authority". What compels this study then is the desire to explore how the author's evasive presence within the text reshapes the readers' subjectivity and consequently the subjectivity of the author thereby significantly altering the dynamics of reading. Unlike the previous studies that primarily investigated the possibility of emancipation of the reader from the author, or those that explored the dynamics between literature and readers using the "affective" or "bodily dimensions" (Kang, 2022), this study proposes a different interpretive framework that shifts its focus from readerly autonomy to psychoanalytic subject formation. Rather than framing Calvino's "unnatural narrative" as producing "effects of disconcertedness, alienation, and defamiliarization" (as cited in Kang (2022)) on readers, it foregrounds the structural dependency between the author and the reader by contextualizing the return of the author within the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. It investigates how the reader's desire is structured by the paradoxical presence of an author who is always there yet never fully accessible. The paper also distinguishes itself from Salvatori's claim that the reader's desire in the novel is structured by the desire of the authorial Other standing in for the symbolic order. Her analysis ultimately frames the author as a static absence, an external force whose desire merely drives the readers to complete the fragmented narratives and recover the imagined whole. This reading of the novel is, however, limited in its scope as it overlooks the elusive authorial presence intricately woven into the narrative. It also fails to account for how the subjectivity is constituted in both the reader and the author, assuming instead that the author is always already a "fully formed autonomous subject" who merely guides the reader's desire (Johnson, 2013). The current study addresses this gap, for it treats the author as a split or a barred subject and positions them not as external to the text but embedded within its very fabric. Calvino's staging of the paradox in which the author's presence within the text is assured yet

remains perpetually elusive to both the character Reader and the readers alike mirrors the Lacanian logic of desire and split subject and hence suggests a far more complex relationship of the author to the text that defies the binary of complete presence or absence.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper draws extensively from Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly his conception of the mirror stage. It explores how *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* as a work of fiction is the fulfilment of the Lacanian theory of the development of the reader's and writer's subjectivity or the becoming of the literary subject. This approach entails, as Luke Johnson puts forth, treating the literary text as analogous to the repository of signifiers that constitute the symbolic Other. The paper goes on to identify a direct equivalence between the psychoanalytic mother in Lacanian formulation and the author and the fictional counterpart of the author in Calvino's text. This framework expands the scope of the research beyond the post-structuralist thought that decentralizes the author. It allows us to further examine how the author functions as the prohibited "object of desire" and reappears in parts of the text according to the reader's unconscious desire for them (Lacan, 1998).

The mirror stage, which marks a pivotal moment in the formation of a child's subjectivity, when transposed into the realm of literature, becomes a compelling metaphor for the reader's interpellation as a subject within the text's symbolic framework. Just as the infant must relinquish the maternal body to enter the symbolic, so too must the reader undergo a separation from the author to constitute themselves as a subject within the discursive field of the text. That is to say, in order for the reader to emerge as a distinct entity or to become a readerly subject capable of interpretation and meaning-making, the imagined unity between the reader and the author must be severed. The reader's literary engagement with the text is mediated by a developmental phase analogous to the child's recognition of wholeness in the mirror, where the reader encounters their own capacity for textual interpretation and meaning-making. This process requires that the author submits the reader to symbolization much like how the maternal figure facilitates the child's entry into language. Hence, the death of the author in this context is fraught with a heavy sense of loss as far as a reader is concerned. The sense of loss that accompanies the reader's separation from the author resonates with the Lacanian understanding of subjectification as fundamentally structured by lack.

4. DISCUSSION

The author's involvement in shaping the reader's subjectivity is evident at the beginning of the novel, where the writer-character Italo Calvino addresses readers through the narrator's voice: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*" (Calvino, 1998). Calvino (1998) further instructs readers on how to engage with the text by urging us "to read properly" and absorb "both the murmuring effect and the effect of the hidden intention, which you (and I, too) are as yet in no position to perceive" (p. 20). The narrator, warning readers about the hidden dimensions and deeper layers of meaning within the text, not only defines the reader's role but also incorporates both the character Reader and real readers into the narrative framework. This guidance directs readers toward a specific mode of engagement with the text.

