

## ITALO CALVINO, ONCE, TWICE, THRICE

### ITALO CALVINO ONCE

Uxía first started reading Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* in October 2011, when she was studying Italian at the Complutense University in Madrid, during her freshman year. It was also the first compulsory reading of the course. The author was not one she had heard much about but he somehow rang a bell; the novel itself was an absolute mystery to her. She read it because she had to: it was an assignment in Professor Fiamma Molinaro's class. She took notes and concentrated hard on writing down details, so that not an inch of a blade of grass was left without being digested, regurgitated and taken notice of. Everything was placed under the microscope of literary props and scientific study. Professor Molinaro liked to be called Signora Molinaro; she also liked exact quotations in her examinations, so Uxía wrote some of those, wondering subconsciously what the point was in repeating like a parrot, knowing in her heart that a nanosecond after handing out the exam papers, she will have forgotten it all. She tried hard, oh so hard!, to concentrate and memorize so that she could bring home top marks. Half of the credits in the subject

depended on written reports like the one she would have to produce on the book, based not on her own ideas or research, but on the repetition of Professor Molinaro's boring lectures.

Professor Molinaro used precise scientific words and expressions in her lectures all the time, and it was expected of her students to follow suit. *The sociology of the text* was a favourite of hers, *the marginalization of the narrative voice* was another one. But none of these clichés was half as used as *the epistemology of diacritic events*, expression that got cast onto bored ears at least three times every lesson.

Uxía and her closest fellow sufferers had made a competition two months onto the course, one unexpected warm and sunny day, at the back of the building so that Paco could roll his cig and smoke it in peace away from strangers' prying eyes who would point to the forbidden signs accusingly. They had to interpret what Professor Molinaro meant with *epistemology of diacritic events*. "The origin of time" was proposed by Uxía. Her suggestion was met with derision. Chaina suggested that it meant "historical events one after the other, as in an Easter procession in Cordova."

Paco sneered: "You fools, the bitch means that if you don't write it so in the next exam at least twenty times you all will fail."

Paco enunciated this while biting on his cig and dragging his words by pushing saliva through clenched teeth. The group decided that he had won the competition hands down. Not for the first time Uxía thought about giving him ten years more and he would become a second-rate Humphrey Bogart: he only needed a detective's raincoat. Maybe she should wait for him – she liked Humphrey Bogart.

"Good. What have I won?"

Promises of paying for an extra coffee were graciously extended. His comment that he'd rather receive a blowjob from one of the girls in the group was met with derision. *Some Bogart...*, Uxía thought to herself.

Chaina made another comment. "That we find this discussion entertaining proves how boring our lives truly are."

Uxía shuddered on hearing the truth on the statement. She was about to say something, but Bruno opened his mouth first.

"When we finish our studies and find no job, we will have to come back to live at our parents'. Then we will realise that we have wasted money and time on a degree which is not worth the toilet paper it is printed on; that is when we will find all the excitement we want."

Uxía thought about the melodramatics of it all, which usually belonged to Chaina and then she asked aloud: "Do you think that it will be like that? Is there no salvation?"

But nobody took the bait, as Paco had finished his cigarette and murmured "Let's go have that coffee. I might as well take you on the offer before you forget about it."

That closed the conversation forever.

After lunch everybody went back to their notes and books. In her report about *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* Uxía used "the epistemology of diacritic events" twice, the first occurrence meaning chronology and the second occurrence meaning biography of the author. Both uses were slightly misleading, ambiguous in their use and graciously opaque about their meaning when read in context.

She got a good mark on her essay. She felt satisfied, having obtained all she wanted from the book. She didn't even stop for a second to consider if she had liked it or not – she was too busy.

She put it away and checked out from the university library the next compulsory reading assignment. She left it behind when she went back to her parents' for her first summer holidays. Uxía was ecologically conscious: the book went to the recycling bin with other handwritten notes, out-of-date documents, notebook pages, and other useless papers that would not be thought of ever again.

