

When “the Other” and “the One” Are the Two Halves of “the Same”. The Case of *Il Visconte Dimezzato* by Italo Calvino

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Abstract

The subject of “The Other”, the different one always generated conflicts more or less serious in the history of humanity, without proposals of any resolution. In the measure in that The Other questions, by similitude or by difference, the identity in which the subject is sustained, that questioning make unstable that precarious construction, and because of this, it converts itself in the opposer. In this study, we will find, in the text of *Il Visconte Dimezzato* by Italo Calvino, the subject of the Otherness/Alterity, analyzing from the semiotic point of view the reactions and behaviors of each one of the two characters and of the members of the society in which they live. The starting point of the story by Italo Calvino is that in a war between Austria and the Turks, the Viscount Medardo di Terralba as a consequence of a canon shot remains divided vertically into two halves and both halves survive. One of the two halves is very bad and the other is very good. Each one of the two halves sees in the other one “The Other”, feeling itself “The One” but incomplete and desiring to turn to be “The Same” as it was before being divided by the canon shot.

Keywords

Otherness, Samety, Identity, Goodness, Evilness

1. Introduction

We are then before a case of that what in Anthropology is named *otherness* or *alterity*. Camiñas (2008: p. 112) signals:

The concept of alterity, or the perception of the other as different, has been

handled amply, as we have said, from the french domain structuralist as well as post-structuralist, in the overall domains of the cultural studies, the semiotics and the cultural anthropology.

In this sense, Levinas (1961: p. 9) makes an affirmation that would seem a tautology but which is really clarifying: “The absolutely other is Other-distinct”. And furthermore, (p. 10) formulates this reflection: “The alterity is the way of being another which can be ‘only starting by myself’”. Certainly, in solitude, the “otherness” is not possible, since it could only be “the one”. It is in relationship with the others when the possibility of comparison or even confrontation is made possible. Samonà (2005: p. 7), referring to this distinction asserts:

In all distinction, the being continues to be always the same; in a certain sense, it differs from itself because it remains being thought as the link that conjugates those who are different, being therefore, grasped essentially to that difference. (...) Consequently, at the moment in which the alterity has self-imposed as the constitutive character of the being, diversity and multiplicity has started to prosper in the ontological weight (...). The other one must finish being vinculated ontologically to the way of being constitutively unified of the soul, of the intellect, and then of the subject as being conscient and as being a person.

The *Other* one, in order to be so, must be different. To be different, it must have good contrast.

Méndez (2009: p. 141) signals that in these situations: “His uneraseable alterity must make of him another one, as well as limit and frontier. And, as it always happens in the frontier, it is an occasion of fronting and confronting”. In our case, it will happen in the tenth chapter, when the two halves of the *Visconte* will confront in a duel.

There are two *selves*; or what is the same, one *self* incomplete, alienated, because one part of it belongs to *another one*.

The situation might be condensed in the equation: $2 = 1$

The two characters are the two faces of a single being.

Being two halves, each one can be considered as a double of the other and, as signals Kovacshazy (2012: p. 345): “le double permet ainsi de dire le vide tout en montrant le plein. Et de façon condensée: il permet de dire le vide du plein.”¹

And further on: (p. 346):

Le double moderne ne relève pas d’une esthétique de la représentation (qui offre une réelle présence) ou, si le double moderne représente quelque chose, c’est le vide. (...) Le double moderne clame plus fort la vacuité de son caractère duel. (...) Le double moderne, lui ne contient pas d’invisible présence, pas d’au-delà de la forme. Comme l’invisible était l’Autre, l’Autre se love ailleurs: dans la forme-sens. Le double ne veut plus être une figure, il

¹The double allows thus saying the vacuum while showing the full. In a condensed way: it allows saying the vacuum within the full.

est une figure vide.²

The vacuum is the sensation that senses each one of the two halves until, as we will see in the tenth chapter, will be unified cleverly by doctor Trelawney.

