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MARTIN McLAUGHLIN

# "C' È UN FURTO CON SCASSO IN OGNI VERA LETTURA". CALVINO'S THEFTS FROM ARIOSTO

"Lavorare tenendo aperto davanti a me il testo
d'Ariosto è sempre per me uno stimolo creativo"
I. Calvino, *Ariosto geometrico*[1]

## 1. *Calvino and literary theft*

Calvino's love for Ariosto throughout his writing life is well known. In his non-fiction he mentions the *Orlando Furioso* on many occasions, writes two substantial essays on the poem for the Ariosto centenary in 1974, and even rewrites or 'retells' the entire work, in *"Orlando furioso" di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino, con una scelta del poema*. This book, over 200 pages long, contains both a sizeable anthology of the poem and also Calvino's extensive prose summary linking the anthologized passages. But his fascination for Ariosto was not just of an analytical or literary-critical nature, he also turned to the *Furioso* for creative inspiration, writing a whole fantasy novel, *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1959), that was set in the same period

[1] I. Calvino, *Ariosto geometrico*, in "Italianistica", III, 1974, pp. 167-168.

as Ariosto's epic and in which several of the poet's characters appeared, including Charlemagne and Bradamante. Around ten years later he retold in miniature the stories of Orlando and Astolfo in an experimental work, *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1969-1973).[2] Hence the epigraph above, at the start of a very brief article from the centenary year 1974, about the capacity of Ariosto's text to stimulate the creative imagination. However, despite this unwavering enthusiasm for Ariosto over the four decades of his writing life, it is important to note any variations. *Distingue frequenter* was a motto cited by the great Italian critic Carlo Dionisotti: the aim of this article is to discern any diachronic developments in Calvino's life-long passion for the *Furioso*, and in particular to distinguish what precise aspects of the poem appealed to him at different times, what words he 'stole' or 'borrowed' from the Renaissance poet, and how he reused those words.

Before proceeding to our analysis, we should bear in mind Calvino's own ideas on 'purloined words' and literary models: the metaphor of 'parole rubate' is in fact one that the novelist himself uses. In a fascinating interview with Tullio Pericoli from 1980, *Furti ad arte*, Calvino discussed notions of artistic thievery with his host, starting from the way Pericoli 'stole' from Paul Klee. The novelist observed that the idea of an author as a proprietor of something that was worth stealing is recent, since in classical times all writers aspired to achieving the best style through imitation of the best models. However, says Calvino, in the 1960s the idea of theft came to the fore, and he cites the example of Tournier's 'purloining' of the Robinson Crusoe story from Defoe in his book *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique* (1967). Calvino

[2] Calvino initially wrote the text of *Il castello dei destini incrociati* to accompany Franco Maria Ricci's deluxe edition (1969) of the Visconti Tarot cards, designed by Bonifazio Bembo and reproduced in Ricci's edition in the margin of Calvino's text; later he added a second part entitled *La taverna dei destini incrociati*, and the two parts were published in the volume *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, Torino, Einaudi, 1973.

admits that this was the context in which he too began to 'steal' or to rewrite famous texts, starting with his re-telling of the *Orlando furioso*, which began as a radio programme in 1968: "È in quegli anni che su un'occasione radiofonica mi metto a raccontare *L'Orlando furioso* in prosa, col mio stile".[3] We shall return later to the question of what he meant by using his "own style" to recount the *Furioso* in prose. He then mentions his other reworkings: *Le città invisibili* (1972) was a recreation of Marco Polo's *Il Milione*, while *Il castello dei destini incrociati* rehearsed the great myths of Western culture from Homer to Faust, and from Parsifal and Orlando to Hamlet and Macbeth. In this way the novelist could return to a pre-Romantic notion of literature, and avoid the accusation of theft since he was retelling well-known myths in *Le città invisibili* and *Il castello dei destini incrociati*.

After this, Calvino discusses the object of literary theft. He says that Pericoli uses the word "steal" as in purloining someone else's secret, the theft of an invention ("la parola rubare che tu usi la intendi come rubare un segreto, quasi come il furto di un'invenzione")[4] and the novelist admits that he too delights in such "thefts". He loves discovering the secret anatomy or pattern in authors very different from himself, such as Tolstoy, and he arrives at the conclusion that the sole act of reading that allowed him to discern these patterns, even before reusing them, was already a form of theft:

> "Forse la lettura è già questo furto. C'è questa cosa lí, chiusa, questo oggetto di cui si carpisce qualcosa che c'è chiuso dentro. C'è uno scassinamento, c'è un furto con scasso in ogni vera lettura. Naturalmente i quadri e le opere letterarie sono costruite apposta per essere derubate, in questo senso. Cosí come il labirinto è costruito apposta perché ci si perda, ma anche perché ci si ritrovi."[5]

[3] Cf. I. Calvino, *Furti ad arte (conversazione con Tullio Pericoli)*, in Id., *Saggi 1945-1985*, a cura di M. Barenghi, 2 vols, Milano, Mondadori, 1995, vol. II, p. 1806.

[4] Cf. ibidem, p. 1807.

[5] Ibidem, p. 1808.