By embedding a self-representative figure or what Booth (1983), quoting Kathleen Tillotson, describes as the artistic "second self" (p.71) into the textual space, Calvino guides the Reader's emergence as a subject, a process analogous to the Lacan's mirror stage. Lacan (1998) elaborates on the process of identification in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, wherein he argues that "the identification in question is not specular, immediate identification" but instead the subject takes support from the field of the Other (p. 268). To put it differently, identification includes something beyond the subject merely encountering its own reflection in the mirror. Rather, for the subject to internalize this image and develop a sense of the self, constant support is required from the field of the Other. Calvino disguises himself in the novel through the creation of an unreliable narrator who figures in the first story as the character called "I". The writer chooses to refer to this character using the simple pronoun of 'I' so

that he can "put into this 'I' a bit of himself, of what he feels or imagines he feels" (Calvino, 1998). Calvino uses this narrative strategy of self-disguise by creating an "implied author, the 'I' parading as the real Italo Calvino, talking to the imaginary reader 'you', whom the reader takes to be himself/herself" to position himself as a mediator in the readers' identification (Fink, 1991).

The writer's role here is that of the psychoanalytic mother who facilitates the child's entry into the mirror stage, which serves as a crucial stage in the construction of the subject's identity. When the mother, representing the Other, calls the child's attention toward the mirror image by saying "Look, it's you!" the child is put in a position where it sees itself through the eyes of the Other. Similarly, Calvino (1998) sets the stage for the Reader's (the fictional characters within the novel) as well as the readers' (the subjects of reading) entry into the mirror stage through his directive: "So here you are now, ready to attack the first lines of the first page" (p. 14). This mode of address, as Iche and Sorlin (2022) argue, draws the readers into the fiction "in the most potent ways" thereby inviting them "to reconstruct the explicitly stated 'situation of address'" (p.3). In order to further lure us into the game that he sets out for us, the authorial narrator adds: "You have now read about thirty pages and you're becoming caught up in the story" (Calvino, 1998). He also indirectly tells the readers not to expect the "unmistakable tone of the author" to be guiding them through the novel (p. 14). As Fink (1991) commenting on the narrative strategies in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* puts it, the author deliberately manipulates the readers' position, transforming them from detached observers "watching the game from a safe place outside the discourse" (p. 94) into active players whose "(erotic) desire to discover the mystery" ultimately becomes a trap set by the author to "draw us into the narrative almost against our will" (p. 95).

Calvino (1998) structural decision to both begin and end the novel with his name: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*… I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino," underscores his role in facilitating the emergence of readers as subjects (pp. 10, 200). The literary purpose behind the use of second-person narration, argues (Castelli, 2023), is to "force the readers to identify with the fictional protagonist" and draw them "dramatically into the text while simultaneously ejecting them" (p. 197). By employing the technique of strategic self-insertion, the writer, while maintaining his authorial presence in an implicit way within the narrative, simultaneously creates a space for the readers to "cut their way through reading as if through a dense forest" and assume an active role in the textual process (Calvino, 1998). He also warns them not to "expect anything in particular from this particular book" by convincing them into believing that "You're the sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything" (Calvino, 1998). Moreover, to mark the Reader's initiation into the Imaginary stage complete, the narrator urges the Reader to continue reading regardless of whether the text appears complete or incomplete: "The pages of photocopying stop at this point, but for you the only thing that matters now is to continue your reading" (Calvino, 1998). Through direct engagement with the readers, and through the use of narrative digressions employed as a "technique of critical detachment through which the text reflects on itself and calls into question the reader" (Santovetti, 2011) the writer manipulates the Reader's (as well as readers') emotional and intellectual reactions thereby setting the stage for their entry into the Imaginary stage.