## ITALO CALVINO TWICE

Uxía second started reading *Si una noche de invierno un viajero* on her bus commuting trip from her shared flat to the clothing store where she worked for six months on her interim period in Bologna. She had already got her degree and was wondering about her future, turning on her head a project of returning back to university to study Translation and Interpretation. Her preferred option, to make ends meet with freelance jobs, was unrealistic at present. The hours were scarce and in between, and they would never support her at the present rate, hence the clothing store job. She was wondering if maybe with the right studies under her belt she could charge more, work more hours, be hired by a publishing house on a permanent basis.

It was a hurt-your-eyes disinfected-white lab of an outlet shop, located a bit to the outside of downtown Bologna. The shop shared many of its customers with a legal-marijuana shop which stood proudly opposite, its shop window crammed with fake bales of hay for some reason that Uxía was never able to grasp. Uxía herself was a

customer of this shop at the beginning of each month, her bank account having received her salary but not having been deflated as of yet of all power by rent, transport costs and bills. Her degree on Italian shone in her mouth in these occasions, chatting up about this and that with the dark-haired, disegno-italiano attendant who refrained from making a pass at her, him never getting to the point of making a move because he didn't want to muck his job up. He felt somehow that Uxía was bad news and trouble. At that time she was kinda taken, so she would have rejected the offer anyway.

The paperback copy of the translation into Spanish had been a birthday present from her brother. Breogán had asked for a novel by an Italian author at a random bookshop, but it couldn't be Camilleri as both Uxía and him had already read everything he had published. The elderly bookshop seller had recommended *Si una noche de verano un viajero* and that was enough for Breogán, his only readings being the sports newspaper *Marca* and job application requirements.

Uxía had appreciated the present. The title didn't even ring a bell at that moment, her mind too preoccupied with the lack of success of her multiple prospective, unsolicited covering letters and résumés to occupy itself with remembering university syllabus. She moved it with her to Italy because it was a cheap paperback edition that would take almost no space in her suitcase if squashed like a toothpaste tube in a corner surrounded by socks and bras. She realised that she had already read it at the beginning of the second chapter. The structure suddenly resonated in a brain starting to wake up because of the scalding-hot morning coffee. At that moment, it was better to keep on reading – she didn't have anything else with her. The happenstance between the two customers asking for a refund made her giggle. This surprised her: she didn't remember the novel to be that funny. She cut it out. The passenger on the window seat beside her looked at her suspiciously. She smiled to him but only

managed to scare him. She concentrating onto the novel. It helped her to pass the time.

When Uxía finished it, she liked it, for the first time. She wanted to know more, about the author, about his intentions when writing this novel, about the rest of his writings. She needed to know more.

The book got left behind when she won an intern position in London for a new translation service at a big multinational. She didn't have time to have a rest and see family – she had to cut short her contract in spite of her manager's protestations, pack up her bags and move to London in the blink of an eye. She also left behind clothes so as not to have to pay for an extra suitcase in a cheap airline. The move also meant a sudden break-up with her first love and her second sexual experience. Neither of them would miss the other much.

## ITALO CALVINO THRICE

Uxía third started reading *If on a winter's night a traveller* while stuck on an overground train in London. Her English had improved much after five years living in London doing odd jobs in positions in front of the public. If anything, London was open to all types of accents and languages.

That day Uxía had given London's public system a twenty-minute leeway time to take her to Kilburn High Road Station and she was going to arrive in time by the skin of her teeth – if the train managed to move on again... She was carrying her tote bag full of personal stuff, heavy with unnecessary riff-raff she should have cribbed out at