The metaphor of theft ("furto") is here intensified into something more violent: the 'purloining' author wants to pluck ("si carpisce") something that is enclosed in another text, he wants to break into it ("scassinamento […] furto con scasso") as well as steal it. For Calvino, his intertextual reading of other texts is anything but passive: it is active and involves a kind of violence in breaking into the other text and trying to seize its inner mechanism. The novelist then gives an example of such theft in his own recent work. In *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, he says, the story of the writer in crisis who resorts to transcribing the start of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is a theft from Borges's tale of *Pierre Menard*, since Menard transcribed the whole of *Don Quixote*. In fact, in this instance what we have is a double theft, since on the one hand the empirical author Calvino carries out a preliminary theft ("furto preliminare")[6] from Borges, while the fictional writer in crisis, Silas Flannery, steals words from Dostoevksy. But although Calvino seems to approve of this breaking and entry, the real point of purloining from another text is not just the theft but what the writer then does with it. In the case of Silas Flannery the idea was for him to steal the beginning of *Crime and Punishment* but then to develop it in a different way: "Nel mio libro insomma propongo, come uno dei tanti esercizi che si possono fare, quello di prendere un inizio già dato e cercare di svilupparlo in un altro modo".[7] In other words Calvino here endorses the classical rhetorical technique of creative literary imitation, where the trainee writer takes some element (a beginning, an episode) from another text but develops it in his own way and with his own words. Yet he links this ancient procedure with modern textual practices when he reminds us that such re-workings of already written texts is a technique that is typical of literary avant-gardes: "Del resto uno dei

[6] Cf. ibidem, p. 1809.
[7] Cf. ibidem, p. 1810.

procedimenti canonici delle avanguardie è il lavorare su cose già scritte".[8] The interview concludes with Calvino returning to his opening idea that literary theft is a recent and inappropriate idea: after the cult of individualism in the Romantic period, now artists prefer works that are impersonal or apersonal, they prefer the idea of art acting through the writer.[9] In what follows we shall see how Calvino carries out his thefts, but also how he then systematically develops in his own way what he has 'stolen'.

## 2. *First phase: 1947-1964*

Calvino's earliest mentions of Ariosto are bound up with his experience of the Resistance. In his very first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947), Pelle's love of "le armi e le donne"[10] is Ariostesque, the phrase echoing the opening line of the poem, as is the theme of the movement of weapons, in particular the German pistol that Pin steals, from one side to the other. Indeed the pistol is described as something mysterious and powerful,[11] thus it is associated with the magic shields and other weapons which pass from knight to knight in Ariosto's epic. The earliest mention of Ariosto in Calvino's correspondence is his letter to Roberto Battaglia of April 1950, where he comments positively on the latter's Ariosto anthology *Le novelle del "Furioso"* (1950).[12] Battaglia's later works continued the link between Ariosto and the Resistance: in a 1958 review Calvino observed that Battaglia's enthusiasm for the *Orlando furioso* had emerged first in his *Storia*

[8] Cf. ibidem.

[9] Cf. ibidem, pp. 1813-1814.

[10] Cf. Id., *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, in Id., *Romanzi e racconti*, edizione diretta da C. Milanini, a cura di M. Barenghi e B. Falcetto, Prefazione di J. Starobinski, Milano, Mondadori, 1991, vol. I, p. 72.

[11] See ibidem, pp. 18-19.

[12] See Id., *Lettere 1940-1985*, a cura di L. Baranelli, Introduzione di C. Milanini, Milano, Mondadori, 2000, pp. 275-276 (to Roberto Battaglia, April 28, 1950).

*della Resistenza italiana* (1953), and even more so in his later book *La prima guerra d'Africa* (1958).[13] A few years later, in the Preface to the definitive edition of his own *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1964), Calvino states that Fenoglio's then recent work, *Una questione privata*, was the real novel of the Resistance, since it was "un romanzo di follia amorosa e cavallereschi inseguimenti come l'*Orlando furioso*".[14] Just like Pelle in *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, so Fenoglio's protagonist is obsessed by women and weapons: for Calvino, in the period 1947-1964, Ariosto's poem is bound up with the experience of the Resistance.

However, the novelist's greatest creative homage to (or 'major theft' from) Ariosto was the last work in his fantasy trilogy, *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1959). The novel was closely modelled on the *Orlando furioso* in its setting, its characters, its narrator's introductions to six of the twelve chapters (in imitation of Ariosto's proems), and in its ironic parody of chivalric values – perhaps the most obvious example of the latter being the bureaucratic "sovraintendenza ai Duelli, alle Vendette e alle Macchie dell'Onore".[15] The text contains two major Ariostan characters such as Charlemagne and Bradamante, but also Orlando, Rinaldo and Astolfo make a fleeting appearance.[16] One passage in particular shows us how the modern novelist purloins but then camouflages some of the words stolen from the Renaissance poet. The description of Priscilla at her castle in chapter VIII ("La vedova Priscilla era una *non tanto* alta, *non tanto* in carne, ma *ben* lisciata, dal *petto* non vasto ma messo ben in fuori, certi *occhi neri* che

[13] See I. Calvino, *"La prima guerra d'Africa" vista dai nostri padri e vista dagli abissini*, in Id., *Saggi 1945-1985*, cit., vol. II, p. 1758.

[14] Cf. Id., *Prefazione 1964 al "Sentiero dei nidi di ragno"*, in Id., *Romanzi e racconti*, cit., vol. I, p. 1202.

[15] Cf. Id., *Il cavaliere inesistente*, in Id., *Romanzi e racconti*, cit., vol. I, p. 964.

[16] See ibidem, p. 1010.