The initiation into the Imaginary phase is marked by the readers developing a sense of awareness of themselves as an entity distinct from the authorial subject. As Lacan would say, "the concept of the other precedes the concept of self, and is imperative to the development of the self" (as cited in Johnson (2013)). In the novel, Calvino employs various narrative techniques to affirm the self-other dichotomy. His decision to maintain the identity of the narrator cum author as an "elusive, invisible, and crafty puppeteer who sets in motion and controls the machinations of the story as well as the Lettore's every thought" helps in the concretization of the self-other dichotomy (Salvatori & Calvino, 1986). As the narrator explicitly confesses: "It is 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" (Calvino, 1998). The reader's awareness of the author's subtle control over the narrative, as well as their thoughts, makes them acutely conscious of their position in relation to the

Other, reinforcing the Lacanian idea that the self can only be understood through its interaction with, and recognition of, the Other. Furthermore, the inclusion of the author's commentary serves the function of not only alerting the readers to see themselves as another an image distinct from their real self but to see themselves from the perspective of the 'Other,' in this context, the author. The author disguising as narrator skillfully sets us up and controls the machinations of our thoughts: "You are the sort of reader who is sensitive to such refinements; you are quick to catch the author's intentions and nothing escapes you" (Calvino, 1998). Calvino issues a paradoxical demand, insisting that the readers, as Bloom (1997) suggests, to "be me but not me," or, in other words, to simultaneously identify with the author's voice while at the same time maintaining a critical distance from it (p. 70).

By deliberately using "I" for the narrator, the author tries to conceal himself within the text, creating a strategic ambiguity as is revealed in the paragraph: "Just as the author, since he has no intention of telling about himself, decided to call the character 'I' as if to conceal him, not having to name him or describe him, because any other name or attribute would define him more than this stark pronoun…" (Calvino, 1998). The reader's inability to fully access the author as a concrete, identifiable figure forces them to recognize their self as distinct from the author's. The writer also "piles supposition on supposition in long paragraphs without dialogue" to create "a thick, opaque layer of lead," by which he can conceal himself in the text or "pass unnoticed" (Calvino, 1998). The reader's recognition of the self is, thus, mediated by the obscured figure of the author, leading to a heightened awareness of the self-other dichotomy. By concealing himself in the text "an anonymous presence against an even more anonymous background" the writer thus cements the self-other dichotomy, signaling the disintegration of the reader-author unity (Calvino, 1998). This moment marks a shift as the reader is forced to confront the idea of moving "over to 'the other side'," thereby losing the initially "privileged relationship" they had with the text (Calvino, 1998). These authorial directives encourage the reader as well as the readers towards identifying with the readerly image that the text projects.

The narrator in the first story of "*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*" encourages readers toward identification when he states: "If you, reader, couldn't help picking me out... this is simply because I am called 'I'....but this alone is reason enough for you to invest a part of yourself in the stranger 'I'" (Calvino, 1998). The writer does this skillfully by creating "a character, a reader called Reader, who is both particularized and generalized" and by purposely "not revealing the Reader's name, physical attributes, occupation, and so on" (Dameron, 1986). As the narrator explains: "This book so far has been careful to leave open to the Reader who is reading the possibility of identifying himself with the Reader who is read: this is why he was not given a name…and so he has been kept a pronoun, in the abstract condition of pronouns, suitable for any attribute and any action" (Calvino, 1998). Calvino's use of the second person pronoun in the novel to address the readers is another strategy by which the writer promotes identification because it opens up a shared reading space where the identities of the Reader and the reader merge.

Just as the child undergoes a sense of alienation following the loss of the mother, so too does the reader cast in the position of the child experience a comparable feeling of alienation upon separation from the author. While this separation is a necessary precondition for the reader to assume an active, autonomous interpretive role, it nonetheless generates a profound sense of loss. The author anticipates and prepares the readers for this by adopting the guise of the narrator to inform them of their impending loss that they are likely to encounter eventually in the course of the narrative: "Perhaps at first you feel a bit lost, as when a person appears who, from the name, you identified with a certain face, and you try to make the features you are seeing tally with those you had in mind, and it won't work" (Calvino, 1998). The reader here is confronted with a sense of disorientation, an experience that parallels the Lacanian notion of alienation.

