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# CALVINO AND THE AMAZONS

## Reading the (Post) Modern Text

Federico V., who lived in a city in Northern Italy, was in love with Cinzia U., a resident of Rome.

Thus begins the story of the traveler in “L’avventura di un viaggiatore,” a short story included in the 1958 volume of Calvino’s *Racconti* and later reprinted in a separate collection bearing the title *Gli amori difficili* (Difficult Loves).<sup>1</sup> This opening is also, of course, the beginning of a story—in the current sense of love affair, erotic adventure, or sentimental relationship. The intimate connection of narrative with love, articulated in the necessary link of distance and desire throughout Calvino’s fiction, is here inscribed in a late-romantic thematic of travel as quest without attainment. When that connection is remade in *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, a novel that obstreperously proclaims its participation in the postmodern aesthetics of simulation, textual spectacle, masquerade, and self-reflexive excess, the result is again a love story.<sup>2</sup> But that love, unlike the earlier ones, is all too easy.

Or so it seems to me, woman reader, who is neither the Woman Reader of the text’s fantasy nor one reading “as a woman” in the fantasies of some contemporary male criticism, but rather a woman whose understanding of self and of the world of men and women, whose relations to culture, history, art, language, and especially love have been profoundly transformed by feminism. It is in this perspective that I begin my reading of Calvino’s text from one of his earlier and more difficult loves.

*Gli amori difficili* tells, in thirteen distinct stories, how a couple does not come together, how two people in love do not meet, and shows that it is

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Written for a seminar I conducted at Mount Holyoke College in 1984, this essay was later revised and titled “Reading the (Post) Modern Text: *If on a winter’s night a traveler*,” as a contribution to a forthcoming volume of essays in honor of Italo Calvino edited by Franco Ricci for Dovehouse Press in Ottawa, Ontario. But, to the best of my knowledge, its first appearance in print is in this volume.

precisely in their non-encounter that the couple and the love itself consist. For instance, at the end of an overnight train ride that will take him to his beloved, a man named Federico realizes that the night he has just spent on the train—that very night ride, with its anticipation, memory, desire, and the absence of the beloved one—that was the true erotic encounter, the consummation of his love. The story is titled “The Adventure of a Traveler,” and all of the thirteen stories are similarly named, each being the adventure of someone; so that the book appeared in French translation as *Aventures* (1964), and the introductory note, most likely written by Calvino himself, stated: “This definition of ‘adventure’, which recurs in the title of each story, is ironic. . . . In most cases it indicates only an inner movement, the story of a state of mind or state of being [stato d’animo], an itinerary toward silence.”<sup>3</sup>

This core of silence at the bottom of human communication is an area of passivity, a non-disposable residue of negativity that, for Calvino, is the essence of the sexual relationship. Desire is founded in absence, in the tension-toward rather than the attainment of the object of love, in the delays, the displacements, the deferrals. Epistemologically and emotionally, that is, Calvino stands somewhere between later romanticism and (post)modernism, or between Freud and Derrida. The scene of writing is always adjacent, though never collapsible on/to the oedipal scenario, and sexual difference is as much an end result of symbolic castration as it is an effect of writing, of *différance*. That becomes quite clear when one rereads the early “adventures” against the recent ones, especially comparing “The Adventure of a Reader” (in *Gli amori difficili*) with what appears to be its blown-up version or postmodern remake, *If on a winter's night a traveler*.

The reader’s adventure takes place on a quasi-deserted beach—and here one cannot help but think of Antonioni’s perhaps greatest film, *L’avventura*, released almost contemporaneously in 1960 and also very much centered on desire as absence, negativity, deferment, all of which are exactly inscribed in the form of the film text; a film text, exactly, where the theoretical notion of a filmic writing, of film as *écriture*, might as well have originated, at least insofar as Italian cinema is concerned. Conversely, one is reminded of the increasing effort on Calvino’s part to inscribe the visual register, the sensory immediacy of the image, in his own written texts, an effort that reaches its goal of perfect balance in one of his greatest books, *Invisible Cities*, and again returns, for instance, in the more recent *Palomar*.

