

**ROMANCE STUDIES:  
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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## ***If on a Winter's Night a Traveler: Italo Calvino and the Ends of Discourse***

You are about to begin watching—or perhaps listening to, or reading—a lecture about Italo Calvino's novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979). Relax. Concentrate. Let the world around you fade. You may be at home, in your room, in a house or apartment shared with others. Best to close the door. Just hope the others will leave you alone. Or perhaps you are on the bus or on campus. You may be watching or reading this as part of a course. Or maybe you stumbled on it on YouTube. You may have watched or read other lectures by Jon Beasley-Murray. You think you know what is coming: a drinks pairing, a question. You may be tempted to skip this preamble, or perhaps you are not sure whether it is in fact preamble or part of the lecture itself. You may have finished the Calvino novel already, in which case you could be hoping that this lecture will clarify things that you missed. You may be halfway through and wondering if the lecture will pick up on or explain a particular theme or character. Or perhaps this lecture is your introduction to the novel, and you are watching or reading it to get a sense of what to expect when you get going on the book. Either way, you have a pen and paper with you—you do take notes of these lectures, don't you? If not, go get a notebook! You can pause the video or pick up the book when you come back. Well, what are you waiting for? Are you the kind of person who watches or reads such lectures in the hope of finding out something new? Or is this another chore, something else you have to find time to do amid other responsibilities? You try to focus, to make yourself comfortable. This lecture seems to have absolutely no connection with all the rest. Perhaps at first you feel a bit lost. But in fact, on sober reflection, you prefer it this way, confronting something and not quite knowing yet what it is.

Calvino's novel may well be unlike any other you have read. It plays with the reader, raising and then dashing expectations of what fiction is all about: a coherent plot, consistent characterization, a beginning followed by a middle and then an end. The book is as much metafiction as fiction. This is part of its postmodernism, its ludic break with convention and its diffidence towards closure. On the other hand, at least at first, it is very familiar, addressing you in the second person ("you") and acknowledging aspects of the reading experience that other novels take for granted or prefer to ignore: for instance, that a book is also a physical object, or that we always come to a story with our

own preconceptions and expectations. It acknowledges the reader's presence and their (your) contributions to story-telling, inviting them in and making the Reader a character. Without readers, after all, there would be no authors. But authors may misjudge their readers, and Calvino's assumptions about his readers can be read either as a gentle critique of ideology, or as a symptom of the way his book, for all its formal experimentation, still shores up gendered expectations about authorship and authority.

### 1. *Metafiction and Materiality*

*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is metafiction, a fiction about fiction. It does not pretend to offer a self-enclosed world, to hold up a realistic "mirror" to reality. Rather, it acknowledges that novels are constructions, which draw on textual strategies to attract and ensnare readers who have many other demands upon their time and attention. It directly addresses the reader, to make plain the expectations and implicit contract that are the basis for reading and writing alike. It also reminds us that a book is a physical as well as a discursive artifact—a thing that has to be written and produced, printed and circulated, accessed and bought (borrowed or stolen), and then opened and read in a particular setting of time and place. All this is complicated now that much of our reading, even of novels, is done on screens. But this only means that the mechanisms of production, circulation, and access are a little different. Calvino envisages a reader at a bookshop that has a "shop window in which you have promptly identified the title you were looking for. [. . .] Having rapidly glanced over the titles of the volumes displayed in the bookshop, you have turned toward a stack of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* fresh off the press, you have grasped a copy, and you have carried it to the cashier" (4-5, 6). You, however, may have ordered it from Amazon, perhaps as an audiobook or a Kindle download, or may have accessed it via archive.org, or even tried to get hold of a PDF for free. Careful you do not infect your computer with a virus! And even if you do read the book on a screen, screens too have their own materiality: you may be reading on a laptop on a desk at home or an iPad on your knee in a coffee shop, or you may be squinting at your phone on the bus. And on those same screens may be other distractions—you hear a small ding to announce a new email message or text; you have tabs open at your Instagram or Facebook. Any novel, and this lecture, too, has to compete with everything else the world has to offer, in an accelerated economy of information and distraction.

My question to you, then, is how did you access and read Calvino's novel and/or this lecture? And where and how did you choose to read, watch, or listen to it? What differences did these choices of physical medium or setting make to your enjoyment and understanding of either book or lecture? Is a novel (this one or others) different if you read a physical copy or if you read it onscreen? How does your immediate environment impinge upon and/or affect your reading? Pause the video here, and write down some notes—you still have your notebook and pen, right? While you do that, I'll have a Campari and soda, but I'll be right back.