However, the sense of loss that the reader experiences, paradoxically, is what fosters the reader's awareness of their distinctness, ultimately paving the way for their becoming. The author, like the mother, therefore, encourages the readers towards false identification with the readerly image in the text: "But then you go on and you realize that the book is readable nevertheless, independently of what you expected of the author, it's the book in itself that arouses your curiosity; in fact, on sober reflection, you prefer it this way, confronting something and not quite knowing yet

what it is" (Calvino, 1998). The narrator, in the guise of addressing or instructing the readers, not only reminds them of the autonomy of the text but also subtly alerts them to the distinct roles of the reader and the author by drawing attention to the text as the very site or evidence of their disunion. These words prompt the readers to internalize the axiom that this is "not the author unraveling this passage; the author knew what they meant from the beginning and has long since moved on to something else; it must, then, be me "(Johnson, 2013).

The novel ostensibly cedes the narrative space to the readers, offering them agency, yet, at every juncture, the author remains the unseen force orchestrating the entire experience, subtly guiding the readers' interpretive journey. For instance, through the character of Professor Uzzi-Tuzii, the writer directs the reader's attention by saying: "Now, around you, there is no longer the room of the department, the shelves, the professor: you have entered the novel, you see that Nordic beach, you follow the footsteps of the delicate gentleman. You are so absorbed that it takes you a while to become aware of a presence at your side" (Calvino, 1998). The manipulation of the Reader becomes further evident in the portrayal of Madame Marne, as the narrator steers the Reader's expectations to align with the author's intentions, subtly shaping their perception of her character: "Your attention, as reader, is now completely concentrated on the woman, already for several pages you have been circling around her…. it is your expectation, reader, that drives the author toward her" (Calvino, 1998).

In a similar vein, the writer, commenting on his narrative strategy, states that.

> I'm producing too many stories at once because what I want is for you to feel, around the story, a saturation of other stories…a space full of stories that perhaps is simply my lifetime, where you can move in all directions, as in space, always finding stories that cannot be told until other stories are told first, and so, setting out from any moment or place, you encounter always the same density of material to be told (Calvino, 1998)

The passage highlights how the writer strategically manipulates the reader's as well as readers' expectations by creating a textual framework saturated with multiple narratives surrounding the main narrative. He likens this layered narrative structure to "a forest that extends in all directions," suggesting that it is filled with untold stories that "cannot be told until other stories are told first" (Calvino, 1998). Commenting on his strategic narrative choice, the narrator reveals that this "narrative discretion" or "the trick of the narrative art" is intended to alert the readers to the abundance of untold stories that are hinted at but never fully realized (Calvino, 1998). The narrator, fully aware that "the person who follows my story may feel himself a bit cheated, seeing that the stream is dispersed into so many trickles," uses this as a deliberate strategy to demonstrate that the true richness of the text lies not in what is told but in the vast reservoir of untold possibilities (Calvino, 1998). By openly acknowledging the "interruption of the plot as the structuring motif of his novel," the writer encourages the readers to actively engage with the gaps in the text (Santovetti, 2011).

Furthermore, Calvino (1998) also offers a sensory dimension to this structured reading experience, as is evident when he narrates: "The first sensation this book should convey is what I feel when I hear the telephone ring," and later when he says, "These pages I am writing should also transmit a cold luminosity…" (pp. 104, 127). All these different instances illustrate that it is impossible to have a purely readerly experience independent of the author's intentions. Even when the reader appears to have achieved a form of liberation from the author following the dissolution of the reader-author dyad that necessarily marks the emergence of the readerly subject complete, the liberation remains ambivalent. In other words, readers find themselves in a paradoxical state of not knowing "whether it is a liberation or a condemnation" (Calvino, 1998). This is similar to the experience of disorientation experienced by the Male Reader, who at one instance in his quest for the text says: "when they liberated me, I mean, when they arrested me" (Calvino, 1998). In this sense, the reader is never completely emancipated but remains trapped within the discursive machinery of authorship. What might seemingly appear as liberation can equally be read as condemnation because the reader's experience is always mediated by the author, standing in for the Other, thereby rendering a pure or untainted readerly experience impossible.

