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The Semiotics of Violence: Reading Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*

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Abstract

This paper attempts a reading of Italo Calvino's novel, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969) from a postmodern perspective. The novel has always been seen as structuralist experimentation, particularly because it was written at a time when Calvino was associated with the OULIPO, the group of the French philosophers like Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and others. The paper argues that the simultaneous reading of the words in the text and pictures in the margin, challenges the very practice and method of reading. The novel suggests that it can be read as a card game, a game that accentuates deferral and plurality of meaning. These conflicting readings create the semiotics of violence, which again is reflected in the theme of the stories. The paper cites example of three stories which show that the violence of language is codified as the violence of the feminine on the masculine, arguing that the feminine challenges the rules, laws, and structures of language as well as life and destroys things that adheres to any strict binary form. The conflict between the rule of the Father and the lawlessness of the Mother leads to no higher synthesis—it ends in violence that refuses all routes of communication or meaning.

[**Keywords**: Calvino, Structuralist, postmodern, violence, meaning, language, communication, masculine/ feminine, author/writer]

The relation between word and its meaning has always been an issue of contention. In any language, which is a body of words and methods of combination, poets and philosophers have pointed out the inability of words to express the exact shade and density of the thought that it wishes to communicate. The well-known Egyptian composer and singer al-Hamuli cried: 'Thought has strayed/ Aid me, tears'. The French essayist and poet, Francis Ponge, complained: 'Words express themselves, they do not express me'. In some art-forms the inadequacy of words has been compensated by incorporating music or gesture or body-language. In other forms, writers or orators have sought different manoeuvres, like the sound and intonation of the words or playing with signification of the words as far as the rules of that language permits.

In recent years, however, owing to structuralism and post-structuralism, the raging debate on words and its meaning has attained a greater level of complexity. The simple thread of connection that exists between words and its function of communication of thought is put under scrutiny primarily for three reasons. First, the words are seen as signs, consisting of two components, the signifier and the signified, and the eternal deferral of meaning occurs as the signifier attempts to exact on the correct signified. A good example of this problematic relation of words to its meaning is well captured in the installation by Joseph Kosuth called 'One and Three Chairs'(1965). The artwork shows

three kinds of chairs, a chair, its photograph and an enlarged dictionary definition of the word 'chair'. One is left to ponder which chair exacts the process of signification that connects the word 'chair' with the 'real chair'. Therefore, the prospect of word as a reliable signifier to justify an exact signified that would relate to the thought of the 'author', or to use a more correct word 'writer' of the text, is now no longer possible or plausible.

Secondly, there is a considerable gap between the word in actuality and its representation in the text. In his book *The Metaphysics of Text*, Prof. Sukanta Chaudhuri talks about a 'semantic triangle' of sign, thought and external referent. In other words, there is an unbroken chain of signifying function existing between the sign or the word, the thought it is supposed to represent and the external referent or the 'real' or the truth. The process precludes any final reaching towards the meaning and engenders a constant evolving of meaning as the sign travels from the disseminating agent to the receiver of the signs.

Keeping the above argument in mind we come to the final part of the argument of the postmodern linguists: the acceptance of the signs. To the reader or receiver [1] of signs the meaning or signification of signs can further change owing to the possibility of multiplicity of meaning of the same text in different contexts. There is no one text in the class, the postmodernist argues. The context or contextuality does not only differ for receivers coming from different cultural, social, sexual, economic, historical or political ethos, but it is also a part of the problem of language itself. Contexts are seen as textual elements embedding particular utterances, and as circumstances surrounding particular situational events. However, as the function of the language changes, from mere signification to more complicated association between sign and idea, the context becomes more dynamic. Therefore, contexts are not just *around* texts as pre-fixed situations, but are dynamically woven *into* utterances while uttering. (Platts, 3) Contexts thus constantly evolves from the beginning of the thought-process to the translation of the thought into signs, and finally to the representation of the sign in a sentence. Given the dynamic nature of the context and taking into consideration the number of agents involved in each of these steps of this entire process, and allowing the scope of ambiguity prevalent in the signs, the entire process of communication would resemble a battlefield. The three main interactive main functions of the language: textual (related to the communicators), ideational (related to the world) and interpersonal (related to the society) and their mutual interdependence can no longer be viewed so simplistically. Taking the cue from Slavoj Zizek we may include another type of communication, called the phatic communication [2]. It is a kind of communication in which the communicators do not intend to disseminate any ideas or encourage any exchange of ideas. It is rather an exchange of meaningless signs that is used to examine whether the line of communication is alive. A suitable example of this would be saying 'hello' over the microphone, or phone, or video-conference call just to examine if the other can hear you. Function of language in the postmodern era is somewhat similar to this phatic communication. Thus, negotiations are becoming increasingly difficult both at personal and public levels, for one does not talk as to communicate his/her ideas to the other, but

