

Gayatri Anand

M.A English

MCM DAV College for Women

Chandigarh, India

gai3.anand@gmail.com

The Nonexistent Knight by Italo Calvino: A Plethora of Unanswered Questions

Abstract

A twentieth-century Italian journalist and writer, Italo Calvino is known for his experimental writing. The Nonexistent Knight is an allegory set in the time of Charlemagne. A torrent of ideas are presented within this novella which is replete with all the elements that an intriguing medieval quest ought to contain.

One can never be sure of saving one's soul by writing. One may go on writing with a soul already lost

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Italo Calvino

The quotation mentioned above has been taken from the text in question, i.e. 'The Nonexistent Knight' by Italo Calvino. It indicates that the author of the tale could be one who is soulless, much like the protagonist of the tale who is a non-being. 'The Nonexistent Knight' is a perplexing story in several ways. It resembles a puzzle with missing pieces. Full of bizarre twists and turns, the story is like a thought experiment conducted on readers. The war which is taking place when the novel begins is compared to a game that has been rigged, with the losing and winning sides decided beforehand. The narrator, Saint Theodora is introduced after the story has already begun. She is a nun who appears to be writing the tale as a form of

penance. However, she is eventually revealed to be a character in the tale that is being narrated: Bradamante, a female knight who harbours unrequited love for Agilulf.

Agilulf, the protagonist, is a paladin who does not exist. He exists only as an empty suit of armour. He knows perfectly well that he doesn't exist but he imitates the act of existence very well. He survives merely through "will power" and "faith". Pain, penance, guilt and neediness all seem to be the central theme of this novel, to the extent of one's own existence being questioned by the key figures

One is unable to relate to the events unfolding in the novel as they are so bizarre and random. The writer voice constantly intrudes and acts as a jarring reminder of the fact that this is a work of fiction. For instance, in the middle of the story the writer complains about the nuisance of writing a novel. At one point in the story, the writer even remarks 'Here on the river's bank I will set a mill' where Agilulf can stop and ask for directions. It is almost as if this book is meant to be a guide on the process of writing a work of fiction.

The two most likeable characters are not human in the conventional sense of the word. It is the quasi-human and the one who rejects his humanity who are consistent while the conventional, existent beings lack integrity and stability. Agilulf can most closely be compared to a humanoid while Gurduloo rejects his humanity in every way. He identifies with every [inanimate] object and [non-human] creature he comes across, including ducks, frogs, pears, fish and shockingly, even corpses.

For instance, he digs a grave for himself and in the process assumes the role of the corpse itself, and sits waiting for the corpse he had been carrying to bury him in it. Agilulf refuses to live a dishonourable life and removes his armour while eccentric Gurduloo emerges as the wisest character of all, a Shakespearean fool. When the humanoid paladin vanishes, his squire Gurduloo says "My master is a person who doesn't exist, so he can not exist as much in a flask as in a suit of armour." His comment brings forth the question-Is it even possible

for a non-being to vanish? The use of the word 'vanishes' itself seems presumptuous as the paladin never existed in the first place. Can he be given a name and experience the kind of yearning for companionship Agilulf seems to experience? Agilulf is shown as likeable, sensitive, vulnerable and lonely. Even the fact that he thrives in chaos where he feels needed is a common human shortcoming. Surprisingly he seems more human and humane than the rest of the existent characters. Raimbaut instinctively feels that Agilulf is the only one with whom he would like to discuss his troubles. Bradamante considers him the most honourable man she knows. Charlemagne considers him his greatest knight. This is a clear indictment of humanity itself as the person commonly believed to be the best, is a quasi-being or even a non-being. The narrator, Sister Theresa, who is eventually revealed to be Bradamante, appears to be in love with the humanoid paladin throughout the narrative. The author never gives any indication that she has any feelings except hatred for Raimbaut. However, at the end of the novel, she inexplicably runs away with him when he suddenly shows up at the convent. Her love for Agilulf and hatred for Raimbaut vanishes as abruptly as Agilulf himself. [Almost as if the human being she loved all along was Raimbaut, if only, he could have the emotions, sensitivity and nature of that of Agilulf - her ideal romance]. The author seems to indicate that this kind of perfection can only exist in the imagination. Flesh-and-blood beings will always be flawed.

Towards the end, addressing the book itself, the narrator reveals her real identity, and talks about the difficulty of writing a novel without a coherent idea: "A chapter started when one doesn't know which tale to tell is like a corner turned on leaving a convent, when one might come face to face with a dragon, a Saracen gang, an enchanted isle or a new love." These lines which appear in what would normally serve as the denouement seem to be a prediction of future events, any or all of which might be real or unreal. Calvino's own voice seems to resonate through the text. It becomes impossible to conclude whether it is Saint

Theresa, Bradamante or Calvino himself who is narrating the action. The story exists on two (or more) levels . Agilulf's journey is depicted simultaneously along with the nun's frustration at the difficulty of writing the book. The two amalgamate towards the end to such an extent that it is impossible to ascertain where the truth lies under so many layers of illusions. It is impossible for one to pinpoint when exactly Saint Theodora turns into Italo Calvino himself.

To add to all the confusion, the novel is full of anachronisms. Futuristic elements abound in a medieval setting. There is a knight with a quest but he is a humanoid. The Knights of the Grail are unholy, unchivalrous and cruel. The narrator is clearly post-modern as she ends up being a part of the story itself and frequently talks about the difficulties of writing. These frequent interruptions in the narrative make it impossible for the reader to be fully immersed/ engrossed in the book. Is that the author's goal or a side-effect? It's impossible to ascertain. However, considering the nature of most post-modern works, it could very well be the aim. At certain moments the narrator appears to be Calvino himself, just for a few brief moments. For instance, the last Chapter begins with the writer addressing the text itself "Book, now you have reached your end. These last pages I found myself writing away at breakneck speed." The writer seems to have run out of patience with the task at hand. One is left with an endless list of questions and no satisfactory resolution is ever achieved. The only possible conclusion that one can arrive at is that the novel is anti-human in several ways. The narratorial author says "...the world was polluted with objects and capacities and persons who lacked any names or distinguishing marks." It seems to suggest that the post-modern world is full of non- beings like Agilulf who can even be called 'post-human'. The narrator deems armour even more necessary for nonexistent beings than it is for existing ones. There is a subtle but ever-present indication that humans are the real pollutants or villains in stories

about heroic post- humans or virtual beings. Ultimately, the reader is left with an ever-growing list of unanswered questions.

Work Cite

Italo Calvino. *The Nonexistent Knight*. Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1962.