



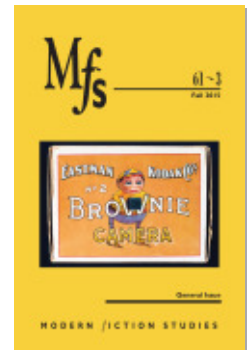
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Being in the Midst: Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*

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BEING IN THE MIDST: ITALO CALVINO'S *IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELER*

This is how you have changed since yesterday, you who insisted you preferred a book, something solid, which lies before you, easily defined, enjoyed without risks, to a real life experience, always elusive, discontinuous, debated. (*If on a winter's night* 32)

ITALO CALVINO'S *IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELER* collapses the distinction between "solid" fiction and "elusive" reality; his novel is not easily defined or enjoyed without risks, for it is, like the world the Male Reader tries to escape by reading fiction, discontinuous, fragmentary, debatable. The Male Reader, the main character in the novel, pursues an order, "an exact, taut trajectory" (27) by which to move through the books he reads, only to find that pursuit to be never-ending and impossible. He looks in fiction for a consolation for his disordered, uncontrollable existence, a way to step outside of time, to exist in "an abstract and absolute space and time" (27). But Calvino's novel serves to frustrate this, and other, manifestations of the desire for the One, for a nontemporal metaphysical ideal, whether it is the monolithic author who stands above his text, guiding the potentially disruptive characters and events into a neat resolution; or the critical reader who tries to gain a perspective above the text, playing detective in an attempt to tie themes together and arrive at the true and comprehensive interpretation of the book; or, most importantly, men and women in the world who may live as the characters in the story fragments do, reading their experience for signs

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of their Origin or End. Whether in writing, reading, or being in the world, *If on a winter's night a traveler* exposes the attempt to escape an interested position (etymologically, a position "in the midst of") and places man squarely back in his temporal world.

Few articles have been published in English on *If on a winter's night a traveler*, written in 1979 and translated into English in 1981.¹ Though the lack of critical attention being paid to Calvino's ninth book is, in one sense, understandable—the novel intentionally frustrates and eludes the totalizing grasp of traditional critical authority—it is also surprising, given Calvino's wide recognition as one of the most important contemporary writers. In his seminal essay, "The Literature of Replenishment," John Barth points to Calvino as an exemplar of the postmodern program, and Barth urges his audience "to read Calvino at once, beginning with *Cosmicomics* and going right on" (71). Furthermore, Calvino himself evidently regarded *If on a winter's night a traveler* as one of his most important works; in an interview in the *New York Times* in 1981, he describes how he had carried the idea for the novel around with him for many years and even "stopped writing fiction altogether for three years" (1) after the plan for the book came to him. Yet despite the importance of both the writer and the novel, particularly to an academic audience, English and American critics have not written on *If on a winter's night a traveler*, in part, perhaps, because Calvino is an Italian writer and the majority of criticism of his work has been done in Italian. This language barrier makes it more difficult, but also more essential, for English-speaking scholars to articulate their own responses to Calvino's work.

Both Italian and American critics have helped to identify part of Calvino's project in *If on a winter's night a traveler* by interpreting the novel as a destruction of the all-powerful Author of traditional fiction and as a document that invests renewed power in the activity of reading. Clearly, a demystification of authority is part of Calvino's larger accomplishment: the demystification of any metaphysical ideal located outside of time and impervious to the surrounding disruptions and disorder. The traditional author has been such an elevated figure, has been, in Mario Lavagetto's words, "silent, dictatorial, omnipresent" (71), completely articulated throughout his textual creation, yet unassailably above it. Calvino explicitly works against this elevation of the author by placing authors in the midst of the text, and especially by placing himself in his own text. Calvino's name begins and ends the novel: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel . . ." (3), and ". . . I've almost finished reading *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino" (260). He rejects the role of the silent, dictatorial author by positioning himself among the other characters in the novel itself and not above it or behind it.