But back to “L’avventura di un lettore”: its protagonist is the young Amedeo, an average reader partial to long, involved, and heavily plotted nineteenth-century novels. He is immersed in one of them, one day, on a solitary beach, when his eye catches the image of a woman sunbathing nearby. Torn between the desire to read, the imaginary of the written page

which, Calvino says, “opened up to him a life more exciting, profound and true” than any action or feeling in the real world; torn between the pleasures of the imaginary and the demands of the symbolic (for his socialization as a young male requires him to take an interest in that female body there on the beach), Amedeo resorts to a compromise:

He lay on his side, holding the book in such a way as to block the sight of her, but it was uncomfortable to keep his arm raised, and he had to lower it. Now the same gaze that ran along the printed lines would meet, at the end of each line, just beyond the margin of the page, the legs of the solitary sunbather.<sup>4</sup>

The two pleasures, looking and reading, are thus for a moment parallel and in perfect equilibrium. But when by sunset Amedeo and the unnamed woman have actually gotten together and are making love, he’s thinking of his novel and silently counting in his mind how many pages are left till the end.

The adventure, the frustrations, and the small victories of Amedeo, average reader of the fifties, are nothing when compared to the adventures, the agonies, and the ecstasies of the postmodern reader in *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. This is a reader with the capital *R*, whom the text addresses as “you,” the Reader as eternal double of the Author, *son semblable*, *son frère*, or, in Calvino’s phrase, the “absolute protagonist.” To call him a postmodern reader, however, is not quite correct. It would be better said that “you” is the Reader of the postmodern text—and a Reader of postmodern texts against his will.

But let me first give at least a working definition of *postmodern*, a term employed so often nowadays, and in so many contexts, as to be nearly empty of reference—and thus itself, probably, postmodern. In the preface to *The Anti-Aesthetic*, a widely cited volume of essays on postmodern culture, the editor, Hal Foster, begins by asking:

Postmodernism: does it exist at all and, if so, what does it mean? Is it a concept or a practice, a matter of local style or a whole new period or economic phase? What are its forms, effects, place? How are we to mark its advent? Are we truly beyond the modern, truly in (say) a postindustrial age?<sup>5</sup>

These questions are then addressed by many in the volume, from many angles. Some critics see postmodernism as a break with the aesthetic field of modernism; others define it as a politics of interpretation. For some it means “the end of ideology,” while others see it as an epistemological shift in social consciousness. Others still think of it as an artistic practice that construes its object, the artifact, “less as a *work* in modernist terms—unique, symbolic, visionary—than as a *text* in a postmodernist sense—‘already written,’ allegorical, contingent” (pp. x–xi). For Rosalind Krauss, the artistic

object is no longer “defined in relation to a given medium . . . but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms” (p. x). Similarly, the practice of literary criticism has become a kind of “paraliterary” writing, in Greg Ulmer’s word, “which dissolves the line between critical and creative forms” (p. x); and vice versa, literary writing has become a “paracritical” practice, as Ihab Hassan suggests and, I might add, Calvino’s text perfectly exemplifies.

Modernism, of course, started out as an oppositional view of art, marking the crisis of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture with its myths of progress, mastery, universality, and what Habermas calls the “false normativity” of its history; but today it has become the official culture. The idea that science, art, language, morality, politics are autonomous spheres possessed of an inner logic, closed systems like the museum, the scientific community (think of the literary topoi of the library, the labyrinth, etc.), is one that was developed by the Enlightenment (it is impossible here not to think of Calvino’s often avowed partiality for the eighteenth century). But the idea of art as a separate sphere within society is still very much with us, as is the notion of an opposition, within that sphere, between an artistic establishment which relies on traditional forms, and an experimental, anarchic, or subversive *avant-garde*.