Since the reader's agency is always circumscribed within the symbolic field that precedes and exceeds them, alienation is inevitable. While alienation refers to the reader's loss or the inadequacy of signifiers in the text, which prevents the readerly subject from becoming the reader s/he wants to be; separation is about recognizing the inherent lack within the symbolic system itself. The inexhaustible nature of the text it's continual deferral of closure and its openness to expansion is an indication that even the symbolic order of the text does not have enough signifiers and therefore carries an inherent lack. In the novel, this idea is exemplified through the various "truncated narratives" or "unfinishable stories" inscribed within the macrotext of the novel. The fragmented micro narratives that constitute the novel could be read as voids or holes, and "the mystery behind these pages that move from one volume to another" (Calvino, 1998) may be understood, psychoanalytically, as symptomatic of the author's unconscious desire, "the thing they wanted (to say) but could not" (Johnson, 2013). In other words, these fragmented and unresolved microtexts function for the readers as the unrepresentable part of the desire of the Other. If we study the reader-writer dynamics in the text from a psychoanalytic perspective, the creation of Reader as a character in the textual framework can be interpreted as the manifestation of the writer's desire. This is analogous to how a child, as conceptualized by Freud (1905), becomes an outcome of the parents' desire for something. In Freud's theorization, the child serves as a substitute for what the parent lacks, a symbolic compensation for their castration. Lacan reframes it in terms of desire and states that the child is a product of the parents' desire for something. As Fink (1995) puts it: "One or both of them wanted something, and the child results from that wanting" (p. 50). The text itself and the inclusion of a reader character within it is a testament to the fact that the author wants something.

Upon recognizing the holes or the "bits perceived to be missing," the Reader attempts to determine what it is that the author is lacking, put another way, what the author wants from them. The Reader strategically transforms themselves into the object of the author's desire and takes up the responsibility of filling the gaps in the text in an attempt to reach out to the author and compensate for the primordial loss. In doing so, that is, by filling in for the author's lack and becoming an active interpreter of the text, they ultimately manage to find a way back to the author, at least figuratively. However, even when the Reader tries "jumping over the gap, picking up the story by grasping the edge of the prose that comes afterward" to uncover the underlying basis for textual coherence, the Reader as well as readers end up encountering new beginnings without ever reaching closure: "You can't get your bearings: the characters have changed, the settings, you don't understand what it's about, you find names of people and don't know who they are…"(Calvino, 1998). In addition, the structure of the novel itself is such that the reader is tasked with navigating multiple, disparate texts simultaneously without any definitive sense of their origin and where they are leading. Calvino (1998), speaking through the voice of the Professor, once again emphasizes this in his assertion: "Don't ask where the rest of this book is!" … "All books continue in the beyond…" (p. 58). The fact that there is a persistent possibility for the addition of more texts, or, in linguistic terms, more signifiers, indicates that the fundamental 'lack' has nothing to do with the reader as such but is constitutive of the very structure of the Other itself.