some point but hadn't. Uxía didn't even remember buying the paperback copy of the Calvino novel translated into English, but from the price sticker at the back it must have come from the PDSA charity shop in Kilburn. She had started to read the Metro newspaper that somebody had abandoned on her seat to pass the time. When she finished this, she rummaged through the disorganized clearance bin of her totebag, which included: crumpled supermarket tickets, forgotten debit card receipts, better-left-unread handwritten notes, her small diary, four packets of open, different-branded tissue from her recent springtime hay-fever period, two different shades of red lipstick (brownish and crimson), a useless dried-out brown nail polish, the make-up bottle she hadn't been able to find a fortnight ago (*¡mira dónde está!, look where it is!*), the address book she never used anymore because that's what mobile phones are for, her cracked-screen mobile phone in its cover, a pair of flat slippers in case her poor feet gave up on her high heels, an almost finished black pen, a blue pen she would never use because she only liked black ink, a sachet of saccharine from a month ago, some tiwtering-twattering-totting coins that persistently annoyed her when they bumped onto each other, her Oyster card that was never where it should be (inside the big jean purse), the empty big jean purse, the small black-sequined purse where the coins should be, the card-holder, where a sad single credit card was, the translation into English of an Italian novel, a mini-box of tampons ready for any sudden star appearance, the scratched shades she didn't mind they were scratched (what are the chances of really needing them in summer, in London?) and fliff-flaff from not having washed the tote bag in a very long time. Uxía annoyed herself because rummaging through the chaos hadn't work out, and she had to pry open the bag to find the novel.

She sighed. She felt prepared for love and war, but she knew that neither would come to her that day. She was only going to meet an old friend of hers, Graciela. Finally

crawling to its destination, the train arrived late to the next station without a single explanation or apology from the driver. She had to run to her appointment. She hated having to do so.

The café they had selected -well, Graciela had- was somehow in the middle of the high street. It was a new place that Graciela had discovered a month ago. From the location, Uxía knew that they could have their coffees there and that in its vicinity there were several pubs if they wanted to have a beer afterwards.

Now Uxía was concentrating in running to her appointment and not crashing onto pedestrians. She didn't even bother to pick out her phone from her bag. It would take longer to find it and text the excuse to Graciela than to run to the café.

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Ah, Kilburn...! The earthquake of a traffic jam, the honking of two hundred cars at the same time, double-decker buses stuck at invaded bus lanes, the bikes that have decided on their own volition to jump onto the sidewalk, the hive of schoolchildren buying halal fried chicken for merienda, the Botox shots and moisturizing cream in the faces of yummy school-run mums, the grey home slippers of slummy school-run mums, the cars that have stopped at a green light because the siren of the ambulance is loud and clear, the ambulance that has to brake to a halt anyway because the pedestrians thought it was a nice opportunity to jump onto the road's pavement to go nowhere faster, the two Poundlands on the street, the double-the-size-bigger one somehow always worse stocked than the smaller one, the illegally-rented rooms in unkempt estate flats, the rude receptionist at the health centre by the street market,



the stalls plunging products and produce onto the sidewalk, the stepped-on chewed gum stuck to a high heel, the apologies for her lateness, the anecdotes of half a year in lockdown, told in front of cups of English tea with plenty of milk, a girl on jogging gear shouting “fuck” several times because the young beggar girl had not only taken the offered two pounds but also her phone, the smiles between Graciela and Uxía about the spectacle the angry jogging girl was making of herself, the fading laughter from their lips, the smirk of the invisible thief already far away, the waiter offering his phone to the girl punching the wall at the café out of sheer frustration, the jogging girl speaking to the switchboard person before retelling her story to a police officer after retelling her story to her boyfriend -at the crucial moment away on the bathroom-, the snoot-coloured dark-red bricks in damaged facades at the high street while walking towards the pub, the torn posters announcing cancelled hip-hop concerts, the twenty face-masks scattered along the street and all over the place, the dressed-for-Chernobyl girl at the entrance of the pub telling them to scan the QR code before entering, the quietness inside the pub, the retelling of Uxía’s last breakup, the approaching late hour, the calls of Graciela’s husband, the push and shove -never mind the social distancing rules- of gentrified newcomers hating it in the area walking briskly at the London speed when they left, the menagerie of people and the crowd-funded abundance of litter, the motley crew of delivery motorbikes and the witch coven of uber drivers, the herd of shitting-down-on-you pigeons and the murder of stray cats, the pull of teeth at the dentist’s and the push of shopdoors which have to be pulled, the goodbyes promising to see each other sooner, the sinkage of truth when a religious leaflet promises to cure cancer, depression and diabetes with prayer, the sewage of souls and the graffiti of insults, the post-lockdown smog in the heart and the fog in the mind, the hot blood and the cold words, the dirty eyes and the ramshackle dreams, the

cacophony of the gridlock and the always-stuck-in-tunnels tube underground trains. Ah, Kilburn...! At Kilburn, walking on her own to the overground station, Uxía was assaulted by the organized chaos of her memories, the year she spent living there at the other end of the high road.

