The Reader Defied: Text as Adversary in Calvino’s *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*

Calvino’s *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* is an undeniable masterpiece of post-modern text production. A hyper-reflexive inquiry into the problematic of writing and reading texts, it wallows in the narrative strategies of self as it traces the a-linear and labyrinthine path leading from poetic inspiration to execution. By drawing attention to the ragged seams of narrative construction, Calvino foregrounds the difficulty encountered in patching together a textual mosaic from the familiar remnants of literary precedents. Here, plots, themes and protagonists, even narrative styles imitate those in texts of the pasts; story lines do not project forward into imaginary time and space but regress into the realm of literature and literary theories. Indeed, more than most texts, Calvino’s *Se una notte* sets out to expose the text’s projected plenitude as but a clever *trompe l’oeil* that masks a hollow void below.¹ Not insignificantly, references to the void abound, and none more tellingly symbolic than in the incipit entitled “Senza temere il vento e la vertigine” where the narrator is seized momentarily by the fear that “ogni vuoto continua nel vuoto, ogni strapiombo anche minimo dà su un altro strapiombo, ogni voragine sbocca nell’abisso infinito” (82). Taking the bridge as a metaphor for textuality and the void as a metaphor for the non-reality it narrates, *Se una notte* reveals itself to be an unabashedly self-reflexive text consumed with celebrating the autotelic nature of its own narrative production.

To classify Calvino’s text as but one more example of post-modern self-reflexivity, however, is to obscure its more innovative wrestle with a more intriguing and original problematic: the increasingly adversarial relationship between artists and their consumers. In *Se una notte*, the conflict between an average reader (Lettore), who longs to be carried swiftly along a narrative current towards climax, and a writer whose ambling and directionless zigzag to nowhere appears designed to frustrate deliberately his reader’s efforts, is the novel’s structuring principle. After colliding relentlessly in both the outer frame and within the embedded incipits, these conflicting desires appear to find resolution in the final tableau where the Lettore is united in marriage to his female counterpart, and in possession of a whole novel that he is about to finish (“Ancora un momento. Sto per finire *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* di Italo Calvino” [263]). If we
probe beneath the harmonious surface, however, we will find that initial tensions between reader and writer have not been resolved. The significance of the final metamorphosis of the narrative “you” that opens the novel into the “I” that closes it is tantalizingly broached (but never fully exploited) by Mariolina Salvatori. However, the fact that it is the reader rather than the writer who signals the novel’s termination (and this in the absence of internal textual corroboration, it must be added) invites speculation as to whether the novel’s significance resides in the Lettore’s triumphant success or in the author’s silence and withdrawal.

It is certainly not without significance that the codeword destined to unleash the narrative involves Zeno of the legendary paradox (“Ah, ha vinto Zenone di Elea!” [17]). Like Zeno who attempted mathematically to disprove spatial finitude, Calvino sets out to conflate \textit{ad infinitum} the narrative experience, to let the text power ever forward on a directionless path to no readily discernible point of destination. From Calvino’s perspective, the ideal narrative is one which negates the very necessity of terminality, one in which narratives engender other narratives in an infinite sequence of unfolding plots that coalesce and mutate into a kaleidoscope of intertextual fragments. For this writer, the joy of narrative is the act of narration itself; it resides in the leisurely encircling of a non-existent center, in the nonchalance of textual drift, in the relentless deferral of completion, in the foreplay of textual intrigue.

\textit{Se una notte} inscribes the artist’s fantasy for unimpeded narrative potency, the imagined ability to pulsate ever forward without impediment or ultimate goal in an incessant and futile endeavor to postpone the inevitable void of unannounced existence. Indeed, central to its pleasure is its resistance to closure, the persistent deflection of any and all indices that might give the sense of an impending ending. Unlimited narrative potential, it is averred in “Guarda in basso dove l’ombra s’addensa,” is a sign of “una vera ricchezza solida e estesa” (109). The dovetailing of narratives provides proof of the writer’s imaginative potential, the tangible evidence of his narrative mastery.

Narrative closure, on the other hand, suggests the opposite: the cessation of creative energy, the vacuity of satiation, the morbidity of expiration (“l’abisso egocentrico del romanzo suicida che finisce per sprofondare dentro se stesso” [70]). Voluntary termination, after all, is an act of self-destruction, the moment when the contrived and articulated reality of the text collapses finally into the void over which it hovered precariously. For the writer it constitutes the moment when he/she succumbs to the death that is non-narration, to the relinquishing of voice. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, to find the suggestion of death at the close of several of the early incipits. The first comes to a close with the news of Jan’s death; the second with the announcement of the death of yet another Kauderer by the Ozkarts; “Senza temere il vento e la vertigine” ends with Alex Zinnober’s discovery of a document charging him with treason and sentencing him to die; “Guarda in basso dove l’ombra s’addensa” ends with JoJo’s burial.

