The Narrator of Italo Calvino’s *Il cavaliere inesistente*

"Il mio nome è al termine del mio viaggio."

When we approach a literary work, especially a novel, for the first time, we expect the author to reveal through the narrator certain basic aspects of the plot and its structure, either by direct description or by indirect revelation in the body of the work. In any work presented by an overt narrator, the reader has two means of forming an impression of the narrator: how he is revealed through his presentation and interpretation of plot-events, and what he tells the reader about himself. Usually the narrator, if a participant in the action, identifies himself, either by naming or by placing himself in the story-context. On occasion the character-narrator attempts to remain anonymous, but unless the narrator is being deliberately obscure, the reader is usually able to deduce early which of the characters is telling the tale. Occasionally an overt narrator who participates in the plot will remain unidentifiable, but in most of these cases the narrator is only incidental to the plot, or claims to be retelling a story previously related by the protagonist, in some cases mentioning that he was present at a certain significant story event (a favorite device of Victorian novelists; see Thackeray, *The Newcomes*; Eliot, *Adam Bede*). In any case, the reader can, as a rule, tell very early whether the narrator is a participant in the action or is outside it, and whether the narrator is omniscient or limited in his perceptions. After all, in his discussion of the first-person novel, Romberg says that the first question to be posed must be, "Who is the narrator?" (83).

In Italo Calvino’s *Il cavaliere inesistente*, on the other hand, the reader is given strong clues that the teller of the tale is a certain type of narrator and then as soon as the reader attempts to identify him, the rules are broken and the reader is forced to reassemble the pieces hastily and to construct a new and different narrator. This throws into confusion many of the reader’s early perceptions of the characters in the work, which are based (at least in part) on the assumption, which later turns out to be false, that the narrator has stood in a certain relation to them.

The narrator of *Il cavaliere inesistente* remains covert until Chapter 4. Until then, the reader has no sense of an active narrator, much less of one who participates in the action. The story is apparently being told by an omniscient being far removed from the plot. The early chapters show many instances of the narrator’s reporting a character’s thought or perceptions. This process is well illustrated by Chapter 2 in which the omniscience of the narrator is
made clear and in which the reader is given many clues as to his nature: clues which later turn out to be false.

This chapter opens with a general statement concerning life in the military: “La notte, per gli eserciti in campo, è regolata come il cielo stellato: i turni di guardia, l’ufficiale di scolta, le pattuglie” (10). The tone of this sentence implies that the narrator has had direct participatory experience of army life. So the reader forms two impressions of the speaker: (1) he is male; (2) he is a soldier. The first paragraph continues the generalization but pinpoints it a little: “il sonno ha vinto tutti i guerrieri e i quadrupedi della Cristianità” (10), leading the reader to a third conclusion: the narrator, if a participant in the plot, is likely to be a soldier in Charlemagne’s army.

The second paragraph upsets this latest conclusion: “Dall’altra parte, al campo degli Infedeli, tutto uguale” (10). We now assume that the narrator is outside the action of the plot, since he can report on the state of the two camps while they are at war with each other. Most Christians would not be privy to the conditions of the pagans’ camp, and vice versa. The narrator’s presence as character involved in the plot has not yet been established, however, so we can easily backtrack, dismissing our identification of him with one or the other side, and reconfirming our original impression that he is not involved in the story, but still has had first-hand experience of war. This belief is strengthened at the end of the same paragraph when we are informed as by one who knows it well: “In nessun posto si dorme bene come nell’esercito” (10).

The narrator next goes from the general to the particular. The third paragraph begins: “Solo ad Agilulfo questo sollievo di dormire non era dato” (10). Not only are we focusing on Agilulfo; we can also perceive what he is experiencing: “continuava a pensare: non i pensieri oziosi e divaganti di chi sta per prendere sonno, ma sempre ragionamenti determinati e esatti” (10–11). The reader is now certain that the narrator is omniscient, with the ability to read the mind of at least one of the characters. Possibly Agilulfo and the narrator are one, and the conclusions drawn about life in the pagan camp are interpolated from Agilulfo’s experience as a soldier; or perhaps, as an officer, he has been on a diplomatic mission to the other side. This conclusion would then indicate that the narrator is referring to himself in the third person, an unusual, but by no means unheard-of, situation. On the other hand, it is still quite likely that the narrator is not at all involved in the plot. After all, the tale is about Agilulfo, as the title Il cavaliere inesistente indicates, and it is not surprising that the narrator presents the action as though seen through his eyes. As the reader follows Agilulfo’s actions and thoughts, this suspicion increases. We hear that Agilulfo “udì una voce” (12) and that “la più piccola manchevolezza nel servizio dava ad Agilulfo la smania di controllar tutto” (12), that “Agilulfo aveva un momento d’incertezza” (12), etc. When Agilulfo meets a new soldier (later identified as Rambaldo) the narrator does not enter Rambaldo’s mind; instead the young man is perceived
through Agilulfo’s eyes: “il giovane restò un po’ confuso, come frenato nel suo slancio” (14); note the important word come; indicating that the narrator is only guessing at Rambaldo’s reactions.