In such situations, maintains Johnson (2013), the Reader as well as readers are confronted with two options: that of fully surrendering to the author's desire by allowing themselves to be guided by it or to appropriate the author's desire as means to construct their own subjectivity (p. 91). In other words, the reader must choose between submitting to the author's desire or transforming it into a productive force in the formation of their own identity. The reader who desperately tries to "complete" the author, as exemplified by the Male Reader in Calvino's novel, ultimately "fails and winds up being completely washed over by the text, swallowed up by the author" (Calvino, 1998). His relentless pursuit of closure by trying to find conclusions to the ten novels he had begun reading only intensified his sense of confusion and brought more disorder. The Reader ultimately ends up becoming a fiction within a fiction, reflecting how the more actively he pursues coherence, the more he is absorbed into the machinery of the text. In this way, he loses his own agency and becomes its effect, its product, or even its residue. The Reader's failure to find either the origin or the conclusion to these incipit novels highlights the destructive potential of fully engaging with or

responding to the author's desire. The impossibility of filling the author's desire or the consequence of it is symbolically represented in the novel through the Reader's eventual imprisonment. The Reader, in his attempt to sort out the conspiracies behind these texts, ends up being jailed towards the end of the novel. The Male Reader's quest for completion, hence, reflects the danger of being subsumed by the author's desire, which leaves no room for the reader's autonomy or the formation of their own subjectivity. The ending of the novel, with the Reader finally returning to the bed with Ludmilla, saying "Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino," also captures the entrapment of the Reader within the circular loop set by the author (Calvino, 1998). Although it seems like a neat ending on the surface, it is ironically circular because the novel ends with the Reader reading the novel that he is inscribed in. His desire to complete the author is rendered practically impossible because his narrative is completed by the author, or in other words, his subjectivity is authored. By inscribing him within a prewritten or already scripted loop, he is turned into just another text by the author, and hence, this is a clear instance of being swallowed up by the author. This can be explained with the analogy of the overprotective mother in Lacanian psychoanalysis, whose engulfing maternal presence inhibits the child's entry into the symbolic, thereby denying them the space to develop their own subjectivity. This is a more detrimental situation than neglect, where the child, despite being ignored, still retains the freedom to become a subject. Lacan (2007) illustrates this dynamic vividly by likening the mother to a "huge crocodile in whose jaws you are" (p. 112). The author's desire, like the mother's, is an unknowable desire shrouded in mystery, which, if fully internalized by the reader, risks absorbing the subject entirely.

Ludmilla, unlike the Male Reader, does not try to bring order to the texts by resolving the conflicts in the fragments of the text she is reading. Even when the author controls and manipulates the readers' engagement with the text by offering directives, Calvino, through the character of Ludmilla, demonstrates how a reader can engage with the text without succumbing to the need to complete or resolve the narrative conflicts. As the narrator explains, Ludmilla does not consider authors as "incarnated in individuals of flesh and blood; they exist for her only in published pages…Ludmilla is always ready to follow them, in the fickle, carefree relations one can have with incorporeal persons" (Calvino, 1998). She engages with the author's desire by positioning herself in relation to it without being consumed by it, as is evident in her conversation with the Male Reader about the novel "*Outside the Town of Malbork*," where she expresses her desire for a more open and fluid engagement with the text: "I wish the things I read weren't all present, so solid you can touch them; I would like to feel a presence around them, something else, you don't quite know what, the sign of some unknown thing" (Calvino, 1998). The statement demonstrates that the reader's path to autonomy lies not in trying to complete or resolve the author's desire but in reconstructing their own subjectivity in relation to it. Ludmilla, for instance, says the narrator, uses fragments of text "detached from the context to construct for herself a ghostly partner, known to her alone, in the penumbra of her semi-consciousness…" (Calvino, 1998). The reference to "ghostly partner" can be interpreted as the "readerly image" or the image that the reader constructs of themselves in their mind following their separation from the author, in their move towards autonomous symbolic identification. By allowing the author's desire to shape her while maintaining her individuality, Ludmilla exemplifies a model of reading that acknowledges the author's control without succumbing to it. This idea is further reinforced when Ludmilla explains the kind of novels she enjoys: "the novel I would like to read…should have as its driving force only the desire to narrate, to pile stories upon stories, without trying to impose a philosophy of life on you, simply allowing you to observe its own growth, like a tree, an entangling, as if of branches and leaves" (Calvino, 1998). Ludmilla embodies a form of reading that allows her to relate to the author's intent acknowledging its presence without letting it completely dominate her interpretation or subjective experience.