That Calvino makes himself visible in his text is quite important when considered as a response to the panopticism of institutions—here the institution of the Author in literature—which desire absolute power and authority. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes the panoptic schema, adapted from Jeremy Bentham's architectural design for the model prison, as a system that facilitates

¹For articles in English, see especially Picchione, Cannon, and Tani. For articles in Italian, see especially Lavagetto, Varese, and Garboli.

the perfect exercise of power. An all-seeing authority-figure observes and disciplines his prisoners (the author his readers, in fiction) without himself being observed because he is situated in a circular tower high above them. The strength of the panoptic mechanism is, according to Foucault, "that it never intervenes, it is exercised spontaneously and without noise" (206). Panopticism makes the authority-figure unassailable because he is invisible and silent, "so subtly present" (206) in the functions he invests while retaining completely a pervasive and controlling power. Calvino brings the author down from the tower and places him in the midst of the fiction, assailable and, in fact, assailed by his audience; Lotaria, Marana, and the extraterrestrial "groupies" all harass Silas Flannery; the Male Reader hurls down Calvino's novel. Calvino strips the absolute and disciplining power from the institution of the Author, and from himself, by placing the author on the same level as the reader: in the midst of the text.

In his article "Per L'Identita di Uno Scrittore di Apocrifi," Mario Lavagetto describes some of the other tactics Calvino uses to remove the author from his all-powerful, all-seeing position in the tower. Lavagetto takes up the question posed by Ermes Marana of how it would be possible "to defeat not the authors but the function of the author" (159), not the many individual writers but the general perception of the author as the one who invests the work with meaning; whose silent voice in the text "guarantees a truth in that world of ghosts and inventions" (159).

To defeat the myth of the authoritative author, Calvino not only puts his name into the text but also multiplies images of himself throughout, thus making it difficult, if not impossible, to determine the single controlling voice of the author. It seems at first that Silas Flannery is surely the author-character through whom Calvino speaks in the novel; Flannery is a popular writer, as Calvino was, especially in Italy, and, like Calvino, Flannery is a tormented writer: "I am definitely the tortured type of writer," Calvino admitted in the *Times* interview, "I suffer, I suffer, it's the only thing I do well" (1). Furthermore, like Calvino, Flannery develops the idea for a book that is "only an incipit, that maintains for its whole duration the potentiality of the beginning, the expectation still not focused on an object" (177). However, Ermes Marana, a subversive, crooked character, and the probable mastermind behind many of the subplots in the novel, is also constructed in Calvino's own image. Marana is a translator—in effect, a metafictionist—who dreams of "a literature made entirely of apocrypha, of false attribution, of imitations and counterfeits and pastiches" (159), a surprisingly accurate description of Calvino's own project in this novel. And Marana also has a plan to write a "trap-novel," a novel in which he repeatedly breaks off his translation at the moment of greatest suspense, a novel like *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Calvino refuses to inhabit any one author-figure and thus to elevate that character above the others; rather, he multiplies his image, writing strategies, and plan for this novel among the author-characters in the story.

The multiplicity of authors in the novel is complemented by the multiplicity of tales they tell; the three principal writers—Calvino, Flannery, and Marana—all write stories that have numerous stories within them. It is done, Calvino stated in the *Times*, to evoke "the pleasure of the sheer proliferation of stories at the disposal of the writer" (1); there is not one story to be written, but many. For

the authors who try to write the one, true book, a book "which would exhaust the whole in its pages" (181), only frustration and failure await; they are pursuing a metaphysical ideal, attempting to put into a words a truth that, if it exists at all, is beyond man's articulation. The strategy Calvino, Flannery, and Marana adopt, on the contrary, is to write many books, many stories, "to pursue the whole through its partial images" (181). Their pursuit is never-ending; realizing this, they are content with the partial images and plural fragments that are all they can honestly produce.

Calvino also uses the reader to help bring the author down from the panoptic tower, to help destroy the idea of the authoritative author. He invites his readers to play an active role in the construction of the novel and thus to assume some of the responsibilities traditionally belonging to the author. Readers of *If on a winter's night a traveler* find themselves immersed in fragments of stories, clues that seem to lead nowhere, tangled complexities, and must extract their own meaning, make their own connections between fragments, trace their own paths through the labyrinth of the text. "The novel is the novel of reading," Lavagetto comments, "because in the midst of these fragments the only event that is continuous and developing is that of the reading" (72). Readers of this novel may find themselves in a situation similar to that of Abdullah, the scribe in the story told by Silas Flannery. While dictating the divine Koran to his scribe, the prophet Mohammed leaves a sentence half-finished; Abdullah absentmindedly suggests the conclusion, which Mohammed accepts. Abdullah, though, is scandalized and loses faith when he realizes that he has played a part in creating the Holy Book. So it may be with traditional readers, unaware of the role they play in constituting the text. But in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, Calvino continually calls upon his readers to recognize their role in constructing the text by making his novel exceedingly fragmentary, with abundant and wide gaps for the reader to fill. A multiplicity of readings is possible and desirable, because there are as many paths winding through Calvino's work as there are readers making the journey.