#### Drinks Pairing: Campari and Soda

Campari and soda is a classic Italian aperitif: a drink served in the late afternoon or early afternoon, before eating. (Vermouth is also a popular aperitif, as are pastis or champagne in France.) Kate Hawkings, who has written an entire book on “the drinks, culture, and history of the aperitif”—Campari Soda is her “absolute favourite”—explains that “the word ‘aperitif’ comes from the Latin *aperire*, meaning ‘to open.’ It is something to open the appetite, to stimulate the taste buds, to mark the start of a meal that’s to come” (6, 7). Lighter than a standard cocktail, legitimated by the notion of the “medicinal” properties of the herbs and other botanicals often infused within it, an aperitif is promise and preparation, a ritual to signal that the day’s work is over and the evening about to begin. Calvino’s novel is of course all aperitif, or a series of aperitifs that frustratingly—or delightfully, depending on your mood—lead to no subsequent consummation.

The material reality of reading usually goes without saying. In most circumstances, we think of a book as a collection of words, and the reader as an “ideal reader,” abstract and disembodied. A saying such as “Don’t judge a book by its cover” suggests that the cover is not itself the book, that it is simply its container. Yet a cover is often the first we see of a book, it is what draws us in and helps us decide to buy it or not, or frames how we understand what unfolds within its pages. More importantly still, the physical infrastructure of pages and print, or pixels and platform, makes reading possible. Without it, there would be no book. A physical book can show signs of history and use, from dog-eared pages to coffee stains, pencilled underlinings and annotations or signed dedications. (Electronic books are less susceptible to such wear and tear, though they may

have digital watermarks or other signs of provenance, or show evidence of scanning errors and so on.) But we often only notice the web of textures and things upon which reading depends when, for some reason, it breaks, when for instance a file is corrupted or our battery runs out, when we drop a book in the bath or forget it in a café.



Image: Bookshop in Turin, Italy

In Calvino's novel, the web of things and relations in which books are enmeshed is continually breaking or being ripped apart. After the book's opening chapter, which sets out the conditions of possibility for the novel—as the reader chooses it, buys it, sits down to read it—the book “proper” seems to begin. Yet its metafictional aspects persist as the author (the same author or another?) continues to address the reader: “The novel begins in a railway station, [. . .] a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph. [. . .] The pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train. [. . .] All of this is a setting you know by heart, with the odor of train that lingers even after all the trains have left” (11,12). The reader is even warned of the authorial strategies in play: “Watch out: it is surely a method of involving you gradually, capturing you in the story before you realize it—a trap” (12). And perhaps we (you) are indeed drawn in to the story that unfolds, of a clandestine assignment and what may be espionage, perhaps somewhere in mid-twentieth century Europe. Then all of a sudden, just as the local chief of police has

revealed himself to be the narrator's co-conspirator, urging him to take the next train out, the narrative is interrupted. We are told that the book the reader is reading (but not the book *we* are reading) is defective, thanks to a printing error: it has been mis-bound, and endlessly repeats its opening thirty pages, rather than allowing the narrative to continue. You therefore return to the bookshop, and ask for a replacement. But when you resume reading, you find that the book you have been given in exchange is not the same one, but a new novel, entitled *Outside the Town of Malbork*. You (we) start reading this novel—"An odor of frying wafts at the opening of the page" (34)—which turns out to be a tale of vengeance and violence in a small village perhaps in Poland, when all at once it, too, breaks off, with blank pages interrupting the narrative: "sensations suddenly riven by bottomless chasms" (43). It is "another trap" (45). You therefore search out the missing parts of this book, this time by contacting the "Other Reader" whom you met earlier in the bookshop, a trail that leads you to the university and yet another book (*Leaning from the Steep Slope*) that turns out to be likewise incomplete. And so Calvino's novel continues, a sequence of interrupted readings caused by a series of mishaps. Driven by the reader's fantasy that all narrative must come to its pre-ordained conclusion, time and again we see this quest waylaid by the accidents of (mis)fortune.

The causes of interruption are various. One book is incomplete because its author committed suicide before finishing it; another because it has been torn into pieces; others because they are stolen or confiscated; and so on and so forth. In each case, just as the reader is being drawn into the narrative fiction—and often at a moment of suspense, a cliff-hanger—the "real world" impinges and we have instead the (increasingly bizarre) tale of the reader's efforts to see these stories to their end, on the trail of forgers and censors, authors and spies, accompanied sometimes by the "Other Reader" and her sister, in settings that range from the Swiss Alps to South American dictatorships. But the result is only further narrative proliferation. Still more stories emerge, one of which comes from the titles of all the truncated novels that are threaded through the text—"If on a winter's night a traveler, outside the town of Malbork, leaning from the steep slope without fear of wind or vertigo, looks down in the gathering shadow [. . .]"—but this, too, breaks off: "What story down there awaits it end? —he asks, anxious to hear the story" (258). The only narrative that reaches any kind of conclusion is the one that has to, somehow. This is Calvino's novel itself, which ends in the most conventional and artificial manner, with

a marriage (of the two readers), but also with a metafictional twist in its final line: “Just a moment, I’ve almost finished *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino” (260). And so you have. Even a book made up solely of beginnings has to end somewhere, if only, once more, for pragmatic, material reasons. Though we might imagine a circular narrative (David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* could be an example) or an online book that is notionally endless, again worldly materiality intervenes: all readers tire, and in the last instance ultimately die. Any discourse meets its limits in the concrete facts of contingency and chance, corporeal decrepitude and ruination. These are its ultimate constraints.