This sensation of vacuum affects his identity.

The *notion of identity*, together with that of *person*, is relatively recent: it was imposed at the beginning of the years 50 and was subjected to a fast transformation until in the common language; it assumed the meaning of a person's unity, equivalent to the idea of the individual.

In the socio-psychological realm the meaning of *identity* is the conscience of oneself. Since there are two halves, they suffer from *dissociated identity* which points to an individualizing totality and which looks for its proper authenticity through impulses of complementarity and of compensation among the divided halves. Although each half thinks that it is in *itself*, which is *oneself*.

The phenomenon of the *dissociated identity*, multiple personality or double personality, as is the case of the two entities (physical and psychical) of the *Visconte dimezzato*, which go each one into his account, is a condition which was given frequently at the beginnings of the XX century, and which interested from the antiquity the literature. It referred to different *selves* imposed by the diversity of experiences and actions.

The duality expresses itself through the contrast of two qualities opposed in two different bodies: the wickedness \neq the kindness in the case of the two halves of the *Visconte, Master Pietrochiodo*, a carpenter which made a clever and serious job and who sets all his attention in doing well his work \neq while *Doctor Trelawney*, a naval doctor who had spent all his life under cover playing cards and who had not seen nor knew anything of the world, now in Terralba, coming after a shipwreck, was dealing with his scientific discoveries rather than healing the illness; the *Hughenots* religious and moralists \neq while the *lepers* were relaxed and merry-makers...

But the duality can be given without the presence of a doublé character in one same person; thus *Sebastiana*, the nurse is at the same time stupid and wise; *Pamela*, the shepherdess is both ingenious and cunning; the *Nephew-narrator* is innocent and malicious.

However, there is a large difference between the dual internal identity of the characters that we have just mentioned and the two halves of the *Visconte*, which are characterized by very different strokes: the two halves are each one the opposite of the other, being parts of one same unity.

As said at the beginning, the main objective is that the subject of *The Other*, the different always generated conflicts more or less serious in the history of humanity without proposals of any resolution. In the measure that *The Other*

²The modern double does not fail to give an aesthetic of the representation (which offers a real presence) or, if the modern double represents anything, it's the vacuum. (...) The modern double claims more strongly the vacuity of its dual character. (...) The modern double does not contain any invisible presence, not beyond any form. Because the invisible was the Other, the Other loves himself elsewhere: in the sens-form. The double does not like more being a figure, it is an empty figure.

questions, by similitude or by difference, the identity in which the subject is sustained that questioning makes unstable that precarious constitution, and because of this, it converts itself in the *opposer*.

2. Development

In the text that we analyze, Calvino recurs to the formula of a *homodiegetic* narrator; in this case, it is a Nephew of the main character, the *Visconte Medardo*, which says the history with the sight of a child which in these moments is seven or eight years old.

The plot is divided into ten chapters and flows in a facile and swift form.

It begins with: “C’era una guerra contro i turchi”³ (Calvino, 1991: p. 367). It was the austro-turkish war; we are at the end of the *Seicento*. The *Visconte* crosses the plain of Bohemia so as to arrive at the camp of the Christians.

According to this nephew: “mio zio era allora nella prima giovinezza: l’età in cui i sentimenti stanno tutti in uno slancio confuso, non distinti ancora in male e in bene”⁴ (Calvino, 1991: p. 367).

This image of the totality of the *Visconte*, a mixture of good and evil, is not only a prelude to the ill luck that will touch him in the second chapter, but it serves Calvino to outline the impulse and the imprudence of the *Visconte* which traverses a plain full of corpses, signs of destruction and death and which do not affect him absolutely; he does not know how to read these signals because being so young and, therefore, so little expert in life, is not able to interpret these signals in another way, i.e., transform them in which they represent.

It goes accompanied by a squire called *Kurt* who explains and clarifies all the things that they see.