rather talks just to evince for the fact he/she can use words and share a common language.

Perhaps, this is why Calvino made all his travellers mute in his novel *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. He was in search of a different kind of communication that is safe from the conflict inherent in the postmodern language and life at large. To quote him: 'We are in a state of emergency. Let us not exchange the terror (*terribilita*) of writing for the terror of reality; let us not forget that it is against reality that we must fight, even if we avail ourselves of the weapons of words.'[3]

Born in 1923, in Cuba, Calvino experienced the horrors of World War II in his youth. He joined the partisan resistance group and fought against the German and Italian fascists until the War ended. His first stories and novel were based on his experiences of the War. These works show marks of neorealism, a staunch support for the social cause. However, his ideology soon changed as he began to experiment with language and form and grew more interested in fantasy and myth. In 1964 he moved to Paris and became a member of Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littèrature Potentielle), an experimental writing group that included Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Raymond Queneau and George Perec. During this time he published most of his experimental works and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969) is one of them. The other works are: *Invisible Cities* (1972) and *If on a winter's night a lonely traveler* (1979).

From the very beginning *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (from now on referred to as *The Castle*) has been seen as 'structuralist experimentation' perhaps because of Calvino's association with Oulipo. My purpose in this essay is to show: first, in spite of being embedded in the structuralist oeuvre, the novel shows a lack of faith in any finality of meaning; secondly, how a language of violence is connotated through the close nexus of the myths and legends; finally, how language fails to communicate a cogent meaning as the tie between the idea and sign is severed by the continual deferral of meaning. To sum up, my attempt would be to read Calvino's novel as a parable of the postmodern communication.

The novel follows a group of travellers who lose their power of speech while passing through an enchanted forest. They come to a tavern where they learn to communicate by using tarot cards that they find in the castle. The first part of the book, entitled 'The Castle of Crossed Destinies' reproduces in colour and in dimensions the tarots printed by Bonifacio Bembo for the dukes of Milan around the fifteenth century. The second part of the book, entitled 'The Tavern of Crossed Destinies' uses tarots that are still available in France. This part also includes coloured photographs of the original painted version of a few important cards. These cards are identified as the *Ancien Tarot de Marseille* of the firm of Grimaud, reproducing a deck printed in the eighteenth century. Calvino believes that the printed cards have not lost the connotation of the original painted ones though they must have lost their original colours. Calvino relies on the random sequence of turning over cards to inform and shape his story. Each character tells/shows/presents his story by producing a selection of the relevant cards while the narrator persona interprets the meaning of each card for the reader/viewer. 'Calvino uses

these card sequences as texts which he then interprets for us, telling us the stories which the cards may or may not be intending to tell' (Rushdie 16)

The cards are not only described and deciphered but are also pictorially presented on the margins of the pages. The entire reading experience of the text becomes multifarious as we read the word and the picture simultaneously. As the first character arranges his cards in a series on the table, the next characters adds rows and columns to the existing series (an experience very similar to the digital drawing of a table where we can add rows and columns on each sides) thereby forming a pattern on the table. Once the cards are arranged they can be read from all sides; challenging the linearity, chronology and syntactical correctness of the written language. Thus, the words and pictures enter into a relationship of difference rather than of confluence or complementation. I would like to quote a relevant section of the novel:

> The square is now entirely covered with cards and with stories. My story is also contained in it, though I can no longer say which it is, since their simultaneous interweaving has been so close....each story runs into another story, and as one guest is advancing his strip, another, from the other end, advances in the opposite direction, because the stories told from left to right or from bottom to top can also be read from right to left or from top to bottom, and vice versa, bearing in mind that the same cards, presented in different order, often changes their meaning, and the same tarot is used at the same time by the narrators who set forth from the four cardinal points. (41)[4]

It is quite justified to say that the principle of aesthetics implied in the novel is 'combinative' as Prof Motte points out[5], however, where I would like to differ from him is in pointing out the fact that this combination does not lead to any higher synthesis towards attaining truth. Contradictory to what Roland Barthes says—'the context of a literary work is not the language but what the language stand for, its reference...The language is a mediating form between the literary from (structure-texture) and the ultimate content'—this novel defies this search for the ultimate content by denying to fix any meaning on any of the cards or by adding a final closure to the novel. The novel does not reach anywhere, rather remains rambling in the dark forest, emblematic of the jungle of crossed communication of the characters.

However, contradictory to this final 'meaninglessness', the entire novel is governed by ironclad rule of storytelling. There is an established frame of construction, each character waits for his turn in spite of the intense desire to tell his story, and one story is inserted after the other. But I have already pointed out that at the end of the first half, as soon as all the cards are laid in their final pattern, the meaning evaporates as the syntactical purity is lost. Not only the stories can be read from different directions, one also notices the several gaps and holes in the pattern itself which deny the possible emergence of a singular truth. The semantic situation deteriorates as the characters almost fight with each other to get hold of the appropriate card:

> The tale's thread is tangled not only because it is difficult to fit one card to another, but also because, for every new card the young man tries to align with the

others, ten hands are outstretched to take it from him and insert it in another story each one is constructing, and at a certain point his cards are escaping him in all directions and he has to hold them in place with his hands, his forearm, his elbows, and so he hides them from anyone trying to understand the story he is telling. (65)

This game of hiding, showing, arranging the cards makes the final narrator's narrative unreliable. We are aware that his narrative is one of the many narratives that could have possibly been interpreted from the sequence of the cards. We also question his own intentions as well: is he faithfully narrating all the cards? Calvino thus is asking the reader to enter the text, playing the game along with the narrator so that he/she can work with him towards the conclusion of the game, if any conclusion is at all possible.

By this time, it is quite evident to us that Calvino is trying to create a kind of crossword puzzle:

One may deduce something which is undoubtedly the final truth of the puzzle:...each truth that the puzzle solver makes was made before him by the puzzle maker...each combination that he tries out and tries again; each groping, each intuition, each hope, each discouragement has been decided, calculated, studied by the other. (Perec)

The game presupposes a set of rules, and the rule presupposes a control exerted by the maker. The structuralist would argue that the writer emphasises his presence through the making of the rules; I, however, believe that the game finally goes out of control of the creator resulting into a final chaos. To analyse this, I would come to the stories and the deep-seated terror of the feminine.

It is needless to say that the book uses many stories and myths and legends and it is beyond the scope of the present paper to adequately address all of them[6]. Therefore, I would limit myself to the detailed analysis of three stories that would serve as example of my present argument. The first story under discussion is the Waverer's Tale that is told in the Tavern section. The story deals with a sad young man who has deserted his wedding feast on the very day of his wedding. Apparently, there are two women in his life and he cannot choose between them. Every time he is about to decide he vacillates between one and the other, 'for every choice has an obverse, that is to say a renunciation, and so there is no difference between the act of choosing and the act of renouncing' (56). He believes a journey could release him from this vicious circle, but in his journey through the paths of the forest he is again confronted with the crossing of two roads. His allows his horses to make the choice and they pull the vehicle to opposite paths and the make the vehicle immobile. He then tosses a coin and it falls on the edge of the bush right in the middle of the intersection of the roads. Still unwilling to take the decision he climbs a tree, among the branches of which there is a succession of repeated forks that 'continue to inflict the torment of choice on him' (57). The thick foliage obstructs his vision and he sees the twins 'identical, barefoot and golden blond'. They show him the walls of a city perched on the top of the tree. This is the City of All. But even here the game of choices continues. The thirsty young man has to choose between the two wells from which to drink or