At one instance, Calvino (1998) himself explicitly challenges the reader's passivity and calls for active engagement with the text: "How long are you going to let yourself be dragged passively by the plot? …. Your function was quickly reduced to that of one who records situations decided by others, who submits to whims, finds himself involved in events that elude his control. Then what use is your role as protagonist to you?" (p. 168). The writer, in other words, critiques the passive role that the reader assumes while reading, emphasizing that the role of the reader

becomes irrelevant if they submit themselves to the whims of the author. He further adds that if the reader were to simply follow the plot without critically engaging with the text, they would not just be victims of the narrative but also complicit in the manipulation the narrative imposes. In Calvino (1998) words, we too become "an accomplice in the general mystification" (p. 168). Psychoanalytically speaking, the feat of subjectification or a literary subject's entry into the symbolic order is marked by the subject's transformation from being a passive recipient of the text to becoming an active producer of textual meaning.

Calvino intentionally adopts an exceedingly fragmentary narrative structure, replete with omissions, discontinuities, and abundant gaps, in order to compel the reader's interpretative imagination and to persistently encourage them to recognize their constitutive role in the construction of textual meaning. The writer employs an approach similar to that of Prophet Mohammed, who figures in the story of Silas Flannery, because like the prophet, who, while dictating the Koran, leaves the sentence half-finished for his scribe to complete, Calvino also encourages his readers to engage in the construction of the text by filling in the absences that he deliberately leaves fragmented (Calvino, 1998). In addition, the novel's structural design, with its numbered chapters forming the "outer frame" and interspersed narratives serving as the "inner frame," offers us, the readers, an opportunity to critically reflect on our reading practice. As Salvatori and Calvino (1986) observe, Calvino employs the "outer frame" to illustrate how not to read a text by portraying the various flawed reading practices of the characters. The "inner frame," or the narratives, in turn, provide readers with the opportunity to practice the reading lessons (p. 203). The reading strategy proposed by Calvino ultimately leads the readers toward an understanding of the generative practice of reading as a metaphor for an unsettling void "a gap that opens onto another gap, a chasm that empties into the infinite abyss." (Calvino, 1998) In facilitating the reader to assume an active, participatory role in the creation and interpretation of textual meaning, Calvino, as Varsava (1986) notes, "compels the reader to play the author" thereby positioning them as literary subjects in the symbolic order of the text (p. 114). The sense of autonomy that the reader experiences following the separation from the maternal author, contends (Johnson, 2013), "can only and finally be consolidated through the development of an authorial ego in the reader themselves" (p. 106).

If the reader's potential for jouissance lies in inhabiting the authorial position or the role of the author, then conversely, the author experiences a parallel jouissance by freeing themselves of the authorial constraints and becoming a reader. The writer's desire to relinquish authorship and retreat into the position of the reader, thereby escaping the burden of signification is another recurring theme in Calvino's text. This longing reflects a deeper psychoanalytic impulse. In assuming the role of the reader, the author attempts to strategically disavow their authorial identity at least momentarily and experience a feeling of bliss or plenitude that preceded the development of their authorial subjectivity. In the novel, the writer's alter ego, Silas Flannery, for instance, exemplifies the yearning to unburden himself from the constraints of the role of the author. He even perceives writing as "the unnatural effort to which he has to subject himself" (Calvino, 1998). The writer often expresses a sense of nostalgia at the sheer sight of the reader, "a young woman in a deck chair," whom he often observes "intently reading a book on another terrace" (Calvino, 1998). He longs for that phase, which psychoanalytically speaking is the time before symbolic castration, when he could allow himself some "disinterested reading" or "abandon himself to a book written by another author" (Calvino, 1998). He laments over how his role as an author has changed his ability to experience reading in its purest form: "since I have become a slave laborer of writing, the pleasure of reading has finished for me" (Calvino, 1998). The writer's desire to dismiss his status as an author and become the reader, or in other words, to rediscover the state of primary jouissance that existed before the entry into the symbolic, is made explicit when the narrator confesses that: "What I do has as its aim the spiritual state of this woman in the deck chair framed by the lens of my spyglass, and it is a condition forbidden me" (Calvino, 1998). Here, the "condition forbidden" corresponds to the Lacanian Real or the pre-symbolic realm of fullness and undivided jouissance that a reader experiences. The woman reader, as far as the writer is concerned, represents an unattainable ideal a time before the split of the subject, before the formation of the ego in the mirror stage, and before the alienating effects of language. The writer, now caught within the symbolic