But as though to confound our preliminary assumptions, at the end of Rambaldo’s speech the point of view jumps to him from Agilulfo:

nella sua [di Agilulfo] voce ora c’era un certo calore, il calore di chi conoscendo a menadito i regolamenti e gli organici gode a dimostrare la propria competenza e anche a confondere l’impreparazione altrui. (14)

But if, as we are assuming, Agilulfo is the narrator, we are forced to reevaluate him, since here we must be observing Agilulfo from the outside, not from the inside, as before: we read that he speaks with the heat of one who knows the rules, not because he knows the rules. It surely must be the inexperienced Rambaldo who notices and perhaps exaggerates the impatience of the renowned “perfect soldier.” This belief is confirmed in the next paragraph:

Il giovane, che s’aspettava almeno un segno di meravigliata reverenza al nome di suo padre, restò mortificato per il tono prima che per il senso del discorso. Poi cercò di riflettere alle parole che il cavaliere gli aveva detto, ma ancora per negarle dentro di sé e tener vivo il suo entusiasmo. (14)

Either Agilulfo is omniscient, as well as non-existent, or he is using a new way of presenting the story for reasons as yet unexplained, or we have erred in assigning him the narrator’s rôle.

Just as the point of view switches from Agilulfo to Rambaldo, at this point the action follows the same course. Instead of following Agilulfo as he goes around the camp, we now watch Rambaldo wander among the tents of the paladins. Although the language here refers to Rambaldo, and does not report his thoughts directly, we are clearly seeing through his eyes: “Eccolo tra i paladini invincibili, eccolo pronto a emularli in battaglia, armi alla mano, a diventare come loro!” (15); clearly the thoughts of the eager novice knight. Other characters are seen through the eyes of the youth, who is quickly disillusioned by the reality of army life and of the knights. He thinks (and indeed, his thoughts seem to echo those of the reader in a different context: the twists and turns that our search for the narrator is taking) that “non avrebbe immaginato che l’apparenza potesse rivelarsi così ingannatrice: dal momento in cui era giunto al campo scopriva che tutto era diverso da come sembrava” (16); “si sentiva preso da uno sgomento indefinibile” (19).

The reader may at this point posit a new narrator: an omniscient being who can read the minds of the various characters and can see into both camps, with an as yet unexplained preference for revealing the thoughts of Agilulfo and Rambaldo. The puzzling point is the narrator’s tone, that of a man accustomed to war, and specifically to the Crusades. The reader can, however, easily dismiss this question, at least this early in the novel, by
assuming that the author has chosen to give the narrator this tone to add color and authenticity to what he is saying.

Until the middle of Chapter 4, we receive no information to contradict this impression. Minor characters come and go without the narrator’s reporting their thoughts, but the more important figures are exposed. There is one striking exception to this rule: the knight whom Rambaldo encounters in his first battle. From Rambaldo’s reaction to the knight, the reader knows that this will be an important character, and is eager to find out more about him. But for once the narrator seems unable or unwilling to penetrate a character’s mind. All we know about this character is learned from what another person (Rambaldo) sees, as for, example, when he learns that “he” is really a woman:

quella nudità era di donna . . . . Si girò su se stessa, cercò un luogo accogliente, puntò un piede da una parte e l’altro dall’altra di un ruscello, piegò un poco i ginocchi, v’appoggiò le braccia dalle ferree cubitiere, protese avanti il capo e indietro il tergo, e si mise tranquilla e altera a far pipi. Era una donna di armoniose lune, di piuma tenera e di fiotto gentile. Rambaldo ne fu tosto innamorato. (38)

