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WHY READ THE CLASSICS?

Kevin Barry

"Everything aspires to the condition of rock music", writes Derek Mahon in his recent collection of poems, *The Yellow Book*. That aphorism implies some ironic regret and Mahon is one among those writers who listen out for radiant, sharp phrases from the past: quotations from, for lack of a better word, the classics.

Such quotations are inherently nostalgic. Italo Calvino was, until his death in 1985, Italy's Derek Mahon. The 36 brief essays gathered together under the title, *Why Read the Classics?*, are overnight visits to the carnival of the past by this fiction-writer and journalist whose especial skill it was to travel light.

Calvino's 14 definitions of a classic are as dialectical and knowing as one would expect from the author of such humorous novels as *Invisible Cities* and *If on a winter's night a traveller*. The first defines the classics to be "those books about which you usually hear people saying: 'I'm rereading . . .', never 'I'm reading . . .'" Calvino's selection is normative and also eccentric. His Greeks include Homer's *Odyssey*, which he reads as a narrative about how to arrive patiently at a desirable future, and also Xenophon's *Anabasis*, which he compares to modern accounts of the struggle to escape by an army (such as the Italian troops on their retreat from Russia) "led to defeat in a war that was not of their making and then left to their own devices." His interests run from Ovid and Pliny to Diderot and Stendhal; from Galileo to Defoe and Robert Louis Stevenson; from Nezami's *The Seven Princesses*, a Persian text in which the "licentiousness of the figurative language is an appropriate style for the upheavals of youthful inexperience", to the fictions and philosophies of Hemingway, Francis Ponge and Raymond Queneau.

This volume is itself a classic book at bedtime, a seductive invitation to forgotten opportunities of rereading. A sense of the real, of the specific, of the actual moment, is something that Calvino looks for in the work of others. He likes fast books but also reads against the grain to detect the apparently accidental elements of the story. He celebrates, for example, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a poem of rapidity, of cinematographic stimulation, of traffic accidents, perversion and mobility, but it is the alternate rhythm to this quickness that he likes best: there are also times when the narrative has to slow down, switch to a calmer rhythm, give the feeling of time being suspended, almost veiled in the distance. What does Ovid do at such times? To make it clear that the narrative is in no hurry, he stops to dwell on the smallest details. For instance: Baucis and Philemon welcome into their humble cottage the unknown visitors, the two gods . . . "But one of the three legs of the table was too short. She put a piece of pottery under it to make it level. As soon as this had fixed the sloping surface, they cleaned the table with green mint leaves. On top they then put olives of both colours, sacred to the virgin Minerva, and autumnal cherries preserved in wine lees, and endives and radishes and a round of cheese, and eggs that had been cooked and turned gently in ashes that were not too hot; everything was served in terracotta dishes."

Limits attract Calvino. He is never sublime. When he writes about Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* ("something like today's Guinness Book of Records") he admires how the Roman philosopher-poet sticks closely to his sources - an "impersonal view of knowledge which excludes individual originality." Pliny does not believe that the heavenly spheres make music, because "for us who are inside it, the world slips round day and night in silence". To explain the origins of the winds, he recalls a report about "a grotto in Dalmatia in which throwing even the lightest object is enough to unleash a storm at sea".

To dramatise the vulnerability of tyrants, he reports that even a sneeze during intercourse can cause a miscarriage. For Pliny, of all the animals it is the elephant that comes "closest to man" by reason of its rites and customs, its recognition of language, its capacity to love, to remember and to obey. "A classic", according to Calvino's thirteenth definition, "is a work that relegates the noise of the present to a background hum, which at the same time the classics cannot exist without." The tower of song is no ivory tower. We are reminded of Walter Benjamin's need to write where there was noise, his window open onto the streets of the city, so that the written words would be energetic enough to be heard amidst the din.

Calvino, too, is a writer who makes himself audible, able to write openly about literature, never dumbed down by routine jargon or authorised theory. The books he likes most are those which make unexpected things happen in other books. One such moment he relishes is when, "completely unsuspecting", Dante's Paolo and Francesca get carried away by what is happening in the story they are reading to one another: "trembling all over, he kissed me on the mouth".