

Languages essays - italian economic miracle



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The " Italian Economic Miracle" Exposed: The Use of Comic Effects and Irony in Calvino's *Marcovaldo*.

The " Economic Miracle" that is said to have swept across post-war Italy in the 1950s has been attributed by many scholars to the decision to open up the economy. This, in turn, gave Italy the chance to undergo a growth spurt that would help it keep pace with the rest of the world. According to Foot, " the decision, made in the 1950s, to open up the country to trade and to let it integrate into the world market allowed it to catch up rapidly with the leading economies" (2001: 110). The growth spurt in the economy had wide-reaching effects. It changed the lives of the Italian people, many of whom found themselves transplanted from familiar rural areas to modern urban environments - essentially a brand new way of life. As Foot asserts, " Italy's economic miracle transformed the country's cultural landscape" (2001: 19).

This is the world that was the setting for Italo Calvino's collection of stories, *Marcovaldo, ovvero, Le stagioni in città (Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City)* . The protagonist of these stories, Marcovaldo, appears to be a good-hearted, hard-working man. He ekes out a living as a day laborer, providing for his wife and children, but it is clearly a marginal existence. The struggle of his daily life is eased by his imagination, which leads him to become entangled in a number of amusing adventures. Marcovaldo has been described by one scholar as a man with " the hero's nostalgia for nature and open spaces," whose " sensitivity to the changing seasons in a cityscape polluted by all kinds of objects and living things, make sense only within the context of an urban setting" (Jeannet 1977: 26).

These stories, or fables, as they are sometimes called, can be read on a surface level as a delightful collection of misadventures by a well-meaning but misguided individual. However, when considered in the light of this stark urban setting, they stand out as comical and ironic, a vehicle used by Calvino to expose the negative sides of this so-called "economic miracle." It has been suggested that "alongside the depiction of urban corruption and pollution, Calvino also, through the lovable but haplessly inept protagonist, undermines the Romantic notion of a 'return to nature'" (Gabriele 1994: 21-22). Thus, it seems that Calvino has transplanted Marcovaldo - this high-spirited, though misguided, representative of rural life - into the hostile new terrain of urban life. In so doing, he wrote a book that can be read as a volume of entertaining tales, and at the same time an ironic critique of the results of the economic boom.

Calvino's use of comedy and irony is present throughout the book, and starts at the beginning. In the initial story, Calvino's description of Marcovaldo is wry and amusing, and it sets up the contrast between Marcovaldo's simplistic nature against the backdrop of the strange new city: "Aveva questo Marcovaldo un occhio poco adatto alla vita di città: cartelli, semafori, vetrine, insegne luminose, manifesti, per studiati che fossero a colpire l'attenzione, mai fermavano il suo sguardo che pareva scorrere sulle sabbie del deserto" (7). Apparently, Marcovaldo is oblivious to the eye-catching distractions of the modern city; to him, they are non-existent. Instead, he is alert to the signs, however few and however bleak, of the natural world. In fact, he spends his time searching them out. The paucity of these signs does not deter him or detract from his enthusiasm. This suggests that he longs for

his former, simpler life, and that he misses the rural background that he knows best.

The search for signs of the natural world is rewarded when Marcovaldo discovers, to his delight, the first mushroom: " Si chinò a legarsi le scarpe e guardò meglio: erano funghi, veri funghi, che stavano spuntando proprio nel cuore della città" (7). The discovery of the mushroom fills him with hope. Suddenly the drab grayness of the city melts away, and the drudgery and struggle of his daily life becomes less oppressive: " A Marcovaldo parve che il mondo grigio e misero che lo circondava diventasse tutt'a un tratto generoso di ricchezze nascoste, e che dalla vita ci si potesse ancora aspettare qualcosa, oltre la paga oraria del salario contrattuale, la contingenza, gli assegni familiari e il carpane" (7). The exaggerated happiness at the discovery of a mushroom serves to highlight the stark contrast of the urban world with his rustic background.

The double reversal that follows the discovery of the mushrooms is another example of the comical irony that Calvino employs to expose the negative aspects of the economic boom. We note that Marcovaldo carefully guards the location of his discovery until Sunday, when, wife and children in tow, he heads for the mushroom site to pick them - only to learn that there are bigger, better mushrooms, and that he is not the only one who is gathering them. This is the first disappointment, followed by an evening in the hospital, because it turns out the mushrooms are poisoned!

Although Marcovaldo here may simply appear to be a bumbling fool, it seems plausible that Calvino is demonstrating the potential for disaster that

is a result of uprooting people from the country and setting them down into a new and unfamiliar environment. Gabriele asserts that " Marcovaldo knows nothing about the natural world, as is evidenced by his mishaps with the mushrooms and the pigeons. Marcovaldo has not been transplanted from a rural environment into an urban one; rather, he chases a rather indefinite dream of paradise" (Gabriele 1994: 21-22).