The perception of the young woman is clearly through Rambaldo’s eyes. Her own feelings are not directly reported, but the reader easily discovers what they are when the warrior-maiden catches sight of Rambaldo observing her and throws a rock at him, shouting “Schweine Hund!” (38). Indeed, at no point does the narrator present Bradamante’s thoughts or feelings directly. The reader and Rambaldo learn about her simultaneously, either through her actions or through pronouncements made in such a way that the reader takes them on faith, as in the following case:

Dei guerrieri che s’erano radunati lì intorno, qualcuno si sedette sull’erba per godersi la scena di Bradamante che dava in smanie.—Da quando le è preso questo innamoramento per Agilulfo, disgraziata, non ha pace . . . . (52)

This statement is presented as though by a classical chorus, and so the reader believes it implicitly, especially as Bradamante’s actions have already made it obvious that she is smitten with the non-existent knight. Rambaldo believes it too and stammers, “Ma come può essere... Agilulfo... Bradamante... Come fa?” (53).

The narrator, then, is unable or unwilling to enter Bradamante’s mind in the same way that he enters the minds of the other characters. Since we have already concluded that the narrator is omniscient and probably a soldier, we are forced to infer that either the narrator is outside the novel, or is possibly Agilulfo or Rambaldo. In the latter case the narrator would have to be imagining, rather than reporting, what is going on inside the other characters’ minds. His familiarity with the pagan camps can easily be explained: both soldiers had ample opportunity to enter the other side’s encampment (indeed, at one point we follow Rambaldo into one) and could be imagining what life on the other side must be like, not what it is like.
Jarring with this conclusion is the odd sub-narrative begun in Chapter 4. Of course, the conclusions presented above are based on information given throughout the entire novel, but what we begin to see in the opening lines of Chapters 4, 5, and most of the subsequent chapters, is in such contradiction with the other clues that it clashes with our idea of the narrator’s identity as presented above.

Chapter 4 opens with a long paragraph describing the era of the story-time, with such historical statements as:

Ancora confuso era lo stato delle cose del mondo, nell’Evo in cui questa storia si svolge . . . . Il mondo pullulava di oggetti e facoltà e persone . . . Era un’epoca in cui la volontà e l’ostinazione d’esserci, di marcare un’impronta, di fare attrito con tutto ciò che c’è, non veniva usata interamente. (28)

Here the narrator is pulling away not only from the context of the story, but also from its historical epoch. At the opening of the next paragraph, the narrator identifies herself:

Io che racconto questa storia sono Suor Teodora, religiosa dell’ordine di San Colombano. Scrivo in convento, desumendo da vecchie carte, da chiacchiere sentite in parlatorio e da qualche rara testimonianza di gente che c’era. (28)

Our astonishment that the narrator is a woman, and even more surprising, a nun, grows when she says:

Noi monache, occasioni per conversare coi soldati, se ne ha poche; quel che non so cerco d’immaginarmelo, dunque; se no come farei? E non tutto della storia mi è chiaro . . . . Cosa può sapere del mondo una povera suora? . . . . Di battaglie . . . io non so niente. Neanche Rambaldo ne sapeva niente. (28–29)

Now we are totally confused. The idea that a cloistered nun inexperienced with war could write with such apparent familiarity about army life does not ring true. Could this nun be transcribing notes found, Gothic-novel fashion, in the walls of her convent? If so, why does she later claim authorship? The transition from her ignorance to Rambaldo’s, and the necessary pairing of the two in the reader’s mind, raise the suspicion that it is Rambaldo who is writing the story and for some reason, as yet unrevealed, is concealing his identity behind that of the nun.

From this point onward, we form two different ideas of the narrator. The first takes the path described above. The second is in quest of Suor Teodora. It is difficult for the reader to accept that both are the same. The appearances of the nun are disturbing, as they divert us from the comfortable process of building up the notion of a traditional omniscient narrator.

If the narrator is also a character in the novel, who is it? Could he really be a soldier, creating the persona of a nun for some reason? His description of army life sounds much like convent life (in the army “tutto . . . era severo, esatto, rigoroso, conforme a una regola morale e . . . a un’estrema precisione
di movenze” [49], a description which rings true for the daily routines of a nun as well as of a soldier. She refers, in openly religious terms, to the “sacrosante regole che [i cavalieri] avevano giurato di seguire, e che, essendo così ben fissate, toglievano loro la fatica di pensare” [50]). We are once more assailed by doubts: if the life of a soldier is described in terms more fitting to the life of a nun, maybe we really are reading the work of a nun who is interpolating from her own life what life under another kind of rule must be like.