This duality of stability/subversion—like the other familiar dichotomies of subject and object, self and other—is what contemporary critical thought (poststructuralism) challenges with notions such as heterogeneity, difference, deconstruction, contradiction. But it remains an enduring cognitive paradigm; and even as postmodern writers would wish to do away with it, this binary structure in one way or another informs their very theorizations. Indeed, Foster himself sees a “basic opposition” in cultural politics today between a “postmodernism of resistance . . . which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo” and a “postmodernism of reaction” which repudiates modernism only to celebrate the status quo (pp. xi–xii). This latter is evident in the neoconservative return to the verities of tradition in art, religion, the family, and so forth. It is accomplished by declaring modernism *passé*, reducing it to a style, and then recuperating or resurrecting the old pre-modernist, humanist tradition and proposing it as a new, “affirmative” and pluralistic culture. Anything goes, and all is well. Or, as Ronald Reagan keeps saying, we’re all happy again.

The postmodernism of resistance, on the other hand, Foster says, “arises as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the ‘false normativity’ of a reactionary postmodernism” or neoconservatism (p. xii). It manifests itself as a textual practice whose strategy is to “rewrite” modernism: not simply to oppose it or to reject it, but to open it

up, to deconstruct it, to challenge its assumptions, and to show its historical limit, that is to say, its non-universality, its being located in a precise sociohistorical situation. The question to be asked here, then, is, Where does Calvino's text fit in this model? For I think that the model does fit, perhaps with a few wrinkles here and there.

To say that *If on a winter's night a traveler* is a self-reflexive text would be a gross understatement. It is a novel about novels, a story about storytelling, a book about the reading and the writing of books, whose characters are only readers and writers. To be exact, there is, exceptionally, one Non Reader, whose character status is signaled by the capital *N* and capital *R*; there is as well, though unremarked by the text, a non-writer (I'll let you guess who the non-writer is). In short, this is a text about textuality, a piece of writing about the process of writing; and we are never for a moment allowed to forget that we are, at that very moment, reading it. It tells of other books that we have read and of the other books Calvino has written. It tells us how we read, what we do while reading, what we want as readers, as well as what the writer wants, how he writes, what he does while writing, and so forth. What HE wants, I said: because the writer, there is no doubt, is male. The readers may also be women; in fact, it is necessary for the writer that at least one Reader be female (I will return to this interesting idea later on), but the Writer or the Author is only and always male.

At a certain point, halfway through his journey in pursuit of the elusive book(s) he is dying to read—a pursuit which coincides with his pursuit of the Woman Reader (la Lettrice, or, in Weaver's excellent translation, the Other Reader)—the hero of the story, i.e., the Reader himself, encounters two strange types, who are also pursuing the Woman Reader. As one can easily surmise, these two new characters are figures or representations of the contemporary writer: one is "the famous Irish writer Silas Flannery," a successful author of best-sellers, whose name and works more than suggest Ian Fleming grafted onto Sean Connery (I opt against the other, linguistically possible but otherwise improbable, combination of Silas Marner and Flannery O'Connor). The other is an imposter, a counterfeiter of manuscripts, who under the guise of literary agent and translator of novels from foreign languages fills the literary market with apocrypha and fakes; his name, Hermes Marana, is a wink to his allegorical status as Hermes, the Olympian trickster who deceives even Apollo with his song, Hermes the eternal gambler and the god of travelers, who takes mortals across the last frontier.

This Hermes Marana, the trans-lator (to translate, etymologically, is to carry beyond, to convey, to transport elsewhere), whose letters arrive from the four corners of the world bearing stamps that never correspond to the countries they are mailed from, is supposedly promoting the latest work of