When they arrive at the camp, the *Visconte* is brought to the presence of the Emperor, before whom he bows and is presented as a member of one of the noblest families of Genoa, as a consequence of which the Emperor names him immediately lieutenant.

At the end of the second chapter, the *Visconte Medardo* has already suffered a canon shooting in the chest and the doctors are trying to bring back to life the half-right of the fired *Visconte*, while the other half “è andata in bricioli”⁵.

The scene ended with the image of this body chosen between the dying ones and brought to the operation table for a very uncertain reanimation. It prepares the central part of the history which follows in the following chapters: the absurd and inexplicable situation of a man physically divided in one half, in the vertical sense. He is saved against any prediction.

Half of the *Visconte* enters the castle of the family with the help of a crutch and is covered by a black cloak. He is received by his old nurse Sebastiana, who is at the same time wise and absentminded. The part of the *Visconte* which has

³It was a war against the Turks.

⁴My uncle was then in his first youth, the age in which confused feelings, not yet sifted, do not distinguish yet between evil and good.

⁵Was made into pieces.

returned immediately gives proof of cruelty and causes the death of his father giving him a loathing (Calvino, 1991: p. 380).

From this moment on, the life of the *Visconte* begins in his new condition: he begins to cut in half all of his victims: firstly pears, then frogs, mushrooms, octopuses and everything he can find trying to represent in these objects his situation, desiring to match his own destination, even the condition of the natural life surrounding him. The violence of the *Visconte* does not stop even with humans: he commands to be hanged all brigands and also to those which have been condemned by furtive hunting in his lands, and in the completion of his unsettling, he commands to be hanged even ten cats alternating them every two men condemned. His old nurse Sebastiana, when she knows these facts exclaims: “Di Medardo è ritornata la metà cattiva”⁶. (Calvino, 1991: p. 383). Effectively it is the evil and means side who is acting, the half side of the *Visconte*.

If we take into account that the half which has returned in these moments is the right half side and the heart resides in the left side, we can reach the conclusion that he is a heartless being, or what is the same thing: without any kind of senses or compassion towards the others. This could be the reason for his way of acting.

The hanging sets are always made by *Master Pietrochiodo*, a carpenter *serio e di intelletto*⁷ which makes torture sets more and more ingenious for the malign objects of the *Visconte* and who was satisfied to be good in his work without stopping to think about the objective to which they would be used (Calvino, 1991: p. 384). He is a minor character of those who appear in the story and who is seen through the eyes of the narrator child who never juzges nor reaches conclusions; he just registers and describes facts.

From time to time, *Master Pietrochiodo* has doubts about his work, but they are weak and more thought than sensed. Also in this case, in a certain way, it is handled by a divided personality between the set to the practice of scientific logic and the compassion towards living beings.

Besides this character, there exists *Doctor Trelawney*, an Englishman by his birth, ex-doctor of the legendary Captain Cook, who once shipwrecked on the Italian coast, instead of taking care of illnesses, was only interested in strange and exotic things: illnesses of crickets and especially in will-o'-the-wisps, his favorite passion. A doctor who almost faints at the vision of blood and when he sees a naked body reddened and, if they were women, he lowers his sight and stutters (Calvino, 1991: p. 392). He is a character with an autonomous identity, lacking direction, following inutile things with total indifference for the evil in the world and enjoys in his solitude. In fact, to make him company, only appears the child, a nephew of the *Visconte* who follows him everywhere. The Doctor, as well as the child, knows helpless and without any opposition to the endless cruel acts that the *Visconte* leaves behind itself.

In the fifth chapter appear two “collective characters”: the lepers (Calvino, 1991: p.

⁶From Medardo the evil side has returned.

⁷Serious and of clever side.

390), and later, the huguenots (Calvino, 1991: p. 395).

The lepers, whom society decides to reject, live in Pratofungo, within the region of Liguria and, in spite of their leprosy they are happy, with a style of life relaxed and merry-making. Their only occupation was to play strange instruments devised by themselves, singing and living as if it were a perpetual banquet.