Why does the narrator disguise his identity? In order to know so much about army life and the intrigues among the characters, he must then (assuming he is a participator in the action) be one of the more important figures. Agilulfo? Rambaldo? Perhaps even Gurdulù, Agilulfo’s counterpart? The possibility of the narrator’s being Bradamante does not seriously cross the reader’s mind. The most important reason is that, as stated above, Bradamante is the only major character whose thoughts and emotions are not revealed directly. It would seem, therefore, that she is the least likely character to serve as the narrator. But as we find out in the last chapter, this is indeed the case.

There is only one exception to Bradamante’s opaqueness to the narrator. When the validity of Agilulfo’s first and most important geste is called into question and he sets out on what will be a long and difficult quest, Bradamante is “commossa, anzi sconvolta” (65). This is not a true revelation of her feelings in the way that Agilulfo and Rambaldo are laid bare: we see through the book that Bradamante is not one to hide her emotions, and anyone aware of her love for Agilulfo (as the whole camp seems to be) could easily draw the conclusion that she would be quite upset by his departure. But it is the closest the narrator comes to stepping inside Bradamante’s skin. Why here, of all places? In hindsight, knowing that Bradamante and the narrator are one, we can realize that in this moment of great pain, Suor Teodora identifies so closely with Bradamante, perhaps even reliving her anguish, that she cannot maintain her detachment.

At all other times the narrator tries to convince us that she is very much unlike Bradamante. Only a very few pages after her declaration (see above) that she, Teodora, could not possibly know anything about war or battles, we see Bradamante as a fierce, proud, and experienced soldier: Rambaldo admires greatly “con quanta leggerezza” (36) she fights. This contrast squelches quickly any half-formed idea that perhaps Bradamante is, for some reason, hiding behind the persona of Suor Teodora. The nun seems to slip up, however, and her nostalgia for the warlike way of life is stronger than her desire to hide her identity. For example, she compares the sounds and smells of the kitchen below her with those of the army encampment (40–41). Rather than the inspiration for a creatively-imagined scene, this description reads like a memory jogged by a familiar sound or smell.

Yet the narrator is usually quite successful at reminding the reader that Suor Teodora’s cloistered life has nothing in common with Bradamante’s
military existence. In fact, so perceptive a critic as J.R. Woodhouse falls into his trap and treats the two women as two distinct narrators, when he says:

the nun . . . can suggest a very naive and feminine reason for the need to lift one's visor to Charlemagne as he questions the individual knights: "Forse perché altrimenti qualcuno, avendo di meglio da fare che prendere parte alla rivista, avrebbe potuto mandar lì la sua armatura con un altro dentro." For anyone who has spent time and energy avoiding the fatuous rigmarole of a military parade the satire on the time-wasting exercise is obvious. (67–68)

But the narrator who makes the "feminine" guess as to the motivation for the visor-raising is the same person who knows enough about the military to be able to make this satire. Suor Teodora has divorced herself from Bradamante enough to make even a conscious reader, aware of their identification with each other, see them as two separate individuals.

As well as emphasizing the differences between Bradamante's experience in war and her own lack of it, Suor Teodora contrasts her personality and experiences in love with those of the warrior-maiden:

mi tocca rappresentare la più gran follia dei mortali, la passione amorosa, dalla quale il voto, il chiostro, e il naturale pudore m'hanno fin qui scampata. Non dico che non ne abbia udito parlare . . . Dunque anche dell'amore come della guerra dirò alla buona quel che riesco a immaginarne: l'arte di scrivere storie sta nel saper tirar fuori da quel nulla che si è capitato della vita tutto il resto; ma finita la pagina si riprende la vita e ci s'accorge che quel che si sapeva è proprio un nulla. Bradamante ne sapeva di più? (49)

Note the subtle but important difference between the last sentence of this passage and the almost identical line quoted above where the narrator claims to know nothing about war and then says, "Neanche Rambaldo ne sapeva niente." Suor Teodora is doing two important things here: 1. showing her omniscience as regards Rambaldo and her lack of it where Bradamante is concerned; 2. implying, by putting the statement in question form, that although she, Teodora, cannot be sure, there exists the possibility that Bradamante's experience in love is vaster than her own, contrasting once more their two backgrounds. This emphasis on the difference in the "two" women is necessary, because even once a reader is aware that they are in reality one, it is easy to forget that the innocent façade presented by Teodora is no more than that. I.T. Olken does exactly this when, discussing the ingenuous narrators throughout the trilogy, he says,