Silas Flannery, the hot author of best-sellers. But in fact he's not. The very soul of mystification, he is intent on falsifying absolutely everything and creating a babelic confusion of titles, names of authors, pseudonyms, translations, original languages and countries, chapters, endings and beginnings. In short, he embodies the author-function, or, better, stands for it, for he never actually appears as a character in the novel but is merely, and constantly, referred to. The Reader never meets him, much as he tries, and thinks of him with burning jealousy because he suspects that the Woman Reader is very much taken by this personage. Marana is, the Reader thinks,

the invisible rival who came constantly between him and Ludmilla [the Other Reader], the silent voice that speaks to her through books, this ghost with a thousand faces and faceless, all the more elusive since for Ludmilla authors are never incarnated in individuals of flesh and blood, they exist for her only in published pages, the living and the dead both are there always ready to communicate with her, to amaze her, and Ludmilla is always ready to follow them, in the fickle, carefree relations one can have with incorporeal persons. How is it possible to defeat not the authors but the functions of the author? (p. 159)

Always, the Reader thinks, Ermes Marana “dreamed of a literature made entirely of apocrypha, of false attributions, of imitations and counterfeits and pastiches.” Briefly, Marana is the genius of simulation, in Baudrillard's terms, the postmodern artist in the age of media implosion, the age of the infinite multiplication of discourses; the writer poised on the rim of the black hole of meaning, as it were.

The other figure of the writer, Silas Flannery, is one generation older and still sits on the late-modernist “abyss” of meaning, so to speak. “How well would I write if I were not here!” he cries out.

If I were only a hand, a severed hand that grasps a pen and writes . . . . Who would move this hand? The anonymous throng? The spirit of the times? The collective unconscious? I do not know. It is not in order to be the spokesman for something definable that I would like to erase myself. Only to transmit the writable that waits to be written, the tellable that nobody tells. Perhaps the woman I observe with the spyglass knows what I should write [you guessed it again: the woman he's watching is Ludmilla, the Woman Reader]; or, rather, *she does not know it*, because she is in fact waiting for me to write what *she does not know*; but what she knows for certain is her waiting, the void that my words should fill. (p. 171; emphasis in the text)

This vision of woman as passive capacity, receptivity, readiness to receive—a womb waiting to be fecundated by words (*his* words), a void ready to be filled with meanings, or elsewhere a blank page awaiting insemination by the writer's pen—is a notorious cliché of Western literary writing. In its most recent version, it is the hymen, the figure of deconstruction and

Derrida's model of the textual operation: the hymen which represents dissemination, the dispersal of meaning effected by the writer's style or stylus or spur (have it anyway you want it).

This, then, explains the unusual and intriguing fact that for Calvino's Writer it is necessary to have a Woman Reader, a privilege we are unaccustomed to, except in those particular genres of "feminine literature" written specifically for women, such as Harlequin romances or *romanzi rosa*. But Calvino is not Louis L'Amour. So we're at first intrigued, until we realize that in this book reading, like writing, is a function of desire, literally. The pursuit of the book's ending corresponds to the pursuit of the unattainable love object, narrative closure is impeded by *écriture*, the dispersal of meaning, writing as *différance*; and the pleasure of the text is infiltrated or intercut with the *jouissance* of the text. More simply put, as the American critic Robert Scholes once suggested, the archetype of this fiction is the male sexual act.

Thus, like the other privileges granted to women, this one—the essential role that Woman appears to have in men's creative writing—is double-edged. We begin to glimpse it early in the story, when we first meet Lotaria, the bad sister (the "mirror image," Calvino says) of Ludmilla the Woman Reader. Lotaria, as her Teutonic name heavily hints, is the Non-Feminine Woman. Indeed, she is the feminist militant who doesn't read novels simply for the pleasure of reading but cannot help analyzing and debating them. (You begin to see where my identification lies.) In particular, when first introduced, Lotaria is leading a seminar at the University, and discussing a novel (in German translation) entitled *Without Fear of Wind or Vertigo*. She is described thus:

a girl . . . with a long neck and a bird's face, a steady, bespectacled gaze, a great clump of curly hair; she is dressed in a loose tunic and tight pants. . . . Crowding behind Lotaria is the vanguard of a phalanx of young girls with limpid, serene eyes, slightly alarming eyes, perhaps because they are too limpid and serene. (p. 73)

Clearly, Lotaria and her comrades are the Amazons, a recurrent figure in Calvino's fiction. But here, to the threat the narrator reads in their eyes (Why are they *too* limpid? Too serene for what?), another feature is added: a hard, ironic voice. This is a feature that in Italian literature since Pavese (who obsessively attributed it to his harsh, cold, domineering female characters) has come to denote symbolic castration. You might say I'm overreading. I am not. Let me offer two proofs, both textual, that is to say, two pieces of internal evidence.