Opposing this lifestyle are the huguenots, religious people who fled from intolerant France at the end of the XVI century and who established themselves in the chalky grounds of Col Gerbido where, with hard work, they laboured the earth. In their flight, they had lost everything, even the Bible, and therefore they observed a nearly forgotten truth with more a moralist intention than a really religious: they multiplied prohibitions in order not to confound themselves, not being many experts in what was peccaminous and “s’astenevano dal nominare Dio e ogni altra espressione, per paura di parlare in modo sacrilego”⁸ (Calvino, 1991: p. 396).

The lepers, on one side with their irresponsibility, and the moralist huguenots on the other side, represent as well two extremes in one way of being divided into halves the human being.

These two communities are visited by the *Visconte*, there he knows persons and habits and also there he makes violent acts.

At the end of the fifth chapter the *Bad Visconte* in presence of his nephew says some words that manifest at the same time the anguish of his condition and his state of necessity (Calvino, 1991: p. 403): “Così si potesse dimezzare ogni cosa intera (...) così ognuno potesse uscire dalla sua ottusa e ignorante interezza. Ero intero e tutte le cose erano per me naturali e confuse, stupide come l’aria; credevo di veder tutto e non era che la scorza”⁹.

The power abuses and the violence of the *Visconte* continue being underway and follow until the apparition in the story, at the beginning of the sixth chapter, *Pamela* (Calvino, 1991: pp. 404-410), a young shepherd cunning and daring, who does not accept any compromises. The *Visconte* sees the little shepherd and says to himself: “Ecco che io tra i miei acuti sentimenti non ho nulla che corrisponda a quello che gli interi chiamano amore. E se per loro un sentimento così melenso ha pur tanta importanza, quello che per me potrà corrispondere a esso, sarà certo magnifico e terribile. E decise d’innamorarsi di Pamela”¹⁰.

As a showing of his feelings, he offers halves of daisies, bats, half a butterfly, half a jellyfish: (...) “ogni incontro di due esseri al mondo è uno sbranarsi”¹¹ (Calvino, 1991: pp. 406). It is a declaration of love.

⁸They would abstain from nominating God and any other expressions, for fear of speaking in sacrilegious way.

⁹In this way one might cut in halves any whole thing (...) in this way anyone might come out from its obtuse and ignorant integrity. I was full and all things were for me natural and confuse, stupid like the air; I thought to see everything, and it was only the crust.

¹⁰“Now, among my acute feelings there is nothing that corresponds to which those who are whole call love. If what for them a feeling so silly has however so much importance, for me it must correspond to such a thing; it must be then certainly magnificent and terrible.” So he decided to fall in love with Pamela.

¹¹Every encounter of two beings in the world is a halving.

The shepherd, in spite of her youth, does not show being insecure nor inexperienced in rejecting the pretensions of the *Visconte*, nor in knowing the meaning of how to translate the messages that he sends in the shape of riddles: half a bat and a jellyfish together meant: “appuntamento stasera in riva al mare”¹² (Calvino, 1991: p. 406).

Pamela feels unable to escape his fate of going to the grey castle. However, she decides to be his wife only in the woods.

The appearance of *Pamela* in this narration serves as an inflection point among the violent situations and the atrocities of the *Visconte Medardo* and the appearance of the other half of the *Visconte*, the left part, the good one, in the seventh chapter (Calvino, 1991: pp. 411-422).

The coming of the Good one to Terralba, the other half of the *Visconte* who had been found by two hermits on the battle field and which had been cured using ointments and balsams alters the situation wholly: the messages of torture and division seeded in nature by the right and mean half of the *Visconte* has re-composed thanks to the pious hand of the Good. The disappeared children are returned to their parents; the widows are assisted, the dogs bitten by vipers are cared, etc. (Calvino, 1991: p. 419). There was, therefore, a double nature in the *Visconte Medardo*, a good one and a bad one. The good one is the half left one: the one who has the heart.