First, their role may be seen as contrastive, that is, a deliberate evocation of the childlike or innocent for the purpose of more dramatically analysing situations than is either possible or desirable through an adult or sophisticated persona. (35)

But the narrator is not only the "childlike or innocent" Teodora, as required by Olken's thesis, but also the worldly and experienced Bradamante.
Shortly after this, Rambaldo learns of Bradamante’s love for Agilulfo. Although the narrator never comments on this love directly, she makes her feelings known through the chorus of old soldiers. When Rambaldo hears of this love, he asks, “Come fa?” (see above). The chorus replies, “Fa che quando una si è tolta la voglia di tutti gli uomini esistenti, l’unica voglia che le resta può essere solo quella d’un uomo che non c’è per nulla” (53). Thus the reader is informed that Bradamante, like the goddess Diana, has purposefully removed herself from a life that includes love. Indeed, her actions bear out this statement. She behaves in regard to Agilulfo like a young person experiencing her first crush. Contrary to all the rules of behavior appropriate to the well-brought-up (albeit eccentric) medieval princess that she is, as delineated by her original creator Ariosto, here she chases Agilulfo throughout his long quest. Rambaldo’s pursuit of her, however, is more typical of and suitable for a young man in an epic. In hindsight, might we not surmise that Bradamante is ashamed of her behavior? Pleading ignorance of love would then serve as an excuse for her excesses.

In the same instant that we learn that Suor Teodora is Bradamante, we learn that she is in love with Rambaldo. After Agilulfo, convinced mistakenly that his existence as a knight is as nil as is his physical existence, disappears into nothing, Rambaldo finds and puts on Agilulfo’s now-vacant suit of armor. He finds Bradamante and they finally make love. Bradamante is overjoyed until she looks into his eyes and discovers that he is not Agilulfo. She is infuriated. “Tu! Tu!—grida con la bocca piena di rabbia, gli occhi che schizzano lacrime:—Tu! Impostore!” (104). She disappears from the scene, only to reappear in the next (and last) chapter where she reveals herself as the narrator. She explains,

Sì, libro. Suor Teodora che narrava questa storia e la guerriera Bradamante siamo la stessa donna. Un po’ galoppo per i campi di guerra tra duelli e amori, un po’ mi chiudo nei conventi, meditando e vergando le storie occorsemi, per cercare di capirle. Quando venni a chiudermi qui ero disperata d’amore per Agilulfo, ora ardo per il giovane e appassionato Rambaldo. (108)

Once again Bradamante has broken the rules, this time of courtly love: the deceived person is not supposed to fall in love with the substitute. Bradamante offers no explanation for her change of heart but calls out to Rambaldo to wait and prepares to ride off with him.

She does, however, explain her reason for writing: “Per questo [amore] la mia penna a un certo punto s’è messa a correre. Incontro a lui, correva” (108). She here explains this narrative as a means of catching hold of Rambaldo. As shall be seen, however, this is only one of her reasons for setting pen to paper.

Earlier, she had said, “A me la badessa ha assegnato un compito . . . : lo scrivere questa storia, ma tutte le fatiche del convento, intese, come sono a un solo fine: la salute dell’anima, è come fossero una sola” (40). Later she
further explains this task as a penance: “A ognuna è data la sua penitenza, qui in convento, il suo modo di guadagnarsi la salvezza eterna. A me è toccata questa di scrivere storie: è dura, è dura” (56). She is not, then, pleased with her assignment, at least at the beginning, nor does she believe in its efficacy: “Che mi varranno queste pagine scontente? . . . . Che ci si salvi l’anima scrivendo non è detto. Scrivi, scrivi, e già la tua anima è persa” (56). She must then have a different motive for writing. But as is usual with Bradamante, she changes her mind a few pages later: “Forse non è stata scelta male questa mia penitenza, dalla madre badessa” (68), and she admits that by writing she may discover some truth and may also relieve herself of the pain that has occasioned her closing herself up in the convent. She is quite interested in the act of writing. She says “ogni tanto mi accorgo che la penna ha preso a correre sul foglio come da sola, e io a correre dietro. È verso la verità che corriamo, la penna e io” (68).

