
Mapping the Flaneur: Critical Reading of Italo Calvino's *Marcivaldo*

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Abstract: Calvino's short story collection *Marcivaldo or The Seasons in the City* features the character, Marcivaldo who embodies the spirit of the flaneur, indeed a subversive urban stroller who is caught in the process of urbanization. He navigates the challenges of urban life, moves between wonder and frustration as he experience the changing seasons quite parallel to the changing Italy. As the subtitle reflects the changing seasons symbolize the physical, emotional and psychological state of the character covertly associating them to the impact of industrialization on spaces. The paper attempts to analyse the titular character Marcivaldo along the lines of spatial theory categorizing him as an early flaneur in the narrative discourse of the time. Marcivaldo could be seen as a detached observer and explorer who strolls the city witnessing the transition of the city space and human psyche highlighting the complexities of modern life.

Keywords: Flaneur, Space, Urbanization, Consumer, subversive, stroller

Introduction: Italo Calvino was a pioneering figure in metafiction and postmodern narrative, renowned for innovatively experimenting with storytelling forms and structures. His writing style blurs the boundary between reality and imagination, subverting conventional story telling. His works are a site for philosophical mediation making the reader an implicit character in the act of reading, in a mode of exploring human experience, and thoughts, using the possibilities of language. Calvino's short story collection, *Marcivaldo*, consists of around twenty stories featuring the titular character trying to connect with the elements of natural world in a space that is being dominated by technology and capitalism. Marcivaldo is a poor worker living with his family in a large, industrial city. Italy during the period of urbanization acts as the backdrop for the stories. Marcivaldo is a very unique person indeed a dreamer, stroller constantly yearning for nature and simplicity in the midst of the fast moving, changing, concrete and consumerist modern way of life. The paper attempts to analyse the character of Marcivaldo along the lines of spatial theory in fact identifying him as a transitional flaneur during the period before and during urbanization in Italy.

Though the notion of flaneur pervades our literary discourse from the nineteenth century, the concept of flâneur was introduced by Charles Baudelaire in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (first published in 1863). As Baudelaire has remarked, flâneur is a privileged, masculine modern figure associated with urbanity. For him, the flâneur is an observer as well as an urban explorer. He is also considered a master of leisure. Flâneur is supposed to be in constant pursuit of knowledge and beauty, enjoying the aesthetics inherent in urbanity and seeking the pleasures of being ‘one with the crowd’ (4-6).

Flaneur as a figure embodies a kind of person, movement, and disposition towards the world. Benjamin discusses how the figure of the flaneur in the nineteenth century demonstrated a co-constitutive relationship between observing and being observed by passers-by in the street (Moore 3). Both Walter Benjamin and David Harvey have given extended attributions to the term flaneur. Benjamin’s reading of the flaneur sees him as a historical figure, belonging in the streets of the city of a Paris of an already historic time. If the meaning of the city is imposed by the logic of capitalism and commodification then the flaneur becomes ultimately a passive spectator who cannot escape the logic of consumerism (McGarrigle 2)

Benjamin in his understanding of modernity incorporates his vision where the notion of flaneur can be viewed as a phenomenology of perception of daily life, an observer and a narrator that transforms the context of the metropolis in a double image: interior and exterior. In this perspective flaneur is a figure representing the fragments of daily life in a sensorial and sensitive way. He is an urban explorer who turns the city into a text to be read. For David Harvey, “the flaneur maps the city’s terrain and evokes its living qualities within the city rendered legible for us in a very distinctive way (McGarrigle 2).” Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, makes a crucial distinction between strategies that is imposed by institutions and tactics that is improvised by individuals. Certeau considered flaneur strolling the city not as a subject of urban planning but as a subjective agent who appropriates and reinterprets spaces (32).