*guizzano*, insomma una donna che ha qualcosa da dire")[17] is clearly a prose equivalent of one of the most famous passages in the poem, the description of Alcina (with whom she shares a trisyllabic name and who is also described in front of her castle):

> "Di persona era *tanto ben* formata,
> quanto me' finger san pittori industri […]
>
> Sotto duo negri e sottilissimi archi
> son duo *negri occhi*, anzi duo chiari soli
> pietosi a riguardare, *a mover parchi* […]
>
> Bianca nieve è il bel collo, e 'l *petto* latte;
> il collo è tondo, *il petto colmo e largo* […] ."[18]

In fact, looking at the words Calvino has taken from Ariosto's canonical description of the ideal woman, it is clear that the novelist does not lavish on this woman the Petrarchan superlatives present in the original, but instead offers a series of contrasts or negations of the key elements of Ariosto's portrait. For a start, Priscilla is a widow not a nymph-like seductress, and the rest of the novelist's description revolves round negatives or reversals of the original: if Alcina is so well formed ("*tanto ben* formata") that the best painters would struggle to equal her beauty, Priscilla is "una *non tanto* alta, *non tanto* in carne". Similarly if Alcina's black eyes are dazzling like two suns and are slow to move ("*a mover parchi*"), Priscilla's eyes are dark but constantly flicker ("certi *occhi neri* che *guizzano*"), and have none of the Petrarchan paradox of being also as bright as two suns. Furthermore, if Alcina's breast is full and broad ("*il petto colmo e largo*"), Priscilla's chest is not enormous though it is prominent: "dal *petto* non vasto ma messo ben in fuori". We see also that Calvino has abandoned Ariosto's canonical top-down

[17] Cf. ibidem, p. 1027. Emphasis added.

[18] L. Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, a cura di C. Segre, Milano, Mondadori, 1976, pp. 128-129 (VII, 11, 1-2, 12, 1-3, 14, 1-2). Emphasis added.

description (height, eyes, breast) to something less ordered: first Priscilla's height, then her chest, then back to her eyes. The concluding part of Calvino's description is in fact the opposite of miraculous, and much more down to earth: "insomma una donna che ha qualcosa da dire". The modern author's prose steals some of the Renaissance poet's key words but either negates the superlatives and paradoxes or brings them down to earth, rendering them literally prosaic.

However, Calvino does not just borrow words, phrases and ideas, but he also takes stylistic elements from his source. The novel begins with two hendecasyllables, as though to suggest Ariosto's epic metre: "Sotto le rosse mura di Parigi era schierato l'esercito di Francia".[19] This hendecasyllabic rhythm recurs on several important occasions to remind us of Calvino's model. Thus chapter II opens: "La notte, per gli eserciti in campo […] ";[20] and chapter IV ends with no fewer than five hendecasyllables, when Rambaldo realizes that his saviour in the battle was a female warrior: "Perchè quella nudità era di donna […] e tese lunghe gambe di fanciulla […] Era una donna d'armoniose lune, di piuma tenera e di fiotto gentile. Rambaldo ne fu tosto innamorato".[21] Clearly the poetic rhythm here enhances even more the parody of this recognition scene. The novelist also deploys other poetic devices such as the alliteration of *v*, *l* and *s* in this battle description: "Volteggiando veloce una leggera lancia teneva discosti i saracini […] Rambaldo, al vedere con quanta leggerezza dà di stucco il soccorritore sconosciuto, quasi si scorda d'ogni cosa e resterebbe fermo lì a guardare".[22]

Calvino indulges in other forms of reversals in order to develop in a different direction what he has purloined from the original. Thus the opening

[19] Cf. I. Calvino, *Il cavaliere inesistente*, cit., p. 955.
[20] Cf. ibidem, p. 960.
[21] Cf. ibidem, pp. 989-990.
[22] Cf. ibidem, p. 987.

scene, typical of many epics, of the Emperor reviewing the troops is a parody of epic seriousness since Carlomagno here seems not the great Holy Roman Emperor but rather a "vecchio rimbambito", who does not understand the ludicrous names of his own soldiers (Calvino will highlight in a later essay Ariosto's delight in the strange names of foreign soldiers, especially those from England). Another obvious reversal is the recognition scene: on many occasions in Ariosto's poem Bradamante is recognized as a female warrior only when she removes her helmet and her blonde hair comes into view (for instance, when she takes off her helmet in the Rocca di Tristano, in *Orlando furioso*, XXXII, 79). In the passage quoted above from chapter IV, the protagonist Rambaldo recognizes that the mysterious knight who saved him in battle is a woman when she removes not her helmet, but the bottom half of her armour in order to urinate in a stream. Here Calvino almost literally turns the *Furioso* upside down.

Some of the reasons for Calvino's enthusiasm for Ariosto are made explicit in an essay written shortly after the novel's publication. In *Tre correnti del romanzo italiano d'oggi* (1960),[23] he claims that he has never stopped rereading the *Furioso* as he finds Ariosto a very congenial, kindred spirit: the novelist's feelings towards Stendhal, Hemingway and Malraux, the literary models of his youth, were just like those of Ariosto towards the chivalric tradition, since although the poet could only deal with virtue through his own irony and fantasy he never cheapens virtue or lowers his notion of humanity. And to the question "È evasione il mio amore per l'Ariosto?" Calvino replies no, for Ariosto teaches us that intelligence thrives on irony, fantasy and formal accuracy, and shows us how all these skills can

[23] Cf. Id., *Tre correnti del romanzo italiano d'oggi*, in Id., *Saggi 1945-1985*, cit., vol. I, pp. 61-75.

help us "a meglio valutare virtù e vizi umani".[24] This subtle ethical dimension is present in both authors, and Calvino insists that the *Furioso* teaches us everything we need even in this new age of computers and space flights, since – as he says in the last words of the essay – the energy of the poem is appropriately geared towards the future, not the past: "È un'energia rivolta verso l'avvenire, ne sono sicuro, non verso il passato, quella che muove Orlando, Angelica, Ruggiero, Bradamante, Astolfo…".[25] A year later he would make a similar point about Ariosto's relevance to the modern world: in *Dialogo di due scrittori in crisi*, an essay on the crisis facing realist novelists like Cassola and Calvino, the latter states: "io per esprimere il ritmo della vita moderna non trovo di meglio che raccontare battaglie e duelli dei paladini di Carlomagno".[26] At the end of the 1950s and start of the 1960s, then, Calvino constantly championed Ariosto's paradoxical modernity and relevance.