Calvino might also be suggesting here that the time Marcovaldo has lived in an urban environment may have obliterated the common country logic he once had. Alternatively, perhaps this incident is used to demonstrate that Marcovaldo is, after all, a simpleton who simply does not know a good mushroom from a poisonous variety. Another possibility is that Calvino is trying to say that Marcovaldo, now an urban dweller, has taken on the greed associated with the rise of the city, and that this greed overpowers his natural instincts. The move from country to city, then, is portrayed as having deleterious effects on new urban dwellers. As Olken suggests, Calvino implies here that " all growing things undergo corruption in the noxious atmosphere of the city" (1984: 121).

Starting with the first story and continuing throughout the book, Marcovaldo embarks on a variety of ill-fated adventures, and each of them ends with a reversals or double reversal. Thus, it appears that Calvino reinforces the message - albeit in a comical way - that the financial prosperity that has been called the " economic miracle" is not a miracle for everyone - indeed, it has a dark side. The final story has a twist that goes beyond this, suggesting that although Marcovaldo's integration into urban life has been less than successful, that the lives of his children show a level of promise.

Calvino describes a typical urban Christmas with clear irony: " Tutti erano presi dall'atmosfera alacre e cordiale che si espandeva per la città festosa e produttiva; nulla è piú bello che sentire scorrere intorno il flusso dei beni materiali e insieme del bene che ognuno vuole agli altri: e questo, questo soprattutto - come ci ricorda il suono, firulí firulí, delle zampogne--, è ciò che conta" (118). Rampant materialism is juxtaposed with the feeling of good will it supposedly inspires, and the ugliness of the city clearly debases the sentiments of good cheer.

In this story, Marcovaldo's children must complete a school project that requires them to bring gifts to a " poor child" When Marcovaldo comes upon them in the midst of their preparations, he asks what they are doing and they respond " Dobbiamo cercare un bambino povero e fargli dei regali" (119). It occurs to him to remind them that they are " poor" children themselves, but apparently the spirit of materialism overcomes him and he responds " Bambini poveri non ne esistono piú" (119). When the children do eventually find a " poor" child upon whom to lavish their gifts, it turns out to be none other than the child of the president of the Union for the Implementation of Christmas Consumption (" il presidente dell'Unione Incremento Vendite Natalizie"). This very spoiled child, dissatisfied with the hundreds of toys he has already amassed, is delighted by the gifts of Marcovaldo's children, and he embarks on a wave of destruction that culminates in the burning down of the family home.

Calvino turns the horror and humiliation that Marcovaldo feels when he learns of this incident into a clever and telling reversal. When Marcovaldo shows up for work the next day, he is certain there will be repercussions

from the exploits of his children. After all, it was their actions that led to the mischief of Gianfranco and the ensuing destruction. In addition, although Marcovaldo is correct in his assumption that there will be fallout to contend with, he is wrong about the nature of that fallout. Therefore, when approached by high company officials the next day, he is not surprised, and girds himself for the worst-case scenario.

However, when he arrives, he is told by the officials that there has been a change in the gift-giving program. Apparently, Gianfranco's destructive deeds have been seen in a far different light by his father: in the act of destroying everything in his wake, Gianfranco finally appeared, for once, to be happy. This has inspired the president to change the course of the gift-giving campaign. The officials inform Marcovaldo of this, exhorting him to hurry, because " L'Unione Incremento Vendite Natalizie ha lanciato una campagna per il lancio del Regalo Distruttivo" (123). Thus the actions of his children, for which he expected a certain and swift punishment, have actually turned around into a new commercial venture based on destruction.

Calvino's portrayal of Marcovaldo as a bumbling peasant in the city can be seen as a vehicle through which he presents the negative aspects of the " Italian economic miracle." He does this by setting this transplanted character into the foreign and often hostile urban environment. This volume is versatile: the adventures of Marcovaldo can be read as a series of delightful children's tales or as a treatise exposing the dark side of the " miracle." Cannon points out that " Calvino had high aspirations for a literature autonomous but not divorced from political concerns" (1989: 33). The duality of *Marcovaldo* suggests that was his intention with this book. " The image

projected by the fiction of Calvino," suggests Cannon, "seems to have become that of an increasingly indecipherable world" (1989: 38). She discusses "the crisis of reason" that is a recurrent theme in Calvino's fiction (1989: 39).

Oaken suggests that Marcovaldo "represents the modern immigrant who tries desperately to adapt and conform. He will never really succeed, as his children may do; he is too divided between the two worlds, ill-prepared and therefore victimized" (Olken 1984: 122). The victimization of Marcovaldo, however amusing and ironic, is a tool Calvino uses to bring to light the negative repercussions that the sudden growth of prosperity brought with it. The final chapter does offer a glimmer of hope, in that the adaptability of Marcovaldo's children, and of children in general, will better equip them to integrate into the new world. They have already done so, in fact, and with much more facility - success, even - than their parents. Whether Calvino believes this is positive or negative, he does not indicate here, perhaps because that has become a moot point. Change, for better or for worse, is inevitable.

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