Although the reader's role is a vital one, its limitations must be recognized; Calvino does not strip the writer of authority simply to give that authority to the reader. In the constructions of several critics, the panoptic tower still stands, with the reader supervising and bringing into order the details of the text. JoAnn Cannon, for example, claims that the reader of *If on a winter's night a traveler* is the absolute "producer of meanings." "It is not the voice of the author that guarantees literature's truth," Cannon states, "but the activity of reading" (104). Cannon has merely replaced the authoritative author with the authoritative reader, substituting one metaphysical ideal for another. However, Calvino's book exists to expose faulty assumptions about both authorship and, perhaps more importantly, about readership. In the world of Calvino's novel, readers, like authors, are not idealized or imagined in a position outside of the text, forming a unity out of its multiple particulars, but are in the midst of the text, forced to exist in fragmentation and disorder.

The fact that Calvino includes so many misreaders in his novel, characters with flawed, obviously misdirected approaches to reading, clearly indicates that he does not confer an absolute authority on the reader. From Irnerio, who has taught himself not to read and whose only use for books is as material objects

in his sculptures, to the extraterrestrial groupies, who haunt Flannery and read his books only because they believe the books contain messages for them from other worlds, to the most blatant misreader, Lotaria, who scientifically dissects and analyzes texts, ruthlessly destructing and rebuilding them in order to make the works succumb to her reading, Calvino presents readers who do various kinds of violence to texts.

The foremost misreader in *If on a winter's night a traveler* is, of course, the Male Reader; understanding his particular way of misreading is quite important for understanding Calvino's project in the novel, for the Male Reader's reading strategy is analogous to the pursuit of the One. The Reader is a dogged pursuer, chasing after both the Other Reader, Ludmilla, and the conclusions to the ten beginnings of stories he reads during the course of Calvino's novel. In his pursuit of Ludmilla he is, ironically, successful, deciding "in a flash" (259) to marry her, perhaps only to give the detectivelike chase he has been engaged in throughout the novel some semblance of an ending, a resolution. For indeed, in his other endeavor—his search for the conclusions to the incipits he reads, which also becomes a search for the Source of the incipits—the Reader is continually foiled and frustrated. Instead of ever discovering a reason or an order behind his curiously disjointed situation, the Reader's experiences become more and more disordered, more and more curious; toward the end of the novel, for example, he is jailed in the midst of a complex South American revolution, involving counter-counter-conspiracies that this ironic hero attempts hopelessly to sort out. Unlike his colleagues in traditional mystery stories, the detective Male Reader, despite his insistent and singleminded pursuit, finds neither the end—the resolution to his confusion—nor the origin—the source of his confusion—to the tales that have so intrigued him.

The detective consciousness of the Male Reader, his obsessive desire to bring disruptive elements into order and under control, is seen most clearly in Chapter Seven, when he carefully investigates Ludmilla's apartment, hoping to discover what the woman he desires is really like. In the best detective style, he snoops around her kitchen, "the part of the house that can tell the most" (142) about her, believing he can ascertain Ludmilla's "real" identity from the items in her refrigerator or the arrangement of the books on her shelves. His "reading" of her surroundings invests potentially insignificant or arbitrary details with great importance, and he tries, unsuccessfully, to coerce these details into a comprehensive interpretation of Ludmilla, one allowing him to know her completely and thus take hold of her. The Male Reader's method of interpretation is alarmingly similar to the traditional critical interpretation of literary texts in which details are explicated and then brought together in what the critic hopes will be a complete and definitive reading, one that effectively resolves (puts to rest or, better, deadens) the issues brought to life in the text. To a surprising extent, this Reader constitutes Calvino's portrayal of conventional interpreters of fiction.