One could sum up the first phase of Calvino's engagement with Ariosto (1947-1964) as being a period when the modern novelist appreciates above all elements of content, in particular the complex passing of weapons across the two sides in a war, whether it be Charlemagne's war against the Saracens, or the Resistance in which Calvino himself fought against the Nazis and the Fascists. He also enjoys reversing some of the set-pieces of the epic (the description of the beautiful woman, the review of the troops, the recognition scene), but stresses the subtle ethical dimension of the poem, Ariosto's ironic but never sneering attitude to vice and virtues, and he advances the paradoxical claim that the *Furioso* is a text ideally suited to the

[24] Cf. ibidem, p. 75.

[25] Cf. ibidem. Exactly the same points are made in another text from 1960, the unpublished introduction to the trilogy where he mentions the *Furioso* more explicitly than in the published one. See Id., *Postfazione ai "Nostri antenati" (Nota 1960)*, in Id., *Romanzi e racconti*, cit., vol. I, pp. 1208-1219; Id., *Introduzione inedita 1960 ai "Nostri antenati"*, ibidem, pp. 1220-1224.

[26] Cf. Id., *Dialogo di due scrittori in crisi*, in Id., *Saggi 1945-1985*, cit., vol. I, p. 86.

times he is living in, a text that looks to the future and whose boundless energy is appropriate to the new age of electronics and space flights.

3. *Second phase: 1965-1985*

Critics of Calvino's narrative oeuvre often talk of a first period from 1947 to 1964 dominated by his realist and fantasy works, and of a second period from 1965 until 1985 which begins with his "cosmicomic" phase before moving onto his semiotic-postmodern period. But even in this second phase of Calvino's career he still turns to Ariosto for inspiration, and to one episode in particular. In *Due interviste su scienza e letteratura* (1968), in a period when he was busy writing his cosmicomic tales, many of which concerned the moon, Calvino suggests another reason for Ariosto's relevance to the modern age: he discusses the brilliance of Galileo as a writer and describer of the moon's surface and points out that it was therefore no accident that Ariosto was Galileo's favourite poet ("Non per niente Galileo ammirò e postillò quel poeta cosmico e lunare che fu Ariosto").[27]

However, it is in the period around 1970 that we find the other most intense period of Ariostan theft and borrowing after *Il cavaliere inesistente*. From 1965 Calvino had been in talks with RAI about making a series of radio programmes narrating and commenting on the great poem, though the contract was only signed in 1967 and the programmes were broadcast in 1968.[28] These programmes would lead to his 1970 edition of *"Orlando furioso" raccontato da Italo Calvino*. But before that volume appeared Calvino decided to retell briefly two major episodes from the *Furioso* in his

[27] Cf. Id., *Due interviste su scienza e letteratura*, in *Saggi 1945-1985*, cit., vol. I, p. 232.

[28] See Id., *Lettere 1940-1985*, cit., pp. 856-858 (to Cesare Lupo, March 31, 1965), p. 946 (to Leone Piccioni, February 8, 1967).

experimental narrative work, *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, the first part of which appeared in 1969. This first part contains a frame chapter followed by seven other tales. In the frame chapter several knights take shelter from a storm in a medieval castle but discover they have lost the power of speech. They can only narrate their stories, in the seven following chapters, using the Visconti cards which are in the castle and which are reproduced in the margin of Calvino's text. Since two of those chapters deal with episodes from the *Furioso*, Calvino again purloins material from Ariosto but both reduces it into just a few pages and also adds to it by including the visual reproductions of the cards.

The fifth and sixth stories of *Il castello dei destini incrociati* are respectively those of *Orlando pazzo per amore* and *Astolfo sulla Luna*, perhaps chosen because they constitute the catastrophic fall and rise of the eponymous hero (and also because in his earlier retelling of the story in *Il cavaliere inesistente* these two knights had been allocated only a minor role). These brief retellings of two main stories from the poem have been compared to a Haiku reworking of these episodes.[29] Orlando himself, "un gigantesco guerriero",[30] is the narrator of the first of these tales recounting his battles, his love for Angelica, and his getting lost in a forest which warns him to return to the metallic battlefields of discontinuous elements and not to adventure "nella verde mucillaginosa natura, tra le spire della continuità vivente".[31] While some critics suggest that the forest is a metaphor for the individual or collective failure of ethical will,[32] it also stands for nature and evokes Calvino's own Resistance experience. In an interview from the same year

[29] See C. Milanini, *L'utopia discontinua. Saggio su Italo Calvino*, Milano, Garzanti, 1990, p. 136.

[30] Cf. I. Calvino, *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, in Id., *Romanzi e racconti*, cit., 1992, vol. II, p. 527.

[31] Cf. ibidem, p. 528.

[32] See C. Milanini, *L'utopia discontinua. Saggio su Italo Calvino*, cit., p. 141.