## 2. *Escaping Gendered Endings*

By gesturing to the materiality of the text and beyond it, and by acknowledging the reader’s own embodiment, Calvino perhaps inevitably comes to over-commit in his description of our (your) social and physical specificity. At the outset, the reader is probably sufficiently abstract that we do feel interpellated into the narrative: on the opening page, we are indeed “about to read Italo Calvino’s new novel” (3; though now it is not so new). And maybe we accept some of the presumptions and projections in the first few pages that follow: that we are, for example, “the sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything” (4). But although the novel continues to be written overwhelmingly in the second person, it is not long before the nameless reader becomes a character much like any other—we (you) do not encounter an Other Reader named Ludmilla, for instance; nor do we meet squabbling professors at the university, argue with an over-worked publisher, or take a plane to South America, as does the Reader of the story. You the reader, and the Reader who is a character in the chapters that alternate with the sequence of openings to (imaginary) novels increasingly diverge, although there is still some overlap in that you and he both find yourselves reading those openings, and are perhaps equally frustrated that they repeatedly and tantalizingly break off. But you are not “the” Reader; you are simply “a” reader, a reader whom the novel can never fully anticipate. At the same time as there is identification with the Reader, there is also (and again, increasingly) disidentification. You are not exactly the reader that Calvino imagines you to be.

Most obviously, Calvino’s Reader is male. For critic Sigi Jöttkandt, this means that “Female readers of Calvino are at an advantage when observing the quiet, hidden workings of what one calls ‘ideology’” in the text. As she puts it: “When it gradually

becomes clear that Calvino's 'Reader' is a he, that it is a male eye who reads and seeks the completion of each of the novels he starts, we, women, start to separate ourselves from our interpellation by the novel's *You*." For Jöttkandt, this is part of the book's design, in that (she argues) "what Calvino is subtly demonstrating for us is that what one believes are simply the normal workings of the world, the way things naturally are, is in fact a masculine perspective. The normal or default way of the world is the male one" ("The Reader as Fault" 16). For Teresa de Lauretis, by contrast, the Reader's (and presumably also the reader's) unquestioned masculinity is more of a symptom, a blind spot in Calvino's novel. For de Lauretis, it indicates the assumption that, similarly, "the Writer or the Author is only and always male," that women are presented merely "as passive capacity, receptivity, readiness to receive," and that (here she summarizes the argument of French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan), "for a woman to write is to usurp a place, a discursive position, she does not have by nature or by culture" (*Technologies of Gender* 74, 75, 80). Calvino's playful questioning and subversion of the novel form, in other words, do not go nearly far enough.

All this demonstrates the limits—ideological as well as material—of Calvino's postmodern democratization of literature, of his revelation of its material conditions and his invitation to the reader to participate in the construction of the text. Or rather, it shows that Calvino's is what de Lauretis calls (following the art critic Hal Foster) a "'postmodernism of reaction' which repudiates modernism only to celebrate the status quo" (73). She is therefore tempted to identify not with Calvino's Reader, nor even with the "Other Reader" (who in the original Italian is the "woman reader"—"*la Lettrice*"), Ludmilla, but rather with the Other Reader's sister, Lotaria, whom de Lauretis describes as Ludmilla's "bad sister and mirror image [. . .] the negative image of Woman" and as "the Non-Feminine Woman [. . .] the feminist militant who doesn't read novels simply for the pleasure of reading but cannot help analyzing and debating them" (77, 76). Yet perhaps ironically, this counter-reading against the grain of the novel, this impulse to debate *If a Winter's Night a Traveler*, also saves it, in that it identifies within it (and against its conventional ending) a line of flight or escape, seeing in Lotaria "the true postmodern writer/reader, the representative of a postmodernism of resistance who successfully escapes not only capture by the narrative [. . .] but also, and more important, captivity in the conjugal bed" (80). All novels have to end, but their endings are not necessarily pre-



determined by how they begin—if they were, why would we ever bother finishing them, as we would know their conclusions from the start? The basic premise of Calvino's novel is that when a text breaks off, its future remains open, and so by implication even when we come to its final page, it could always have ended otherwise.

*You, of course, may take your reading of the novel in some other direction, reach your own conclusions.* The novel in fact only lives on in the debates and commentary that it provokes. But at some point even this ends, as nobody wants to be stuck with the same book forever. Perhaps right now some other commitment is drawing your attention away. Someone is at your door, calling you elsewhere. Dinner is ready, or you have to hustle to your next class. And you say, "Just a moment, I've almost finished Jon Beasley-Murray's lecture on *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino."

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Song: Lucy Spraggan, "Why Don't We Start from Here?"