When we compare the reading strategy of the Male Reader to that of the Female Reader, as Calvino clearly intends, the reasons why the Male Reader fails and the flaws in his way of reading become more evident. Unlike the Male Reader, Ludmilla remembers the content of the books she has read and is able to recall specific incidents and characters perfectly. She involves herself in the

novels and does not, like her male counterpart, try to remain suspended above them. She is attentive to their content and does not merely wait for the conflicts at work in the texts to be resolved and brought into order. Ludmilla is the epitome of the interested reader; her way of living in the world and in the worlds opened by novels is "filled with interest in what the world can give her" (27). The Male Reader, on the other hand, wants nothing more than to be disinterested, to exist outside the world of the text; his frustration is precisely at being in the middle, "at the mercy of the fortuitous, the aleatory, the random, in things and in human actions" (22). His expectations and desires, about Ludmilla and about the fragments he reads, are repeatedly aroused, but the resolution of those desires is continually postponed; the satisfying ending that would tie together the multiplicity of details into a graspable whole is continually deferred.

The plurality and complexity of details in the text react against the totalizing efforts of the Male Reader or the literary critic to subsume these disruptive and affecting elements into a neat, ordered whole and thus to neutralize them, bring them to rest, make them insignificant and forgettable. The detective consciousness is doomed to fail in Calvino's work and in much of contemporary fiction, to be bombarded by the clues, leads, and details it tries desperately to organize, because it is essentially a manifestation of man's desire to do the impossible: to get out of time, out of a necessarily pluralistic, disordered situation in the world and in the world of the text.² The detective-reader or -critic tries to escape the middle ground of temporality, to climb up the tower, as it were, by pursuing the end, the solution to the crime of disorder and fragmentation in the text, which is also the pursuit of the beginning, the source of the crime, the author.

There are multiple expressions of the unattainable desire to pursue and to incorporate, to rise above the unresolvable complexity of the text by placing oneself or another figure, such as the author, in a panoptic tower; the most important occur in the ten story fragments in *If on a winter's night a traveler*. In these fragments, Calvino articulates his antimetaphysical view most clearly, as characters "read" their lives, the signs or experiences around them, in precisely the same way as the Reader reads a text. Calvino's novel is, then, not only a metafictional critique of a totalizing authorship and readership; it directly addresses being in the world; it exposes the impossible pursuit of Unity as it distorts the way men and women live. The desire to escape multiplicity and disorder exists not only in the activities of reading and writing but in all arenas in life.

The "I" of the first story voices a sentiment that many subsequent characters echo: "I would like to swim against the stream of time; I would like to erase the consequences of certain events and restore an initial condition" (11). Going backward in time, swimming against its stream, is an extremely desirable prospect for this character and others; it is a movement to restore an "initial condition," and "zero moment" (14) of unity, before time threw man into a fragmented world. But it is an impossible movement. The "I" is unable to get rid of his troublesome suitcase, the past he must carry around with him. He finally realizes that every attempt to erase the past "provokes a new rain of events . . . so that

²For an excellent analysis of the detective consciousness as it manifests itself in Western civilization and literature, the "ontological invasion," and the responses of postmodernism to the detective pursuit, see Spanos.

the more I seek to return to the zero moment from which I set out, the further away I move from it" (14-15). The "initial condition" recedes from the grasp of this character exactly as the Male Reader's Source remains forever elusive.

The metaphor of erasure—drawn, appropriately, from writing—represents a strategy many characters in *If on a winter's night a traveler* adopt to reduce and to simplify their worlds, to eliminate the disturbing complications in their lives, to negate their temporal existence. This attempt to escape time by willfully erasing multiplicity in order to clear a path back to the origin is, in all cases, unsuccessful. The "I" in the fifth fragment is a character who tries repeatedly to erase his past, or rather his accumulation of pasts, by changing "jobs, wife, city, continent" (106), each time thinking, "What a relief, I'll turn the mileage back, I'll erase the blackboard" (106). However, he soon realizes that it is futile to try to leave his pasts behind, to pursue a moment of pure beginning. He comments,

the past is like a tapeworm, constantly growing, which I carry curled up inside me . . . and I can be sure that even in this tiny, insignificant episode there is implicit everything I have experienced, all the past, the multiple pasts I have tried in vain to leave behind me. (106-107)

Erase signifies the impossible attempt radically to simplify and thus gain control over one's life, to escape being in the midst by returning to an ideal condition.