That was how and when she had met Graciela, a Barcelona-born girl her own age who said things like “verdat” and “felicidat” when they spoke in Spanish to each other. They were roommates, physically sharing the room in different bunk beds, both girls so strapped by lack of cash that this was their only option. There was no contract, and there were no paid jobs, so one thing fitted the other. Things were not working out for them, Uxía feeling the possibility of teaching languages in London disappearing into the void of nothingness in spite of all the right qualifications, and her internship only causing her expenses she couldn’t afford. Graciela managed to find work at a pub, was harassed by the manager so she didn’t show for the second week. Both girls had their birthday in May, and they felt they were trapped into the same gloomy destiny at the time.

Another month down the line and Uxía would become a sandwich-maker, Graciela a till-operator. They had taken a like to each other forced by circumstances and in-you-face space. Afterwards they kept contact through social media, although Uxía was more of a Facebooker and Graciela an Instagrammer. Objectively, Graciela had done much better: she was the brand-new second-wife of a Chelsea-living Brixton landlord she had met through a website or another. Uxía could not remember exactly which, although Graciela had recommended her to create a profile there several times. She was the trophy wife which had made the jump from exploited to exploiter, and how contented Graciela was with the change! Graciela worked part-time as a receptionist in an art gallery in a schedule that didn’t contradict her husband’s schedule. She had

got the job because the owner and her then-fiancé knew each other. She had already booked a nose job in the clinic to make sure that she stayed the second wife.

They had kept in touch the same way that Uxía had kept in touch with Bruno, Chaina, Paco... people whose life paths have taken each other so far away that they didn't have anything in common anymore but who were interesting enough to meet, have coffee with, send a real-life anecdote, laugh about a joyful post, meet in person once in a while, once per year at the most. As an exception, this was the second meeting between them because of the circumstances of easing themselves out of lockdown had made them crave for human contact and face-to-face reality.

The overground was half-empty on her way back, which was strange considering the hour and the crowds outside on the high street. The release from the lockdown had not been done all at once, little by little people were cautiously returning to their jobs -if they still had one. Everybody was wearing a mask for once, which was weird and had not become the new normal yet. There was a little discomfort about the empty seats *-¡sitios libros!, ¡qué lujo!, available seats!, what a luxury!*- as the people who had occupied them with shopping bags didn't want to have anybody sitting on them. Evil looks were given but not acknowledged, personal belongings were moved reluctantly.

Well, in closer inspection not everybody was wearing a mask. The two elderly ladies at the back were not wearing them. It was Uxía's turn to shoot an evil stare. She sighed and fished her book from out of the jungle in her handbag. She placed the book high, knowing that the white-haired bible-carrying ladies on modest clothing were going to do the rounds and speak to everybody. At least they would try. She lift her shield weapon and hoped for the best.

The black lady started. She was speaking to everybody and nobody, droning on out and clear “You’ve got to pray to the Lord Jesus, he is the only one who can save you”. Overground trains have no divisions, it is all a long stretch of seats on the sides and empty space in the middle. Her voice rippled through without the usual interruption of sweating bodies pushing onto each other, hollering children or crying babies.

The white lady looked meeker, she just stood there, smiling to everybody. Then she moved and started to distribute copies of a pamphlet. The first passenger kept on playing Candy Crush on her phone and didn’t acknowledge the poster or the person, the second passenger kept on listening to the music in his headphones, the third passenger picked up the leaflet and placed it in the empty seat on his left, the fourth stared back outside the window. Uxía was the fifth, but she had her plan: she was prepared to concentrate on her book and ignore them.

“Your book is a lie.”

With her book firmly placed in front of her face, at first Uxía didn’t realise that she was being spoken to. The white lady insisted:

“Your book is a lie.”

It was useless to pretend.