We may discover here a partial explanation for her odd manner of narrating the story: she longs to be one with Agiulfo, and so presents the story as if seen, at least partly, through his eyes. But since the act of writing, as she says, has led her to fall in love with Rambaldo, it is only natural for her to begin to see events, and herself, as he saw them. Since she is pursuing him with her pen, she begins to identify herself as narrator with Rambaldo, and put him into that rôle. She is trying very hard to separate herself as nun from herself as warrior: thus her care never to show Bradamante’s thoughts directly.

So we are able to follow the progress of a narrator who finds therapeutic value in the act of writing. Yet we are never quite sure of Suor Teodora. If she is living at the same time as the characters that she is representing (as we learn is the case), where does she get her modern way of looking at the world? She has a most un-medieval way of viewing love, as we have seen. She is aware of the genre in which she is writing, centuries before the formulation of genre theory:

quello che il volgo—ed io stessa fin qui—tiene per massimo diletto, cioè l’intreccio d’avventura in cui consiste ogni romanzo cavalleresco, ora mi pare una guarnizione superfìua, un freddo fregio, la parte più ingrata del mio penso. Vorrei correre a narrare, narrare in fretta, istoriare ogni pagina con duelli e battaglie quanti ne basterebbero a un poema, ma se mi fermo e faccio per rileggere m’accorgo che la penna non ha lasciato segno sul foglio e le pagine son bianche. (81)

Aside from a dissatisfaction with her own choice of subject, she is here attacking, as consisting of mere blank pages, what audiences at various times have found most attractive about Ariosto: the chivalric pageantry.

She views the world and human life in the same way that she sees writing of chivalrous adventure: “Ogni cosa si muove nella liscia pagina senza che nulla cambi sulla sua superficie, come in fondo tutto si muove e nulla cambia nella rugosa crosta del mondo” (82). Clearly this is a modern comment on the
world, inappropriate the Middle Ages, where the story is set. We here enter once more into the problem raised earlier: are we reading the transcription of an earlier manuscript found by the mysterious Suor Teodora? She hints at this several times, as though trying to throw the reader off her track, only to contradict herself, often in the same sentence: “io che scrivo questo libro seguendo su carte quasi illegibili una antica cronaca, mi rendo conto solo adesso che ho riempito pagine e pagine ma sono ancora al principio della mia storia” (81). If she is indeed copying, why does she call it “la mia storia”? She claims authorship even more strongly when she says “non mi resta che immaginare gli eroi della mia storia intorno alle cucine” (41). Once we know that she is really Bradamante, we must wonder why she has misled us at this point.

To show even more clearly her twentieth-century standpoint, she makes an attack on literary scholarship: “Meglio sarebbe, per aiutarmi a narrare, se mi disegnassi una carta dei luoghi . . . con frecce e con crocette e con numeri . . . [per] segnare il cammino di questo o quell’eroe” (83). This idea of drawing a map to plot the characters’ movements becomes a recurring motif in the next few chapters. Scholars of Ariosto have often used such methods to try and untangle the complicated plot, and the narrator’s ridicule of it shows her awareness of twentieth-century scholarship. When we find out that Bradamante is telling the story, we are made conscious of the author-narrator split: Bradamante, as a fictional character in Ariosto’s work, is incapable of commenting on its corpus of scholarship, whereas Calvino is more than competent to do so.

The contradictions in the personalities of Bradamante and Suor Teodora are never resolved, by either the narrator or the author. Why are we led to believe that the narrator is omniscient, and probably a man and a soldier, only to find out that the narrator is instead a nun, who contradicts herself when speaking of her motives for writing and whose historical position is unclear? Once we uneasily accept Teodora, we are suddenly told that she is Bradamante, a character whose mind the narrator has not, apparently, been able to enter, and with whom she shares no points of similarity: the last person, in short, whom we would suspect of telling the story.

There are practically no rules of standard narrator-reader relationship that Teodora/Bradamante does not break. William Riggan’s dictum that a narrator who is also a character “is, to be sure, subject by nature to human limitations in recalling events and words and in delving into other characters’ minds” (23) is obviously the first rule to go, as our narrator reads the others’ minds with ease. Similarly, a narrator who reveals the motivation of his characters is misleading if he keeps some secrets back without letting us know that he is doing so. Suor Teodora appears to reveal all, but is actually keeping the most important secret (her identity) to herself. We are constantly being dragged back and forth between a covert and an overt narrator. The Western reader is accustomed to either seeing the story through the eyes of a character and
so being able to account for the character’s subjective view of the plot, or gathering impressions from a trustworthy, omniscient narrator. The reader of *Il cavaliere inesistente* is constantly shifting position. Once Teodora introduces herself, she begins nearly every chapter with a reference to herself and to her writing. Then, abruptly, she switches back to the narrative. The transitions would be less disturbing to the reader if the narrator had started off by introducing herself; then we would have been able to judge everything accordingly. But for three chapters we have seen an omniscient narrator and are convinced of his/her reliability. From the opening chapter of the work the narrator reports occurrences invisible to one present, convincing us of his/her omniscience and trustworthiness. The narrator is aware that the conclusions a reader has drawn on his own are harder to shake off than any given directly, so she allows us, with clear clues, to formulate the picture of a narrator different enough from Bradamante that we will never suspect her of telling the story. Even after she has told us that the narrator is a woman, she carefully points out the differences between the nun and the warrior-maiden in order to keep us off the track.2