First, in talking to Lotaria, who in this book represents the Critical (Woman) Reader (she is writing a thesis on Silas Flannery and uses elec-



tronic instruments for content analysis), our hero the (male) Reader is addressed by Calvino as follows:

Again you feel the sensation you felt when the paper knife revealed the facing white pages. . . . You are dazed, contemplating that whiteness cruel as a wound. (pp. 44, 42)

Two paragraphs earlier, the text asserted that

the pleasures dervied from the use of a paper knife are tactile, auditory, visual, and especially mental. Progress in reading is preceded by an act that traverses the material solidity of the book to allow you access to its incorporeal substance. *Penetrating* among the pages from below, *the blade vehemently moves upward*, opening a *vertical cut* in a flowing succession of *slashes* that one by one *strike the fibers* and mow them down. . . . [It goes on, but you get the idea.] (p. 42; emphasis added)

Obviously, when this orgasmic process is abruptly interrupted by a blank page, the Reader, (post)modern Oedipus, is dazzled and blinded by the “whiteness cruel as a wound.” It is, recognizably, one of the classic “Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes” described at length by Freud.

The second piece of internal evidence that Lotaria, the critical feminist reader, is ipso facto non-feminine (that is, masculine or, in harsher words, castrating) is toward the end of the book, when the hero’s adventures take him to Ataguitania, a fictional country of Latin America; and there among revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries, among military dictatorships and censorship experts with electronic reading machines and text processors, he meets her again as Sheila, the computer programmer who, his captors tell him, “will *insert* the program we want” (p. 217; emphasis added). Indeed she does, and as the printout of yet another novel begins to unfurl, this Sheila-Lotaria, the Feminist Revolutionary/Counterrevolutionary, actually attempts . . . to rape him. Fortunately, we’re told, they’re interrupted by the flash of a bulb and the click of a camera, which, the text remarks, “devour the whiteness of your convulsed, superimposed nudity” (p. 219).

In short, Lotaria, the bad sister and mirror image of Ludmilla, is the negative image of Woman, the *unheimlich* double of a female Dorian Gray. She is the woman reader we shouldn’t be. Or so the text tries to convince us. For, whether because of male narcissism, blinding homophobia, or a rather shocking cultural naiveté in a writer so sophisticated otherwise, Calvino seems unaware that there are women readers—let alone the Amazons of old—who simply have no interest in men or men’s desire; or who, while sharing Lotaria’s militant and critical disposition, would not waste their revolutionary energy on raping or castrating.

But let us turn to the true heroine, Ludmilla, the Woman Reader desired and pursued by Reader and Writer alike, and in the end attained, captured, and safely married off to the hero. Because there is an ending to this story, after all. Whether intentionally or not, I do not know, Calvino appropriates the famous ending of *Jane Eyre*, “Reader, I married him,” and rewrites it to fit his plan: “Reader, you married her.” Only, in compliance with the current liberal ideology of gender equality, he writes: “Now you are man and wife, Reader and Reader.” As if that fooled anyone.