(1973) in which the Einaudi edition of *Il castello dei destini incrociati* appeared, he says to Ferdinando Camon that if he were to rewrite his first novel now he would do it starting from a micoscopic moment, such as the waiting for the spring of 1945 to arrive, waiting for the rhododendrons to provide cover for the partisans, and the focal point would be "la simbiosi partigiano-rododendro".[33] Confirmation of this link between the thick vegetation and Ariosto comes a few lines later in the interview when he tells Camon about the variegated weapons the partisans possessed: "Ogni arma ha una storia non meno movimentata delle storie degli uomini, come l'*Orlando furioso* la guerra partigiana è un continuo passar d'armi di mano in mano, da un campo all'altro, e anche oggetti indumenti zaini scarpe".[34] In *Il castello dei destini incrociati* the condensation of Ariosto's vast epic into a few pages of modern Italian prose also includes poetic effects such as the onomatopoeic description of the battle:

> "E subito i nostri occhi furono come accecati dal polverone delle battaglie, udimmo il suono delle trombe, già le lance volavano in pezzi, già i musi dei cavalli scontrandosi confondevano le schiume iridescenti, già le spade un po' di taglio un po' di piatto battevano un po' sul taglio un po' sul piatto d'altre spade".[35]

There is also alliteration (mostly of the letter *f*) in the description of Angelica: "Nella figura di questa donna bionda, che in mezzo alle lame e alle piastre di ferro affaccia l'inafferrabile sorriso d'un gioco sensuale, noi riconoscemmo Angelica";[36] and hendecasyllabic rhythms for emphatic phrases: "per la rovina delle armate franche […] Orlando ne era ancora

[33] Cf. I. Calvino, *Colloquio con Ferdinando Camon*, in Id., *Saggi 1945-1985*, cit., vol. II, p. 2778.
[34] Cf. ibidem, p. 2779.
[35] Cf. Id., *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, cit., p. 527.
[36] Cf. ibidem, p. 528.

innamorato [...] Dimenticati d'Angelica! Ritorna!"[37] The tendency for Calvino's prose to slide into hendecasyllabes has already been noted in his most Ariostesque work of the earlier period, *Il cavaliere inesistente*, so it is no surprise to seeing him stealing such rhythms here as well.

When he describes the forest, Calvino carries out another reversal of what is said in the central canto of Ariosto's poem. Whereas in the latter, Orlando in his madness is described as uprooting ("svelse") oaks, elms, beech trees, ash-trees, ilexes and fir-trees,[38] in Calvino's tale it is the forest itself that tries to oppose Orlando's progress through the wood and three of the same trees are mentioned: "Vedemmo […] gli aghi degli abeti farsi irti come aculei d'istrice, le querce gonfiare il torace muscoloso dei loro tronchi, i faggi *svellere* le radici dal suolo per contrastargli il passo".[39] From the cards that Orlando puts down we learn that it was in the forest that he discovered that Angelica had made love to Medoro, and there he had lost the light of reason and proceeded to slaughter wild beasts in his rage. The card of the Moon hints at Astolfo's journey there to recover Orlando's wits in a jar. However, this version of Orlando's story ends much more ambiguously than in Ariosto's original, for the final card the hero puts down is that of the Hanged Man, and despite his serene look he seems to suggest that he has gone all round the world and finally realized that it can only be understood in reverse: "Cosa dice? Dice: – Lasciatemi cosí. Ho fatto tutto il giro e ho capito. Il mondo si legge all'incontrario. Tutto è chiaro".[40] Here Calvino has turned Ariosto's hero into someone not just mad from love but suicidal.

[37] Cf. ibidem

[38] See L. Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, cit., p. 598 (XXIII, 135, 1-4): "e svelse dopo il primo altri parecchi, / come fosser finocchi, ebuli o aneti; / e fe' il simil di querce e d'olmi vecchi, / di faggi e d'orni e d'illici e d'abeti".

[39] Cf. I. Calvino, *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, cit., p. 528. Emphasis added.

[40] Cf. ibidem, p. 532.

The sixth story of *Il castello dei destini incrociati* is recounted by Astolfo. The cards he places on the table narrate how Charlemagne ordered him to recover Orlando's wits so that the latter could return to fight and relieve the besieged city of Paris. The Hermit orders Astolfo to ride up to the Moon on the Hippogryph and recover Orlando's wits which were preserved in a jar. Unlike in the *Furioso,* Astolfo meets not St John but the poet himself on the moon in the form of Il Bagatto, and the description of this figure recalls Ariosto's own words: "Sui bianchi campi della Luna, Astolfo incontra il poeta, intento a interpolare nel suo ordito le rime delle ottave, le file degli intrecci, le ragioni e sragioni".[41] The word "ordito", with its textile associations, has Ariostan resonances: in a famous passage early on in the *Furioso*, the poet articulates his poetics of *varietas* using the metaphor of weaving from which the noun *text* or *testo* ultimately derives:

> "Ma perchè varie file a varie tele
> uopo mi son, che tutte ordire intendo,
> lascio Rinaldo e l'agitata prua
> e torno a dir di Bradamante sua".[42]

Similarly, in the very passage in Astolfo's visit to the moon which Calvino is summarizing here, the same metaphor is used, this time of human lives: on the moon Astolfo sees the lives of future people which have already been laid out on the loom ("poi ch'ebbe visto sul fatal molino / volgersi quelle [*scil*. vite] ch'eran già ordite").[43] Here the poet says that the Moon is a desert, but from its arid surface every discourse and poem departs while all journeys through forests battles treasure-hordes banquets and alcoves take us back to this centre of an empty horizon.[44] This sense of emptiness at the end

[41] Cf. ibidem, p. 536.
[42] Cf. L. Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, cit., p. 28 (II, 30, 5-8).
[43] Cf. ibidem, p. 907 (XXXV, 3, 3-4).
[44] See I. Calvino, *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, cit., pp. 536-537.

of this episode also shows how once more Calvino turns Ariosto's variety and brio into something more negative, suiting the novelist's own mood at this time, and matching his darker version of the Orlando story in the previous tale.