The encounter between *Pamela* and the left part of the *Visconte* starts a serene and pitiful love, completely different to that produced by the right part of the *Visconte*, full of agitation and bad signs (Calvino, 1991: p. 420).

Pamela opens his heart to the good *Visconte* and gives to him a full account of the atrocities and the proposal of marriage that made the other half, and she does not understand why he does not face all the evils he has done and how she almost has some compassion of him, to which he replies: “E come non averne? Io che so cosa vuole dire essere metà d’un uomo, non posso non compiangerlo”¹³. And he continues: “O *Pamela*, questo è il bene dell’essere dimezzato: il capire d’ogni persona e cosa al mondo la pena che ognuno e ognuna ha per la propria incompletezza”¹⁴ (Calvino, 1991: p. 421).

The *Bad Visconte* feels himself strong by halving everything that is within his reach and does evil, but the *Good Visconte* suffers seeing everything that is incomplete or halved, and tries with anxiety to allow restoring everything that had been halved by it:

Io ero intero e non capivo, e mi muovevo sordo e incomunicabile tra i dolori e le ferite seminati dovunque, là dove meno da intero uno osa credere. Non io solo, Pamela, sono un essere spaccato e divelto, ma tu pure e tutti. Ecco ora io ho una fraternità che prima, da intero, non conoscevo: quella

¹²Meeting this evening at the shore of the sea.

¹³And how not to have it? What means to be only half a man? I cannot understand it.

¹⁴Oh *Pamela*, this is the good of being cut in half: the understanding that every person and thing in the world implies the pain that one has in its own incompleteness.

con tutte le mutilazioni e le mancanze del mondo (Calvino, 1991: p. 421).¹⁵

Then he makes Pamela the following proposal: “Se verrai con me, Pamela, imparerai a soffrire dei mali di ciascuno e a curare i tuoi curando i loro”¹⁶ (Calvino, 1991: p. 421). And furthermore he adds: “fare insieme buone azioni è l’unico modo per amarci”¹⁷ to which *Pamela*, cunning and amused, answers: “Peccato. Io credevo che ci fossero altri modi”¹⁸ (Calvino, 1991: p. 422).

The story resolves itself in the tenth chapter (Calvino, 1991: pp. 437-444) in which *Pamela* who had in the sixth chapter a bridge function, between the evil actions of the *Bad Visconte* and the charity ones of the *Good Visconte* undertakes the action of conducting the history towards an ending which is besides happy, inventive.

Since the two halves of the *Visconte* want to get married with her, *Pamela* is compromised with both, with the condition that the marriage is made in the church after they both have asked their hand to their parents.

With this solution she wants to resolve the situation that the proposals of the two *Visconti* have proposed. The *Good Visconte* accepts that she is married with the *Bad Visconte* and he will leave Terralba so that there is peace and serenity for her and its rival, the *Bad Visconte*. In turn, the *Bad Visconte* proposes that she is married with the other half so that he may make force to show the law according to which the marriage is valid in as much that *Pamela* has been married to Medardo di Terralba, this means she is his wife, and since the good half will not oppose the problem will be solved.

On the day of the marriage arrives, the *Bad Visconte* cannot arrive in time, and, on the contrary, the *Good Visconte* arrives punctually at the church. The marriage was made, both husbands said yes, the rings were exchanged and the priest said: “Medardo di Terralba e Pamela Marcolfi, io vi congiungo in matrimonio”¹⁹ (Calvino, 1991: p. 440).

At the end of the church, the *Bad Visconte* appears and says: “Medardo di Terralba sono io e Pamela è mia moglie”²⁰ (Calvino, 1991: p. 440).

The *Good Visconte* opposes and they begin to fight with swords, but lacking balance as they have a single leg, they both come to the ground and they decide to adjourn the duel to the following day. *Pamela* decides to return to the wood.