Another convention, if not rule, that our narrator flouts, is that pronounced by Ford Madox Ford, that the author “keep the reader entirely oblivious of the fact that the author exists—even of the fact that he is reading a book.” He says that Cervantes, who can be excused because he “wrote before the form had evolved into its present state,” (4) intruded his authorial presence clumsily into his work. Bradamante may also be excused, if excuse is needed,4 because of her authorial inexperience, and also because she cares too passionately about what she is describing to be able to maintain authorial distance.

It is necessary for her to keep us in the dark in order to maintain the considerable advantages of first-person narration, which, according to Scholes and Kellogg, “carries with it an inherent quality of realism and conviction based on a claim to firsthand experience” (18). The corollary to this advantage is, of course, that the narrator’s involvement in the text makes errors in perception, recounting, etc., particularly possible (Scholes and Kellogg, 21–22) and when, as here, the author is deliberately trying to deceive the reader, misconceptions are even easier to follow.

The importance to Calvino of having the narrator be involved in the action is stated by Olken in reference to *Il visconte dimezzato*, where, she says,

> [the narrator] bridges the gap and serves as the catalyst for the suspension of disbelief; for he is, after all, a highly believable witness to all that he relates . . . . His occasional references to his own feelings are . . . intensified because the reader has a certain involvement with him and comes to expect his interpolations. (37)

There are thus two personages who have a motive for keeping the reader in the dark as to who is telling the story: the narrator and the implied author. Indeed, the question of which is which is puzzling, as the two seem to get mixed up with each other: Bradamante, as both narrator and “author” utilizing
her own narrator, Teodora, assumes part of the role that should be assigned to Calvino: Woodhouse, discussing his theory of the “ingenious” narrators and purpose in the trilogy, says,

The suggestion of any harm or horror befalling them is heightened in us by their youth and our feeling of sympathy. On the other hand, their view of the adult world helps to underline the many imperfections and stupidities in that world. (60)

As much Calvino’s choice, it is his character, Bradamante’s, to employ the naive narrator to deflect interest off herself.

This split of narrator into two, and author into two, plays with and expands the “split” thematics of the trilogy: Olken notes

the juxtaposition of ideologically opposite pairs of characters, each the alter ego of the other: Biagio and Cosimo; Suor Teodora and Bradamante; Medardo’s nephew and Esaù (39)

to which we should add, “Bradamante and Calvino.” Teodora,

in addition to being an ingenious trovata insofar as the story structure and integration of characters is concerned, . . . allows Calvino an actively internalized role. (73)

Teodora’s motivation for not revealing herself as Bradamante is not difficult to find. She is closed up, voluntarily, in a convent, where she has fled to escape her past. She is writing, partly as a penance, partly to rid herself of pain, and partly to re-create and thus to possess, in a sense, Rambaldo (although she claims to be unaware of this last motive until the end). To identify herself to her readers would be to negate the effects of all three of these motives: her penance would not be accomplished, as she would be bragging of sinful exploits; she would be reliving, rather than relieving herself of, her pain; and as Bradamante, she would not be able to represent either the thoughts of Rambaldo or the occurrences at which she was not present. By disguising herself and her experiences behind the nun who is far removed from the epic situation, Bradamante gets to have her empirical bread and eat her fictional cake, as Scholes and Kellogg would have it. Until we discover the identity of the narrator, we think we are privileged in the way described by Riggan, when he says that

multiplicity of narration often affords the reader more information and perspective with which to make his own evaluation of persons and events than is possible for any of the individual narrators in the work in question; it thus frequently exposes unreliability in one or more of these speakers. (10)

Yet the fact of the coincidence of the “I-narrator” of the nun-sequences and the omniscient narrator of the main text destroys this advantage.