structure of signification and the structural role of the author, finds himself alienated from this pure state of experience of a reader. He can only observe from a distance what the reader inhabits a space of immersive enjoyment. Flannery's voyeuristic longing for the reader, seen in this light, can be conceptualized as a staging of the author's desire to exchange his divided symbolic position for the imaginary wholeness of the reader.

However, since a return to the pre-symbolic state is impossible, the only possible way out for the author to restore the primal reader-author unity or reach close to experiencing jouissance that existed prior to symbolization is through the act of writing itself. Writing, in this context, as Johnson (2013) suggests: "can be interpreted as an attempt to rid oneself of one's own symbolic identity, to cast the imago that served in the development of the authorial ego, and has since acted as a barrier between the symbolic and pre-symbolic jouissance, back into the world of the text so that it may be picked up by some other reader" (p. 109).

In the novel, the creation of an 'ideal reader' represented by the female reader Ludmilla, "I would say that she could be my ideal reader, this Ludmilla" can be interpreted as one such authorial strategy to recuperate the fractured reader-author unity (Calvino, 1998). From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the ideal reader construct can be understood as "none other than the reader to whom they imagined their own maternal author to be writing" (Johnson, 2013). Therefore, Calvino's invocation of Ludmilla as his ideal reader is not merely a narrative construct but is a symptomatic expression of the author's attempt to restore or reconnect with the lost primordial object or, in this context, the 'maternal author.' The passage highlights how "even as an author, the author continues trying to repair the disabled reader-author unity of which they were once a part" (Johnson, 2013). Calvino's text reveals the split nature of the authorial subject, torn between the unconscious desire to return to the maternal source and the ego's effort to assert symbolic control. Writing, as far as an author is concerned, hence becomes a site of psychic tension between a longing to return to the primordial state and a defensive struggle to maintain authorial autonomy and distinction within the symbolic order.

5. CONCLUSION

If on a Winter's Night a Traveler intricately explores the psycho-literary dynamics between the reader, the text, and the author, challenging the finality of the "death of the author." In undertaking a Lacanian psychoanalytic study, the article explores how the text as a literary mirror becomes the site of formation of the authorial and readerly subjectivities. The reader's journey from passive consumer to active interpreter mirrors the psychoanalytic trajectory of separation, alienation, and symbolic identification, with the author playing the role of the mother or the Other. Through metafictional techniques and recursive narrative structures, Calvino constructs a literary space where the author's lingering presence paradoxically enables the reader's emergence as a subject, even as it undermines the notion of a fully autonomous reader. Simultaneously, the writer's own desire to escape the burden of authorship and return to the pre-symbolic or primal readerly state, exemplified through figures like Silas Flannery, reveals the author's split nature: a conscious creator and an unconscious reader seeking jouissance. Such a reading challenges the celebrated post-structuralist narrative of readerly autonomy, revealing instead how the author's unresolved burden is embedded in the text and passed onto the reader through the act of reading. Moreover, the text's fragmented narratives and strategic gaps not only demand interpretive labor from the reader but also expose the impossibility of fulfilling the author's desire, highlighting that 'lack' exists not just in the reader but in the very structure of the text.

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