The stories featuring Marcovaldo has been set in an industrial city of northern Italy. And the first in the series were written in the early 1950s and thus are in a very poor Italy. The last stories date from the mid-60s, when the phantasma of economic boom flourished. After the unification of Italy in the late nineteenth century, internal movements followed a regular pattern that is from south to north and east to west. Population movement was relatively slight during war time as permits were required to move within the country. Rapid industrialization in the urban centres acted as a catalyst in accelerating the movement of people from the south to north. Rural land was abandoned and people moved to industrial areas. The economic boom brought in by rapid industrialization was called by historians as a miracle. The heavy industry of the north coupled with the large business groups in the centre gave an international dimension to Italy which indeed brought a huge transformation in the lives of people. The most important consequence of this boom was the mass migration,

Italians moved from the rural south to the urban north. Gradually Italy was transforming itself into a consumer society; magazines began to showcase advertisements of various products that became the need of consumer culture. As a result, a new way of life that was affluent, convenient, luxurious at the same time urban and exciting enthralled men and women of this new consumer world.

The stories set in 1950s and 1960s Italy have been demarcated on the basis of time by giving the names of seasons. Its traces could be found in the writings of Italo Calvino with perhaps an extended range of attributions. In the first story, Marcovaldo is introduced as a modern enthusiast city dweller coping with the urbanization. Unlike the urban flaneurs it was not the aesthetics of urban sphere that attracted his gaze,

instead, he would never miss a leaf yellowing on a branch, a feather trapped by a roof-tile; there was no horsefly on a horse's back, no worm-hole in a plank, or a fig-peel squashed on the sidewalk that Marcovaldo didn't remark and ponder over, discovering the changes of season, the yearnings of his heart, and the woes of his existence. (Calvino 1)

He was a keen observer such that no sight and especially when it comes to nature and its constituents, nothing could escape Marcovaldo's vision. "And yet, once, a flight of autumn woodcock appeared in a street's slice of sky. And the only person to notice was Marcovaldo, who always walked with his nose in the air (13)." Like a typical flaneur, his observation as well as obsession to space is evident in the following lines, "He opened the window: the city was gone, it had been replaced by a white sheet of paper... the snow had fallen on noises or rather on the very possibility of making noise; sounds, in a padded space, did not vibrate (16)." Marcovaldo, the stroller always felt that his footsteps carried him involuntarily to different places, "as he walked along, dreamed of getting lost in a different city: instead his footsteps were taking him to his everyday work place" (17).

And this chapter is titled as, "The City Lost in the Snow", quite in unison with the psyche of Marcovaldo who longs to get lost in the city spaces (30). The city referred to in the chapter is described as lost indicating the heavy snow that has completely covered the city making the landscape nothing but a white expanse of thickly layered snow. Whereas like the city that is lost Marcovaldo is lost psychologically and he is unable to locate the old city. Marcovaldo desperately shovels the snow in an attempt to reconfigure the city. But then he realizes that he cannot make the old place as it was before snowing. Marcovaldo is constantly yearning for nature within a city that is increasingly industrial, sterile, and mechanical. He is re-authoring the space with a kind of quiet resistance. There is pain when he realizes that what is lost is lost.

But shoveling the snow is a spatial reconfiguration indeed a personal cartography that is created against the grand city planning act. After engaging with snow, Marcovaldo learns to pile the snow into a compact little wall. And then he ponders that he could go on making little walls like that, and therefore he could build some streets and thereby remake

the city. He was thinking of a whole city that is made of snow - monuments and spires and trees, all made of snow, such that the city could be unmade by shovel and remade in a different way.

In the story “The City All for Himself”, Marcovaldo and his family could be seen walking around the city that was illuminated by street-lamps, and where they could see only houses and not a sign of a forest. And reached the area where the street turned into a highway (37). This image of the familiar street transforming into a highway symbolizes the relentless rush of urbanization and the loss of personal, psychological spaces. The city has expanded into a modern space consumed by traffic signs, concrete buildings, speeding vehicles making the idea of wandering, observing, making small discoveries, possibility of pause and wonder and obsolete idea altogether.