between the two women of his 'eluded choice' who once again appear to him, signifying the two 'different ways open to him who still has to find himself: the way of passions, which is always a way of action...and the way of wisdom, which demands reflection and learning little by little' (59). Still unwilling to leave one for the other the man wants 'the sea' and the tree crumbles down and the man is faced with severe consequences that the tarot Hanged man suggests. His wish to escape from individual limitation, from categories and roles finally lead him nowhere and he is forced to come back to the forest defeated and rejected. His final encounter is with his own double who promises to meet him 'hanging from the gallows different from the one where you will have hanged yourself' (63).

The rejection of choices shown in the first rejection of the two women is the cause of the undoing of the Waverer. The feminine forms appear here in a more codified manner of brides, queens and finally 'The Sea'. In the next story of Roland crazed with love, taken from the Castle section, the feminine form becomes even more threatening. This story begins with Roland as warrior, a successful paladin. He falls in love with the beautiful Angelica, the enchantress from Cathay, and follows her to the forest. On his entrance the entire forest seems to warn him of the impending doom: 'The forest of love, Roland, is no place for you! You are pursuing an enemy from whose snares no shield can protect you' (30). Yet Roland persists on. Once he enters the forest he realizes that Angelica does not love him, the commander of the troops, but a youth of the entourage, slender, coy as a girl. The revelation traumatizes Roland and he loses his intellect and descends into the night of madness. He slaughters the animals of the forest with the ferocity with which he once killed the Saracens and resembles 'The Fool'. Roland descends into 'the chaotic heart of things, the centre of the square of the cards and of the world, the point of intersection of all possible orders' (33). His end is also metaphorically presented in the image of 'The Hanged Man'. He seems to say: 'Leave me like this. I have come full circle and I understand. The world must be read backward.'(34)

Similar to these stories which I have described at length, most of the stories show this deep-seated fear for the chaotic, the multiple, presented through the feminine forms. While the men symbolize disjunction, dismemberment, or death, women are associated with unity, nature, and the sea teeming with life or the jungle of intense vegetation. If the masculine show the rule of the law, the feminine shows the lawlessness inherent in the centre of things, in the very existence of the universe, as the controlling principle of life. Anyone who tries to defy this chaos is ruined by it. The stories thereby lead us away from the Symbolic, towards the ambiguity of the Real, trying to suggest the final inability of the law to explain the meaning of the universe.

This perhaps is best explained in the story of the Ingrate whose tale starts off the Castle section. This narrative begins with the literal death of the father, suggesting the Lacanian concept of the absence of the father. Instead of following the patriarchal order and upholding it, the young man indulges himself with the forest Amazon, who had saved his life. When time comes to marry her, he abandons her for a wealthy bride. He breaks the code of civilization again by bringing into the world a nameless, unacknowledged child. His final punishment comes from the world of the Great Mother,

Cybele. Her priestesses sentence him to the forest of self-loss and he must dismember himself and join the swarming maenads. When he resists, they fall upon him with sharp blades to maim him, or unman him, or tear him to pieces, 'The Eight of Swords' suggests all.