In *Il castello dei destini incriciati* Calvino reduces Ariosto's vast and varied text to just a few pages summarizing the two main plots of the epic which he had ignored in *Il cavaliere inesistente*, where Bradamante had been the focus, namely the story of Orlando and that of Astolfo, the latter probably connected with the novelist's obsession with the moon in the new space age. If in this text Calvino gives Astolfo, the English knight, a prominence on the level of Orlando's, this is partly due to the fact that the recovery of Orlando's wits is the second half of the eponymous protagonist's story, but it is also due to other factors such as the novelist's well-known Anglophilia[45] and also to the fact that the knight's journey to the moon qualifies him as another exponent of lightness, a theme which is emphasized at the start of his tale ("un tipo leggero come un fantino o un folletto")[46] and which will emerge emphatically in the author's later discussions of Ariosto's poem.

### 4. *The retelling of the "Furioso" and the Ariosto centenary*

Perhaps in *Il castello dei destini incrociati* Calvino limited himself to just two brief stories from the *Furioso* because between 1968 and 1970 he was working on a much longer Ariostan project, the 1970 retelling of the poem in *"Orlando furioso" di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino*. Before looking at this text in detail, it is worth remembering the

[45] For Calvino's Anglophilia, see M. McLaughlin, *Calvino saggista: anglofilia letteraria e creatività*, in *Italo Calvino Newyorkese*, a cura di A. Botta e D. Scarpa, Cava de' Tirreni, Avagliano, 2002, pp. 41-66.

[46] Cf. I. Calvino, *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, cit., p. 533.

phrase used by the author in the interview with Tullio Pericoli: "È in quegli anni che su un'occasione radiofonica mi metto a raccontare *L'Orlando furioso* in prosa, col mio stile".[47] It is easy to see what "in prosa" means but what precisely did he mean by "col mio stile"? Let us look at this surprisingly little-studied volume to see if we can find an answer.

The 1970 book consists of an introduction in five sections (on the historical Orlando, Boiardo, Ariosto, Christians and Saracens, and on Ariosto's use of the *ottava*), followed by an anthology of passages from the poem linked by Calvino's prose commentary. Here the novelist does not so much purloin Ariosto's words as present them on the page in octaves, and then uses his own words to narrate the intervening episodes. The most thorough analysis of this text was Stefano Verdino's article which established that the novelist adopted four different levels in rewriting in this text: *riassunto*, *integrazione*, *variante*, *interpretazione*.[48] It is this last level that is the most significant, and in what follows I would like to say more about how Calvino interprets Ariosto in this 1970 volume.

In the third introductory section Calvino makes a number of statements about the poet that help to explain the affinity between the two writers: indeed it seems that often when he is writing about Ariosto Calvino is also writing about himself. Thus, he notes that after the 1516 edition of the poem Ariosto tried to write a sequel, but *I cinque canti* did not lead to a new poem, since the poet seemed to have lost his earlier inventiveness and narrative brio: "l'inventiva, la felicità del primo slancio creativo sembravano perdute".[49] This sentence reminds us of the novelist's own admissions that after the publication of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, his

[47] Cf. Id., *Furti ad arte (conversazione con Tullio Pericoli)*, cit., p. 1806.

[48] See S. Verdino, *Ariosto in Calvino*, in "Nuova Corrente", C, 1987, pp. 251-258.

[49] Cf. I. Calvino, *Il saggio Ludovico e il pazzo Orlando*, in *"Orlando Furioso" di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino*, Torino, Einaudi, 1970, p. XVII.

subsequent attempts to write a second novel made him think that he had lost the creative spark that helped him write the first novel: "la vena mi s'era inaridita".[50] Similarly, a few pages later he remarks that Ariosto was not so much interested in fully rounded characters as in the dynamic energy that drives them forward in the poem:

> " […] gli eroi del *Furioso*, benché siano sempre riconoscibili, non sono mai personaggi a tutto tondo [...] ad Ariosto, che pur ha la finezza d'un pittore di miniature, è il vario movimento delle energie vitali che sta a cuore, non la corposità dei ritratti individuali".[51]

Calvino too observed many times that he himself was not interested in fully rounded characters but rather in geometrical patterns.[52] Later in the introduction, we see another link between the two authors when the novelist notes that in Ariosto's obsession with writing octave after octave, expanding the poem from within between the 1516 and 1532 editions, he seems to have been obsessed with concealing himself: "nella sua ostinata maestria a costruire ottave su ottave sembra occupato soprattutto a nascondere se stesso".[53] Calvino too was famous for his reluctance to provide details about himself and his private life.[54]

When one turns to the text itself, which consists of sequences of octaves from the poem held together by Calvino's prose summaries, it is

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[50] Cf. Id., *Postfazione ai "Nostri antenati" (Nota 1960)*, cit., p. 1209. Similar ideas are expressed in in a short note accompanying the short story *Pesci grossi, pesci piccoli*: see *Note e notizie sui testi*, a cura di M. Barenghi, B. Falcetto, C. Milanini, in I. Calvino, *Romanzi e Racconti*, cit., vol. I, pp. 1267-1269.

[51] Cf. Id., *Il saggio Ludovico e il pazzo Orlando*, cit., p. XIX.

[52] See Id., *Postfazione ai "Nostri antenati" (Nota 1960)*, cit., p. 1211.

[53] Cf. Id., *Il saggio Ludovico e il pazzo Orlando*, cit., p. XXIV.