One character, the "I" in the last tale, does successfully erase in order to realize the consequences of erasure. He carries out a fantasy of erasing everything that stands in the way of his ultimate desire, the woman Franziska, and eventually does erase everything except for himself and Franziska and the men from Section D, state officials who are also erasing. Because this governmental erasure supplements and even controls his own, the world he believed erased by an act of *his* will, a decision he could revoke at any moment, is truly finished. As he begins to feel the void all around him, he wishes desperately for the presence of the world, a world "full of people and things . . . friendly and hostile, things to rejoice in or to combat" (250). Furthermore, his erasure has opened a huge gap, an abyss, between himself and Franziska; by erasing the world, he has obliterated everything that connects him to her and has alienated himself completely from her. Hence, erasure—simplifying in order to comprehend or take hold of an object—is shown to be a strategy that actually places the object of desire further out of reach. The "I" in this story is saved by Franziska, who, unaware of his erasure or his frantic effort to reconstitute the world, simply asks him to invite her to the cafe. Ludmilla offers similar salvation to the Male Reader, bringing a world of presence, of diversity and plurality and life, to a character who has been pursuing a fundamentally inhuman, metaphysical ideal.

Nacho Zamora, a character in the ninth tale, undertakes a quest that, like erasure and like the detective pursuit, is a manifestation of the desire to step outside of time. He returns to Oquedal, his birthplace, to search for his mother and to settle the question that has disturbed him all his life, the question of his mysterious origin. Nacho's origin becomes even more problematic, however, as he discovers that he could be the son of the poor Indian woman Anacleto Higuera or the son of the wealthy white woman Dona Jazmina. Nacho comments that he feels as if he is passing "through a series of places that ought to be more

and more interior, whereas instead I find myself more and more outside . . . as if in this palace all the doors served only for leaving and never for entering" (225). His search for his origin—an attempt to discover his “true,” absolute, ideal self—backfires on Nacho, and he is placed back in change and uncertainty. He becomes more and more unsure of himself as the story goes on: “it is not clear whether [the bed] is unmade or has been turned down for the night. . . . it is not clear whether she is resisting me or drawing me on” (231). Like the Reader and other characters in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, Nacho is denied access to the realm of the absolute and timeless but is thrown squarely into the world; instead of a panoptic, all-knowing perspective from the tower, he is reminded of his limited human perspective.

In the ten tales, Calvino presents characters who misread signs in their obsessive drive toward a metaphysical ideal. The implications of these fictional misreadings extend into the “real” worlds in and around the text. Fiction and reality intertwine in strange and effective ways in *If on a winter's night a traveler*. For example, the Male Reader's life resembles more and more closely the fictions he reads: “Now it is the stories you live that (like the stories you read) break off at the climactic moment” (231). Readers of the novel, as well as readers in the novel, sense a blurring of the distinction between fiction and reality. At the very outset, readers see their own situation reflected on the page: “You are about to begin reading . . .” (3). In almost all of the tales, the readers (and the Reader) are told what sensations they should be receiving from the words they are reading, what real-life effects the fiction should have.

In her brief but insightful review of *If on a winter's night a traveler*, Luciana Marchionne Picchione discusses Calvino's “semiotic world view”; in his texts, Picchione points out, an equivalence exists between book and universe, between fiction and reality, so that “the world presented in the novel becomes a system of signs to be deciphered, and the reading of the literary text becomes a model for an interpretation of the world” (5). In Calvino's novel, reading is a metaphor for living, and a textual misreading that coerces its multiple meanings and possibilities into one complete interpretation comes to represent a way of being in the world that is intolerant of plurality and diversity and disorder, that seeks instead to impose a meaning and order on the world from a disinterested, distanced standpoint outside time. The polysemic reading strategy Calvino asserts in *If on a winter's night a traveler* against the “univocal, dogmatic perspectives” of traditional interpretation (Picchione 5) is, like the writing that repeatedly inscribes only partial images rather than pursuing the one exhaustive Book, a rejection of the movement to get out of time, a confirmation of man's place in the midst of multiplicity.

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LAWRENCE'S *MR. NOON*

The English reviewers have been unjustly harsh about *Mr. Noon*. They may have been disappointed by the publisher's promise of "a new work of major importance" or by the obvious flaws in the fiction. James Fenton complained about the "tiresome junk" and the "blatherings about tree worship," wished "that the pretence of novel-writing had been dropped, and that the author had satisfied himself with composing a memoir." Grace Ingoldby wrote: "Discursive, peppered by self-conflict and appeals to the 'gentle reader, gentle critic,' the novel, unfinished, fails to gell." Christopher Hawtree flatly stated: "it is bad, giving little evidence of the imagination at work, and is so constructed that it could easily have rambled on forever without making a whole." Raymond Williams noted, in his typically turgid and ponderous manner, "the radical uncertainties of this novel" and the lack of "continuity of the title character." Only Graham Hough