“The Fog” is indeed a very powerful episode where the city gets invaded by fog, “a thick, opaque fog, which engulfed things and sounds, flattened distances into a space without dimensions, mixed lights into darkness and transformed them into glows without shape or place” (61). This is a very theatrical spectacle transforming the city into a new one. Marcovaldo’s visibility was adversely affected due to fog there was in no way he could his familiar surroundings. He reached a tavern and then started having wine (64). The thick fog disrupts the normal rhythms of the urban world – slowing down traffic and mobility, lack of visibility, chaos and confusion. Unlike the others Marcovaldo was indeed enjoying the warmth of wine and this was not a moment of panic but an opportunity for introspection and escape. Once he was out of the tavern, he found it difficult to understand the place around him. The city that was so familiar, indeed the very part of his existence, started being transformed into a new and fleeting place.

Marcovaldo is a passionate city lover and dweller. In the month during every year there was a general change of feeling. No one loved the city anymore except Marcovaldo. He was the only inhabitant not to leave the city. For eleven months of the year the inhabitants loved their city and woe to anyone who cast aspersions: the skyscrapers, the cigarette machines, the wide screen movie theatres, all undeniable sources of constant attraction. The only citizen to whom this feeling could not be attributed with certitude was Marcovaldo (97). He would stroll through the deserted streets that opened before him, wide and endless, devoid of car; shutters lowered buildings. That is the streets were all to himself. All the year Marcovaldo had dreamed of walking in the middle of the streets freely, crossing red signal lights and stopping and standing in the centre of the squares. He was happy to do this but didn’t enjoy much as Marcovaldo’s eyes could notice the emergence of a different city.

He goes on staring at the empty streets and closed shops thinking of the reality that the moment human beings had deserted the city and it had fallen prey to inhabitants hidden till then. Small insects, molds and tiny plants had invaded the area. “And so forgetting the

function of sidewalks and zebra stripes, Marcovaldo was moving through the streets with a butterfly's zigzag... (99).

In Marcovaldo's opinion the new city that has been formed creates distinction between the space that could be accommodated by people and cats. He attributes the newly formed city with a few names – vertical city, counter-city and a negative city (100) – a space of concrete towers, billboards, elevators and smokestacks. The city is built upward, vertically, efficient and rigid, where nature is displaced and time is measured by factory whistles. To Marcovaldo this city is alienating and oppressive. The mystery and intriguing atmosphere of the city was exposed by cats. Marcovaldo the flaneur observes that “from the cat city there opened unsuspected peep-holes onto the city of men: one day a tabby led him to discover the great Biarritz Restaurant (103).” He calls kitty as treacherous as it would vanish after leading him to a certain way.

Marcovaldo, the poor warehouse worker is a wandering observer drifting through the city with wonder, excitement, curiosity and happiness like a small child. He walks, watches, dreams, enjoys, and engages with the city spaces not through the modern day consumption mode instead by sheer love, leisure and passion – he observes mushrooms, birds, plants and such minute and trivial things when looked from the perspective of urban modernity. He is a flaneur from the margins indeed a subversive and precarious flaneur. Calvino's Marcovaldo is not a consumer of modernity but rather a dreamer resisting it. Marcovaldo lacks the bourgeois leisure of Benjamin's flaneur, he shares the same dream like orientation towards the city. In Marcovaldo, the flanerrie is not aesthetic consumption but a survival tactic, marked by fantasy, misrecognition and failure. Marcovaldo's wandering aligns with Certeau's idea of “walking in the city” as a practice that makes use of spaces that cannot be seen as a silent, evasive poetics of mundane everyday life.

Marcovaldo is more or less a transitional flaneur, a figure who moves through urban or social spaces not in a static, detached way, but as someone undergoing or embodying change that is culturally, psychologically, or politically. This figure is indeed caught between the transcending borders of the rural to the urban, as a result of industrialisation. Though he symbolises resistance to industrial time and space, towards the end of the story he has started to engage with the changing city space and aesthetics with utmost interest. Therefore Marcovaldo is indeed a complex persona where he is a classical at the same time a transitional flaneur, not Baudelaire's bourgeois flaneur, but a subversive urban stroller.

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