Roland and the Waverer abandon the claim of the chaos and are in turn are destroyed by it. The Ingrate self-indulgently turns his back on order and embrace the chaos/flux but is similarly destroyed. The alchemist in the story who upholds order by creating the city of gold is also destroyed. The maiden with water refuses to enter his city, the solid metals are inimical to her fluid spirit and she states that the inhabitants of the city have no soul to lose (20). The rule of gold thus results in damnation, the deadly order of the rigid metal, petrification or crystallization. Here a death-in-life situation evolves owing to the rejection of the feminine. One is damned if one enters the world of the Mother, one is also damned if one rejects it totally.

At the end of the novel the original narrator is lost. He is either unwilling to share his story or is incapable of writing it. In the Castle collection the figure of the narrator is replaced by the Hostess of the Castle. All of a sudden she is alone; the table is set only for two, engaged in her own game of solitaire. She becomes a combination of the figure of Madam Sosostris, the famous clairvoyant of *Waste Land*, and the Great Mother, Cybele, one who controls the forest. She plays out till the end, and then gathers and reshuffles only to begin all over again.

In her essay Kathryn Hume points out that in the first version of *The Castle*, published separately with photographs, the Hostess is shown to pay attention to every card play. In this version she does not begin a new game; rather she 'exists outside the book, capable of seeing its pages, and yet creating the sequences we have just read as taking place simultaneously in the narrator's experience.' (P 127)

From the threatening female figures to the final submission of the male ego to the overwhelming and powerful figure of a woman as the ultimate creator/writer of the narrative—Calvino seems to suggest a total breakdown of the world of the father. This submission to the flux or chaos and the rejection of the rule can finally be located in the philosophy of his semiotics—the deferral of meaning, the multiplicity of contexts, the possibility of multiple reading. The rigidity of the structure is replaced by the fluidity of the signs. Otherwise, the water nymph would not give life to the city of gold. However, we must not think that Calvino was talking about an ecriture feminine or was being governed by the philosophy of feminism. Calvino was experimenting with language and form, underscoring the limitation of the structural order that cannot accommodate the overwhelming power of the Real. He speaks of a kind of lawlessness that is inherent in 'form' itself—something that tries to break free of the shackles of reason, logic, structure, rule, or syntax. It celebrates the destruction of order. Along with the order dies the possibility of attaining meaning, along with the meaning disappears the narrator and the claim to authorship, and along with the submission of order to chaos, rises the potential of violence. It is a kind of a mythic violence that questions any order, any government—a sort of Bacchic dance of delight and supreme happiness.

The question remains: once the violence runs its course will a new order emerge? Or should we reject the possibility of any order for any order presupposes a power play? Is the violence devoid of power games? Or is it at all possible to evade the power games? One wonders. The novel does give any answer. It was not meant to give any. What is perhaps important to understand is the fact that violence is there and will be there, embedded in the very structure of the language, destroying it from within. This is the fate of the modern world. So 'wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh'.

Endnotes

[1] The second word is more apt because as soon as we translate words to signs we broaden its scope by including all its forms, written, oral, digital; and also gestures, colours, pictures can all be seen as signs. The various forms of words are more relevant to the post-literate generation who can read yet prefers to go for the digitized version of the Web for necessary information.

[2] Though this term was originally used by Roman Jakobson and was related to structuralism, Zizek interprets the word in a different way and context.

[3] This quote was found in the introduction written by James Gardner for the section on Italo Calvino, in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Sharon K. Hall Vol. 39, 1985.

[4] All the reference of the novel is taken from the Vintage 1998 edition of the book.

[5] Motte says: 'Calvino's line of reasoning here is almost syllogistic; all literature is combinatoric; all combinatory activity is play; therefore, all literature is play.'

[6] Calvino uses a number of other texts as subtexts: Homer, Holy Grail, Renaissance epic Romances, Faust story, Shakespeare, Freud, and so on. The three main mythic figures also feature in the basic pattern of the stories: Faust, Parsifal, Oedipus. It is noteworthy, that they are all overreachers; leaving the boundaries of accepted social norms, they experimented with what lies beyond. Yet they are all killed by the chaos, the flux, the meaninglessness central to the scheme of things.

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