[54] See C. Benedetti, *Pasolini contro Calvino. Per una letteratura impura*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1998, pp. 63-114; M. McLaughlin, *Concessions to autobiography in Calvino*, in *Biographies and Autobiographies in Modern Italy. A Festschrift for John Woodhouse*, edited by P. Hainsworth and M. McLaughlin, Oxford, Legenda, 2007, pp. 148-167.

clear that it is only in the latter passages that he has scope for modifying Ariosto's words, where he can "raccontare *L'Orlando furioso* in prosa, col mio stile".[55] One of the most obvious features of the way Calvino retells the story is his metatextual approach: he tends to see the text from the point of view of the writer as much as of the reader. Thus when introducing us to canto I, he describes Angelica as a figure fleeing from one unfinished poem to enter one that has just been started: "è la protagonista d'un poema rimasto incompiuto, che sta correndo per entrare in un poema appena cominciato";[56] similarly, commenting on the Alcina episode, he says that Logistilla's advice makes Ruggiero think he has strayed from a chivalric poem into an allegorical one;[57] he sees Atlante's castle not just as a magic space or vortex that keeps important characters out of the conflict, but also as a convenient void where the author can detain certain knights until he needs to resume their story;[58] he considers the Hippogryph not just a fantasy element but as a privileged piece in its movements on this chess-board, using a metaphor from structuralist discussions that are echoed in the dialogues between Marco Polo and the Great Khan in *Le città invisibili*. This metatextual approach continues right until the end of the poem when Rodomonte returns in canto 46 to challenge Ruggiero in order to prevent the poem from ending: "ora viene a sfidare Ruggiero, a cercar d'impedire che il poema si compia".[59]

Another feature of Calvino's commentary is his stress on the literary values of Ariosto's text, qualities that the novelist regards as crucial for the next millennium, such as lightness and rapidity. Lightness he associates in

[55] Cf. I. Calvino, *Furti ad arte (conversazione con Tullio Pericoli)*, cit., p. 1806.
[56] Cf. *"Orlando Furioso" di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino*, cit., p. 3.
[57] Cf. ibidem , p. 31.
[58] Cf. ibidem, p. 117.
[59] Cf. ibidem, p. 221.

particular with the character of Astolfo who controls the winged horse in the poem "con la leggerezza d'una farfalla",[60] and even the knight's own non-wingèd horse does not leave a hoof-print on sand or snow: "Il galoppo di Rabicano è così leggero che sfiora il suolo come fosse una libellula".[61] But lightness is also an attribute of the poet himself who allows us to contemplate even disasters with a certain lightness because these are set against the variety of events that happen in life: "Questo poema ci ha insegnato a contemplare lutti e strazi dosandoli in modo da farli scorrere quasi con leggerezza in mezzo ai variegati accadimenti della vita".[62] Closely linked to the lightness of the poem is its other main quality, rapidity of narration. Thus when Olimpia awakes to find her husband Bireno has gone, her initial despair is followed swiftly by a happy ending to her story: "il poeta [...] può passare, con uno dei suoi rapidi arpeggi, dagli strazi della tragedia al galoppo dell'avventura".[63] 'Lightness' and 'Rapidity' are two of the most important literary qualities outlined in Calvino's final non-fiction work, *Lezioni americane* (1986).

Nevertheless, the prose summary does not ignore questions of content. Calvino stresses, as elsewhere, the constant swapping of arms and magic objects from one side to another, and the fact that nobody ever owns anything for long: "Nella confusione della guerra, armi, cavalli, arnesi, continuano a passar di mano in mano, ognuno di essi col suo nome e la sua storia e le sue caratteristiche inconfondibili".[64] Thus this 1970 retelling of the *Furioso* on the one hand looks back to Calvino's first novel where weapons and uniforms passed from side to side, and on the other

[60] Cf. I. Calvino, *Il saggio Ludovico e il pazzo Orlando,* cit., p. XIX.
[61] Cf. *"Orlando Furioso" di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino,* cit., p. 86.
[62] Cf. ibidem, p. 217.
[63] Cf. ibidem, p. 50.
[64] Cf. ibidem, p. 145.

reflects contemporary metatextual works such as *Le città invisibili* as well as looking forward to the essays on literary values such as lightness and rapidity contained in the *Lezioni americane*.

The period between 1968 and the Ariosto centenary of 1974 saw the greatest concentration of work by Calvino on the Renaissance poet and his text. This period of Ariostan enthusiasm would conclude with the two substantial articles which the novelist wrote for the poet's centenary in 1974, one article on the structure of the poem *Ariosto: la struttura dell'"Orlando furioso"*, and the other on the style of the octave *Piccola antologia di ottave*. These titles alone, with their emphasis on the epic's structure and metre, show that Calvino's interest in the Renaissance text was shifting in this period from the poem's content to its organization and style. In the first of these essays, Calvino is interested in all structural aspects of the epic, from the micro-structure of the octave (with its anti-climactic shift of tone in the final couplet) to the macro-structures of the canto (with its *proemi* and its cliff-hanging endings) and of the whole poem, with its zig-zag plot movement, its asymmetry and mixture of tones. On the macro-structural level he notes that the two centres of gravity in the poem are Paris and Atlante's castle, and once more states that the latter is as much Ariosto's castle as Atlante's, since it was a space in which to keep characters until they were needed. In fact many of these ideas are familiar, but what is new in this essay is the more detailed stylistic analysis of the ottava, of sentence structure and tone.[65]

In the second of these centenary essays, *Piccola antologia di ottave*, he also concentrates on narrative technique, defining the "spirito ariostesco" as a

[65] See Id., *Ariosto: la struttura dell'"Orlando furioso"*, in Id., *Saggi 1945-1985*, cit., vol. I, pp. 759-768.

