

## Writing foreign literature, facing foreign problems

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*Abstract.* This paper reflects on a problem that Italo Calvino surely confronted when he tried to write foreign literature. How do I incorporate one of these female brats that features in prominent Japanese fictions?

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*“Ring, ring your bell*

*All the way to hell!”*

I believe there is a competition: best French novel in the English language. What is it like trying to do something like that, to write as if one is a member of another tradition?

Italo Calvino’s imitation of Japanese literature in *If on a winter’s night a traveler* impresses me, but I would probably prefer if it were a little less explicit. Also, as has been surely noticed, where is the brat that appears in certain notable Japanese fictions (Mishima 1959; Tanizaki 1985)? I imagine Calvino trying various things to incorporate such a character and tearing up the results. He seeks advice from various friends. His network is excellent. Eventually he concludes, “We are getting all this but not that; I cannot do any better.” The immensely talented Italian cannot solve the problem of how to get qualities A, B, C, D, and that!

“But it seems so simple. You just get to know such a person and keep a diary and then apply your literary skills.” I would like to think the Japanese writers who

solved it did so relatively independently from each other and I fear they would have no respect for failure here. (Well, maybe Mishima would.) You can be clumsier with words, your structure can be unruly, but you cannot pass unless you can incorporate that kind of character. Nevertheless, I at least hold Calvino's effort in high regard, for its craftsmanship and style. (Perhaps in his defence, it will be said that she was incorporated; it is just that this is the way in which she behaves in this context: docile. Where is the song mourning, or detesting, the absence of that other aspect?)

I further imagine Calvino in an afterlife in which he has to keep going with the task, tinkering with assumption after assumption of his, or just abandoning them, in the hope of cracking it! Perhaps this does not count as a professional philosophy paper by some standards, but I think it is an experience worth reflecting on. (It leads to one speculative proposal for the high position of Sophocles: the style is there, also a difficult to incorporate character is there. Others tried but failed. See Edward 2022, for a presentation of the case against).

## References

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