The following day at dawn, each one with an invention by *Master Pietrochiodo* which consisted of a sort of calliper’s legs, fixed to the waist of each one and having one point set in the ground, allowed them to be straight and move and even inclining forwards and backward.

¹⁵I was whole and did not understand, and I moved deaf and incommunicating among the pains and the wounds seeded everywhere; there where one which is not whole one cannot believe. Not only me, Pamela; I am a being split and torn, but you are whole and full. Now I have a fraternity that before being whole I did not know: that with all the mutilations and remainings in the world.

¹⁶You will see with me, Pamela, that I will learn to suffer the evils of all the people, healing yours by healing the others.

¹⁷Making together good actions is the only way to love ourselves.

¹⁸I recognize my sin. I thought you behaved in another way.

¹⁹Medardo di Terralba and Pamela Marcolfi, I declare yourselves married.

²⁰I am Medardo di Terralba and Pamela is my wife.

3. Unfolding of the Result

They start the fight, the *Bad Visconte* as he unsets the point from the ground loses balance and falls to the ground, but he succeeds in giving a sword hit to the *Good* one splitting him upside down, and the *Good* one gives in turn a sword hit to the *Bad* one from the head to the abdomen.

They are both bleeding on the ground, and *Doctor Trelawney* jumping, clapping hands and shouting says: “È salvo! È salvo! Lasciate fare a me”²¹ (Calvino, 1991: p. 443).

After half an hour they brought to the castle, in a pallet, a single blessed one. The *Bad* and the *Good* were strongly bandaged after the Doctor had unified viscera and arteries in one and another part.

The *Unified Visconte* was on the verge of dying but finally he was saved and little by little both halves united could be made to be inserted symmetrically so that *Doctor Trelawney* exclaimed: “Ora è guarito”²² (Calvino, 1991: p. 443).

And *Pamela* exclaimed²³: “Finalmente avrò uno sposo con tutti gli attributi”. (Calvino, 1991: p. 443).

Everything seems to be in order: *Doctor Trelawney* leaves the crickets and the will-o'-the-wisps in order to occupy himself of illnesses; *Master Pietrochiodo* no longer builds gibbets but useful mills.

The *Visconte* being again *the same* by the union of the *other* and the *one* who has the experience of the good and the evil fused has acquired the wisdom. He had a happy life, many children and a just government. Life in Terralba improved. (Calvino, 1991: p. 443).

The nephew-narrator is the only one who senses a bit of sadness and wanting: “Alle volte uno si crede incompleto ed è soltanto giovane. Ero giunto sulle soglie dell’adolescenza e ancora mi nascondevo tra le radici dei grandi alberi del bosco a raccontarmi storie”²⁴ (Calvino, 1991: p. 444). The sensation of solitude increased when one sees that *Doctor Trelawney* has left embarking himself in the vessel of *Captain Cook* who has returned to fetch him and says: “Io rimasi qui, in questo nostro mondo pieno di responsabilità e di fuochi fatui”²⁵. In this way the tenth chapter ends, and the story ends.

4. Conclusion

After all the things lived by both separated halves of the *Visconte*, we can make use of the words expressed by the narrator’s nephew, which we have cited above and which we can consider our conclusion: the *Visconte* being again *the same* through the union of the *other* and the *one* has the experience of the good and the evil fused, has acquired the wisdom. He had a happy life, many children and

²¹He has been saved! He has been saved! Let me act.

²²Now he has been cured.

²³Finally I will have a husband with all the attributes.

²⁴Sometimes one who thinks himself incomplete is merely young. I had reached the threshold of adolescence and still hid among the roots of the great trees in the wood to tell myself stories.

²⁵I was left behind, in this world of ours full of responsibilities and will-o'-the-wisps.

a just government. Life in Terralba improved.

To have the experience of good and evil fused allows judging and acting correctly and with wisdom.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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