“Excuse me?” Uxía asked in her most bored whisper. The black lady, the one that had been preaching aloud approached Uxía’s seat to support her friend. The white lady repeated, for the third time:

“Your book is a lie. Calvin separated himself from the true path. He listened to the devil and forsook the right to be saved by the grace of Jesus Christ.”

Uxía stared at the lady. Then she stared at the open pages in her book, now resting on her lap. She turned it around without closing it, she placed it on her lap again. She looked at the worn-out front and back covers, the surname of the author, Calvino, occupying almost half of the cover in big dark red letters. Everything else, including the picture and the title, was smaller. She realised there was a confusion, a mix-up of surnames.

The next stop was not her stop. She closed her book without taking notice of the page and stood up in silence. Her brain was trying to find something to say, something eloquent and intelligent, something different to simply telling them to fuck off somewhere else.

The doors closed and the train started to move. There was no escape now. She sat down again.

“Calvino...” Uxía started and then shut herself up. She looked at the book again.

The two cats had eaten the mice and smiled proudly of themselves, having made their point. Both of them were offering Uxía a copy of their leaflet.

Uxía didn't even want to touch it, and then she added:

“I think you are confusing John Calvin with Italo Calvino. I'm reading Italo Calvino; he was an Italian writer.”

Presently the two ladies looked down at the cover of the book.

“He has already passed away. He was married and had a daughter. He was a communist all his life.”

The black lady tried to interrupt, politely: “That's interesting, but we are speaking about the true book of all books, the Bib...”

...but now that she had begun, Uxía was not going to let them go away so easily.

Uxía felt on fire.

“This novel is about ten different first chapters, and about two readers, and about two writers.”

The ladies cautiously receded a couple of steps, still holding on onto their fake smiles, withdrawing the offer of the religious pamphlet. *What is this girl talking about?*, they were wondering. *Had they been so unfortunate as to come across a crazy person?*

“He didn’t only write this novel. He also wrote *The Baron in the Tree*, which is usually considered his masterpiece.”

The train arrived to the next station. The ladies eyed each other and their gaze spoke without words. Still with their frozen Cheshire-cat grins on, they silently got off the train. Meanwhile, Uxía kept on lecturing them.

“He wrote a wonderful elegy in praise of Che Guevara, whom he had met some years before.”

Suddenly Uxía became the mad person, speaking to closing doors. She turned around and came back to her seat, holding her tattered book like she would caress and protect a baby.

The rest of the passengers ignored the mad woman who sat down on her seat like a ton of bricks, some new passengers sighed with annoyance on seeing this young mad person doing weird gestures and speaking aloud to the air and herself. A middle-aged Muslim man in a thobe looked at Uxía’s embraced object, and perished the thought that there was any danger on it

Uxía fidgeted restlessly in her seat – she still felt the adrenalin rushing through her veins like the new CEO of a multinational company signing the dismissal of a thousand employees in order to increase profits, but the hit was already subsiding. Uxía had broken one of the sacred laws of public spaces and she knew it. Nobody can cancel anybody in a public space; after all, this is London, and everything and anything goes.

She tried to return to her silent reading. She opened the book randomly, as she couldn't remember where she had stopped. The random page spoke to her: *“Today each of you is the object of the other's reading, one reads in the other the unwritten story.”*

She turned the pages back and forth, trying to find the page. She re-read some sentences, she read some random new sentences, but the exact paragraph eluded her.

She gave it up. She had no idea on what page she had stopped reading. She would have to start the novel again. But not today, not on this slow trip back home that was beginning to feel like eternity.

When she got to her stop, she felt tired, less proud of her acts. In fact, she realized she felt ashamed – she didn't dare to look at the disapproving gaze coming from the few remaining passengers who had been witnesses to her rebellion.

Out on the platform, for lack of a better thing to do, she stared at the downcast sky for a second. Then she shoved the book in her bag and she picked up her phone. She searched on the phone's agenda Graciela's number while she was going down the stairs.

When Graciela picked up the call, Uxía was already out on the street and she announced, ready to let it all out and exorcise her demons:

“Guess what has just happened.”