Calvino’s motivations are more complex than his narrator’s. He is, in this novel, playing with many ideas dear to twentieth-century authors, one of
which is the difference between appearance and reality. Until the last chapter we get no grasp of the nature of the narrator and indeed are tossed back and forth among many different interpretations. What the narrator appears to be is never quite clear (a nun? a soldier?) and what she really is, is equally obscure (a fierce warrior? a young woman in love?). Can we believe Calvino’s assertion that his idea of making Bradamante tell the story was “un colpo di scena che mi è venuto in mente all’ultimo momento” (xix)? Or is he, like Bradamante, playing with his readers in his own rôle of narrator of the introduction to the novel? That is, can we accept as real Calvino’s apparently sincere statement of his purpose?

Another concept explored by Calvino (here and elsewhere) is that of identity. He says that his is a trilogy “d’esperienze sul come realizzarsi esseri umani” and that this particular work explores “la conquista dell’essere” (xix). We see, as opposed to each other, Agilulfo and his squire Gurdulù, who is “un uomo senza nome e con tutti i nomi possibili” (43). He is liable at any moment to lose his identity: when he falls into the sea, he happily gulps down salt water until he realizes that he should be in the ocean, rather than the other way around. While burying corpses after a battle, he buries himself, forgetting which is the corpse and which himself. Similarly, Bradamante forgets (on purpose, we assume) which is the narrator and which the subject of the narration. The first appearance of Bradamante is accompanied by a confusion over identity: when she will not tell her name to Rambaldo, he follows her, assuming her to be a man, to the river where he simultaneously discovers her sex and falls in love with her.

Calvino has obviously chosen the Orlando story as the jumping-off place for his novel because of its richness in problems of identity, point of view, complexity of plot, and other elements he explores here and elsewhere. It is not only the Furioso in specific that he utilizes; the problem of “who is in love with whom and who is chasing whom” so evident here obviously derives ultimately from the Orlando Innamorato. There, the problem involves just two characters drinking alternately from the springs of love and disdain; here we have the problems of a nonexistent man loved by a woman who exists in two disparate identities, who is in turn loved by a second man. The second man searches for the woman in her first identity, and the woman in her second identity, in her turn, searches for the second man. It is an incredibly involved and complex spiral of pursuers and pursued.

The Bradamante/Teodora split embodies all the problems of identity, experience, and point of view presented by Calvino in the novel. Like Agilulfo, Suor Teodora does not exist but thinks she does, at least temporarily. The very nature of Agilulfo (his knighthood) is challenged, and he disappears. The very nature of Teodora (her nunlike innocence and inexperience, so insisted upon by the narrator) is challenged at Rambaldo’s unexpected appearance, and she disappears, to be replaced by Bradamante. Her constant shifting forces the reader to reevaluate frequently much of the narrator’s interpretation of the
other characters, action, and moral conclusions drawn throughout the text. If, as Scholes and Kellogg have said, "The period of the rise of the novel . . . has also been the period of really great experimentation with, and development of, technique in the management of point of view" (241), Calvino has certainly reached a new point in this development in his Il cavaliere inesistente.

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NOTES

1 The best-known example in courtly literature of a similar situation is Elaine's substitution of herself for Guinevere; but although Lancelot is successfully deceived, he does not abandon his original love-object.

2 At one point the narrator offers a tantalizing clue that may lead the reader in search of a narrator down a blind alley. The youth Torrismondo, in telling of the strange circumstances of his birth, says that after his mother Sofronia had been saved from rape by Agilulfo, she "prese il velo in un lontano convento" (63). Could this young woman, who had known Agilulfo and had been at least marginally aware of the life of a soldier, be narrating the story as told to her by her son? Sofronia never becomes a very important character, so this question fades from the reader's mind as he pursues more likely avenues.

3 Quoted by Rubin 4. According to Scholes and Kellogg, this principle was also adhered to by Flaubert, Henry James, James Joyce.

4 See, for example, Romberg: "I do not look upon the solution of the 'problem of illusion' as the only or even the major criterion for an evaluation of the literary qualities of a first-person novel. There are—and this holds true in particular for the modern first person novel—many authors who do not care about formal credibility" (xi).

5 Woodhouse seems to take this statement at face value, saying, "That Calvino conceived of her as an ingenuous nun rather than an amazon is evident from his introduction," (67, n.).

WORKS CITED