Like her sister, Ludmilla also first appears among the bookshelves, on page 29,

looking among the Penguin Modern Classics, running a lovely and determined finger over the pale aubergine-colored spines. Huge, swift eyes, complexion of good tone and good pigment, a richly waved haze of hair. And so the Other Reader makes her happy entrance into your field of vision, Reader, or rather, into the field of your attention; or, rather, you have entered a magnetic field from whose attraction you cannot escape. (p. 29)

With accurate symmetry, as he devotes chapter 9 to Lotaria (a chapter featuring the one sex scene of the novel), so he devotes chapter 7 to Ludmilla, and for six pages gives the Woman Reader the honor of the second-person pronoun, of being addressed as “you”—of being, that is, the protagonist. Meanwhile, the hero, the male Reader, now referred to as “he,” walks around “inspecting” her apartment. The text speaks to the Woman Reader, thus:

What are you like, Other Reader? It is time for this book in the second person to address itself no longer to a general male you, perhaps brother and double of a hypocrite I, but directly to you who appeared already in the second chapter as the Third Person necessary for the novel to be a novel, for something to happen between that male Second Person and the female Third, for something to take form, develop, or deteriorate according to the phases of human events. . . . Let us see, Other Reader, if the book can succeed in drawing a true portrait of you, beginning with the frame and enclosing you from every side, establishing the outlines of your form. . . . To understand this, our Reader [the male Reader again] knows that the first step is to visit the kitchen. (pp. 141–42)

The text then goes on to comment that “your” relationship with objects is “a relationship with the physicality of things, not with an intellectual or affective idea” (p. 143); it notes “a certain aesthetic tendency” among the utensils, and condescends to appreciate the fact that “your” few books do not make up a library: “they are not very numerous,” but they are a “living part” of your space, which “you enjoy handling, seeing around you,” ready for immediate consumption (p. 146).

By the end of his search of the apartment, the male Reader has become again the “you”: “Don’t believe that the book is losing sight of you, Reader,” Calvino feels the need to reassure him, since the second-person discourse has shifted to the Woman for all of six pages. And, to reimburse him for his temporary loss of narrative status, the text gives him a bonus: when the Other Reader comes home, shortly after, he succeeds in getting her into bed. A lyrical ellipsis follows—similar to the fade to black that in classical cinema conventionally stands for the sexual act, the consummation of love, and occurs immediately after the first serious kiss. In this ellipsis, the equation of reading and lovemaking is played out through the topos of the body as text. It begins:

Ludmilla, now you are being read. Your body is being subjected to a systematic reading. . . . And you, too, O Reader, are meanwhile an object of reading. (p. 155)

The reading of each other’s bodies (or, as Calvino wittily says, “of that concentrate of mind and body which lovers use to go to bed together”) is an equal opportunity, leading to conjugal harmony: “the fullnesses and the voids compenetrates, the two of you a single subject” (p. 154).

That sounds all very wonderful. But what of the sisterly symmetry, what of Lotaria and the sex scene with her? There, it is clearly a matter of sex—crude, violent, and conventionally “erotic.” There are no ellipses or parentheses. Her body is described as she undresses out of successive sets of clothes in a kind of futuristic striptease, as if she were a simulacrum, a female android; and the description is in the language of glossy, softcore porn (p. 218). Nothing lyrical or philosophical about it. Why is it so?

Before “you” rush to say that, obviously, it’s the old story of wife and mistress, chaste bride versus licentious whore; or that Calvino’s allegory of desire merely updates the classical allegory of sacred and profane love, let me caution against too quick an answer. Calvino, as I have already pointed out, is not Louis L’Amour. The stakes of his text are higher, for it does not simply inscribe received popular wisdom but actually engages contemporary theories of signification. It may have occurred to you, my readers, that one of the charms of Ludmilla—the book’s most original character, according to several male reviewers—is that, besides not being interested in authors of flesh and blood (what she loves is the Author-function, as you recall), she positively refuses to have anything to do with writing. She won’t even go to the publishing company’s office in order not to cross the boundary between those who make books and those who read them. She wants to remain a reader, “on principle.” Thus, she takes no part in her sister’s critical or intellectual activities and does not like the “feminist” novel

discussed in the women's seminar. Her notion of the ideal novel is, naturally enough, an organic one:

The novel I would most like to read . . . should have as its driving force only the desire to narrate, to pile stories upon stories, without trying to impose a philosophy of life on you, simply allowing you to observe its own growth, like a tree, an entangling, as if of branches and leaves. (p. 92)

Now, we know from Lacan as well as Calvino that writing is the masculine activity par excellence, because it exists in the order of the symbolic where language, the circulation of signifiers, and signification itself are subject to the name of the Father, to the structure of symbolic castration in which the phallus is the signifier of desire. Writing thus presupposes possession of the phallus—symbolically speaking, of course; and for a woman to write is to usurp a place, a discursive position, she does not have by nature or by culture. Hence, in our allegory, Lotaria's "masculinity," which the attempted rape is there to signify beyond a doubt.