"spinta in avanti",[66] returning to the sense of energy that he had identified in the poem at the beginning of the 1960s. The novelist is particularly interested in beginnings and admires those octaves that announce a new adventure (he cites *Orlando furioso*, IX, 9), especially on the banks of a river, as a boat arrives. Another area he enjoys is Ariosto's fun in Italianizing English toponyms (X, 81), and in citing this octave Calvino hints at one of the main motives for his affinity with the epic poet: "la toponomastica inglese fornisce il materiale verbale con cui Ariosto si diverte di piú, qualificandosi come il primo anglomane della letteratura italiana".[67] Calvino also was a notable victim of Anglomania or Anglophilia. Not surprisingly the novelist enthuses about the most striking example of Ariosto's rapidity of narration, namely the single octave where as Bradamante seeks shelter for the night, the temperature shifts within just eight lines from blazing heat to cold and snow:

> "Leva al fin gli occhi, e vede il sol che 'l tergo
> avea mostrato alle città di Bocco,
> e poi s'era attuffato, come il mergo,
> in grembo alla nutrice oltr'a Marocco:
> e se disegna che la frasca albergo
> le dia ne' campi, fa pensier di sciocco;
> che soffia un vento freddo, e l'aria grieve
> pioggia la notte le minaccia o nieve."[68]

But if lightness and rapidity were values that Calvino had singled out on many previous occasions, in this essay he also observes that precision of detail is a major value, citing the example of the minute particulars of the final duel between Ruggiero and Rodomonte (XLVI, 126), as well as Rinaldo's precision in legalistic argument in the Ginevra episode (IV, 65).

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[66] Cf. Id., *Piccola antologia di ottave*, in Id., *Saggi 1945-1985*, cit., vol. I, p. 769.
[67] Cf. ibidem, p. 770.
[68] L. Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, cit., p. 837 (XXXII, 63).

## 5. *Conclusion: the 1980s*

It might seem that after this intense concentration on the *Furioso* between 1968 and 1975 Calvino's interest in Ariosto diminishes in relative terms. However, he remains a canonical author for the novelist, and one who paradoxically has much to say to modernity. As Calvino observes in an interview (1982) about the French translation of his *"Orlando furioso" di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino*, Ariosto's epic which has no beginning, no middle and in a sense no ending, is a work of "stupefacente modernità".[69]

Even in a late essay such as *Il libro, i libri* (1984) he is fascinated by the fact that the *Furioso* is a text that is itself a universe but it also contains a magic book (the one used by Astolfo to ride the Hippogryph) which in turn contains the world of magic: "L'*Orlando furioso* è un libro che contiene tutto il mondo e questo mondo contiene un libro che vuole essere il mondo".[70] Calvino, who had just published an encyclopedic *summa* of the universe in *Palomar* (1983) was still fascinated by works that contain a whole world. He even wonders, in a sort of mise-en-abyme, whether the magic volume consulted by Astolfo on the back of the Hippogryph is in fact the *Orlando furioso* itself. And, as we have seen, the *Furioso* epitomizes some of the key literary qualities that Calvino thought essential for this new millennium: Ariosto is explicitly mentioned in the essay on *Leggerezza* in *Lezioni americane*, and in the other essays we have examined he was cited for both his rapidity and precision of narration. Similarly the novelist's creative engagement with the *Furioso* continues at least until 1983, since in that year

[69] Cf. I. Calvino, *"Sono nato in America…". Interviste 1951-1985*, a cura di L. Baranelli e M. Barenghi, Milano, Mondadori, 2012, p. 524.

[70] Cf. Id., *Il libro, I libri*, in Id., *Saggi 1945-1985*, cit., vol. II, p. 1849.

he wrote three extra chapters to add to his 1970 "edizioncina"[71] of the poem, and sent them to be included in the Spanish translation of that volume.[72] So his Ariostophilia continues long after 1975.

Calvino's obsession with Ariosto was constant throughout his life: he first mentions the *Furioso* in connection with his own early experience of war in the Resistance, and even towards the end of his life the novelist sees the Renaissance poet as embodying three fundamental literary values for the next millennium (lightness, rapidity, precision), values set out in his last non-fiction work *Lezioni americane* (1986). If the first phase (1947-1964) of Calvino's involvement with the Renaissance poet was characterized by certain affinities of content, such as the passing of weapons from side to side, and the ironic but never dismissive attitude to ethical questions of virtue and vice, the second phase (1965-1985) is typified by structural and stylistic interests. Although *Il castello dei destini incrociati* tends to offer a much darker picture of human life than that found in the *Furioso*, the author still finds Ariosto's text strikingly modern and worth stealing from. More than in the 1950s and early 60s, he now admires above all the lightness, rapidity and precision of Ariosto's narration. The *Furioso* clearly held secrets that Calvino thought worth purloining throughout his career, from characters and episodes to more abstract literary values. In the interview with Tullio Pericoli with which this article began, Calvino stated that imitating or stealing is part of the apprenticeship of all young writers: "Credo che un giovane, per cominciare una qualsiasi attività creativa, non deve farsi scrupolo di imitare, di rubare".[73] Both the young and the older Calvino was never afraid to imitate and steal from Ariosto. But whereas the developing writer imitated but then in the

[71] Cf. Id., *Lettere 1940-1985*, cit., p. 1231 (to C. Lonergan Salvadori, February 9, 1974).

[72] See ibidem, pp. 1503-1504 (to Mario Muchnik, September 28, 1983).

[73] Cf. Id., *Furti ad arte (conversazione con Tullio Pericoli)*, cit., p. 1803.

second half of his literary career jettisoned other early literary models such as Stendhal and Hemingway, the *Orlando furioso* remained a constant and varied source of creative stimulus for Calvino until his death in 1985.