Calvino then seems to side with Lacan, abandoning Freud, who—let it be said to his credit—did entertain the possibility of symbolic bisexuality, of an ambiguity in the female subject that would mean that women are not just the Other, the complementary opposite of man, voids and fullnesses compenetrating, but in effect different, heterogeneous, not quite comparable. And that implies a concept of gender asymmetry, a possible new way of understanding social relations, on which only feminist theorists are currently working (and only a small number of feminist theorists, at that).

If Calvino is no longer with Freud, neither is he quite with Derrida, whose "affirmative woman" is rather more like Lotaria, one who masquerades, simulates, pretends to be what she is not, and is only what she pretends. But alas, Lotaria is also masculine, castrating, and so she falls short of Derrida's Ideal Woman. The character in this book who comes closest to that, actually, is Ermes Marana; in fact, Derrida's "woman" is not a woman but a figure of writing, a question not of gender but of genre, style, not difference but *différance*. However, Marana doesn't make it either, for as it turns out, all of his masquerades and machinations, deconstructions and simulations had one very old-fashioned purpose: they were all for the love of Ludmilla.

Finally, therefore, one is tempted to read this text "aberrantly," as another author of postmodern fiction, Umberto Eco, would say. One is tempted to read Lotaria as the true postmodern writer/reader, the representative of a postmodernism of resistance who successfully escapes not only capture by the narrative (she vanishes from the text after the sex scene) but also, and more important, captivity in the conjugal bed. To read Lotaria so, however, one would have—precisely—to "rewrite" her, which in a sense

is what I've done, with a bona fide postmodern gesture. And so it is time to come back to the question of postmodernism.

In another essay of the volume *The Anti-Aesthetic*, an essay on postmodern art, Craig Owens discusses the work of Mary Kelly, Laurie Anderson, Martha Rosler, Barbara Kruger, and others. These artists are engaged, he argues, in the double process of “deconstructing femininity” (deconstructing the received notions and images of Woman), and “investigating” not only the representation of Woman but “what representation *does* to women” (p. 71). However, he laments, in most critical discussions of their work, the issue of gender is carefully avoided; and, needless to say, these artists are considered rather marginal. On the other hand, he states, the “official” artistic production (by men, that is) seems “engaged in a collective act of disavowal,” whether it simulates mastery or it contemplates and advertises the artist’s loss of it. And this Owens attributes to the emergent voices of the conquered, “Third-World nations, the ‘revolt of nature’ and the women’s movement.”

Symptoms of our recent loss of mastery are everywhere apparent in cultural activity today—nowhere more so than in the visual arts. The modernist project of joining forces with science and technology for the transformation of the environment after rational principles of function and utility (Productivism, the Bauhaus) has long since been abandoned; what we witness in its place is a desperate, often hysterical attempt to recover some sense of mastery via the resurrection of heroic large-scale easel painting and monumental cast-bronze sculpture—mediums themselves identified with the cultural hegemony of Western Europe. Yet contemporary artists are able at best to *simulate* mastery, to manipulate its signs; since in the modern period mastery was invariably associated with human labor, aesthetic production has degenerated today into a massive deployment of the signs of artistic labor—violent, “impassioned” brushwork, for example. (p. 67)

A massive deployment of the signs of writing is certainly an apt description of Calvino’s book. All the elements of fiction are there: the nuts and bolts of storytelling; the chassis and the engine, narrative frame and driving force of narrative; down to the rear-view mirror and vinyl seat covers of the novel as desiring machine. They are all there, if a bit scrambled, superimposed onto the story and placed in evidence on the surface of the text; a “rhetoric of fiction” added on to the fiction.

A massive deployment of the signs of writing, then, rather than “an itinerant toward silence” in the manner of a Beckett, is what constitutes this text: not the impossibility of expression, the absence, the traces, the shredding and dissolution of language into silence, but instead the massive presence, the concrete materiality, the pressure, the multiplication of words and meanings. Unless this is, in fact, that “implosion” prophesied by

Baudrillard, the mad rush of both modernism and postmodernism together into the black hole.

Yet, it is this very display of the signs of writing, the signs of the labor of writing which, Calvino has said over and over, is a labor of love—it is this labor of love that seduces us and draws us to him even as he will not grant us equal access to writing; even as he waves the specter of Lotaria the android before us, women who read *and* write, and who love to write as much as he did.

Why is that necessary? Why has the women's movement of the seventies, which after all demanded little more than equal access to cultural production and self-determination, engendered the neoconservative reaction that we see all around us, and that leads so many writers, artists, and theorists to employ their labor and their talent in order to re-contain women in male-centered systems? Just as the female reader here is finally re-contained within the frame of the book as merely a character in a man's fiction, reduced to a portrait, an image, a figure of the male imaginary? Because, I suggest, Woman is still the ground of representation, even in postmodern times. Paradoxically, for all the efforts spent to re-contain real women in the social, whether by economic or ideological means, by threats or by seduction, it is the absent Woman, the one pursued in dreams and found only in memory or in fiction, that serves as the guarantee of masculinity, anchoring male identity and supporting man's creativity and self-representation. Just as it was with Flaubert, *Madame Bovary c'est lui*.

So here is the modernist Calvino emerging in the palimpsest of the postmodern text, reappearing in the rewriting of his own modernist works, those works where the love adventure was "an inner movement, a state of mind, an itinerary toward silence." I want to conclude by referring back to another story of *Gli amori difficili* entitled "L'avventura di due sposi" (The Adventure of a Young Married Couple). Again, the comparison with the two Readers of *If on a winter's night a traveler* suggests to me that Owens may be right; and that if Calvino, in rewriting his own texts, feels the necessity on the one hand to engage or deal with feminism, and on the other to put us in our place, that may mean that "the discourse of the others" is indeed challenging, disturbing, or threatening the status quo.

In "L'avventura di due sposi," two young married factory workers have very little time to spend together. He works the night shift, she the daytime shift. When he comes home at seven in the morning, her alarm clock has just gone off, and by the time she gets home in the evening with the shopping and they've eaten dinner, he's off to work. Coming home to a cold house in the morning, he gets into her side of the bed, still unmade and still warm. When she goes to sleep at night, lying on the bed he's just pulled up, she stretches a leg toward her husband's side feeling for his warmth. But

every time, Calvino wrote, “she realized that her own side was warmer; so evidently Arturo too had slept there, and she felt a great love for him.”<sup>6</sup>

This, I would say, rather than Lotaria’s matter-of-fact sexual aggressiveness or Ludmilla’s unenthusiastic acquiescence, is an insightful rendering of the sexual relation between a woman and a man who love each other.

### Notes

1. Italo Calvino, *Gli amori difficili* (Torino: Einaudi, 1970), p. 47. This and all subsequent quotations from this work are in my translation. It may be noted that *Difficult Loves* is the title of a recently published selection of Calvino’s short stories. Eight of the thirteen stories originally included by Calvino in *Gli amori difficili* are now in *Difficult Loves* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1984), in William Weaver’s translation, grouped in a section under the subheading of “Stories of Love and Loneliness.”

2. Italo Calvino, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), from the original *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (Torino: Einaudi, 1979).

3. Calvino, *Gli amori difficili*, p. ix.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

5. Hal Foster, “Postmodernism: A Preface,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), p. ix. All further references to this work are given in the text.

6. *Gli amori difficili*, p. 90. This story is not included in *Difficult Loves*.