In later incipits, however, there is an attempt to counter impending doom with
scenes of last minute rescues. Marjorie Stubbs is found and released at the end of “In una rete di linee che s’allacciano”; Elfrida rescues her husband in “In una rete di linee che s’intersecano”; Franzisca forestalls apocalyptic erasure in “Quale storia laggiù attende la fine.” There is, then, in Se una notte, an inverse proportion between images of death and narrative terminality, as if Calvino, obsessed with the necessity of termination at the outset, sought increasingly to postpone the inevitable as the novel progressed, and like Scherazade, narrate tirelessly in order to avoid the end.²

Calvino’s aversion to closure finds reinforcement in his character-writer’s stated preference for openings. Silas Flannery insists that the joy of narrative resides in beginnings rather than endings, in that moment when the narrative is pure potential, when the possibilities are infinite, when the writer’s power over both reader and narrative is total:

Ogni volta che mi siedo qui leggo “Era una notte buia e tempestosa . . .” e l’impersonalità di quell’incipit sembra aprire il passaggio da un mondo all’altro, dal tempo e spazio del qui e ora al tempo e spazio della pagina scritta; sento l’esaltazione d’un inizio al quale potranno seguire svolgimenti molteplici, inesauribili . . . (176)

Vorreï poter scrivere un libro che fosse solo un incipit, che mantenesse per tutta la sua durata la potenzialità dell’inizio, l’attesa ancora senza oggetto. (177)

Once that first scenario is established, however, the range of options narrows rapidly, dissipating the writer’s imagined omnipotence. Once begun, the text seems to acquire a momentum of its own, a power the writer is at times unable to control. By way of example, we need only look at Silas Flannery’s outline for an upcoming book. The sketch he offers parallels closely the plot of Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore (197-98); one might assume, in fact, that Flannery’s narrative project is the finished product we have in hand. If it is, however, the final version contains an important plot development that Flannery did not intend. Along with the male reader who meets a companion female reader with a sister, and along with the series of incipits that break off at crucial moments, there is the marriage between the Lettore and the Lettrice that Flannery intended specifically to avoid. Indeed, the desire to keep Ludmilla away from the Lettore was the reason he created the sister in the first place. It appears, then, that what the writer intends to express is not necessarily what is actually expressed at all, a problem encountered early on by the traveler in incipit one (“cosìché più cerco di tornare al momento zero da cui sono partito più me ne allontano . . .” [16]).

Even within the individual incipits, the web of narrative so painstakingly planned results in entrapping the writer himself. Marilyn Orr (214-15) notes that the narrator himself becomes entrapped as character in another’s story. Likewise, discourse, too, here has a way of engulfing the enunciator and distancing rather than narrowing the gulf between actual and intended message. Indeed, Richard
Grigg (50) avers that the camouflage of language, that is to say, language that screens and deforms the reality one is attempting to convey, is what allows the writer to escape the tyranny of the subject. It is certainly a textual commonplace to find characters entangled within their own rhetorical webs. Marana's elaborately laid plans contribute ultimately to his defeat ("Marana finisce per lanciarsi in affabulazioni sempre più frenetiche e imbrogliate" [116]). Mr. Okeda's houseguest finds himself routinely embarrassed by explanations intended to clarify ("A tutte queste mie riflessioni, il signor Okeda è rimasto in silenzio, come fa sempre quando mi capita di parlare troppo e finisco per non saper più districarmi da un ragionamento aggrovigliato" [203]).

This discursive entrapment is paralleled by a number of physical self-entrapments wherein "masters" become unwilling servants in turn. Like the hero-traveler in the first incipit who bemoans his servile state:

è chiaro che dipendo da altri, non ho l'aria d'uno che viaggia per una sua faccenda privata o che conduce degli affari in proprio: mi si direbbe piuttosto un esecutore, una pedina in una partita molto complicata, una piccola rotella d'un grosso ingranaggio, tanto piccola che non dovrebbe neppure vedersi (15);

and like the character in the final incipit who finds he is powerless to reconfigure a vanished reality ("Con terrore crescente comincio a rendermi conto della verità: il mondo che io credevo cancellato da una decisione della mia mente, che potevo revocare in qualsiasi momento, era finito davvero" [252]), Calvino's characters discover routinely that they are at the mercy of forces they believed they had mastered. By way of example, Alex Zinnober is discovered to be the very traitor he was hunting (89); the catoptric room designed to secure imprisons the man who so painstakingly created it.

The text is not the only force subjugating the writer, however. Notes Robert Perroud (244), the work reflects Calvino's concerns about authorial dependency on readers' subjective responses. Clearly, the writer-figure in this work is portrayed as being ever at the mercy of readers who demand, among other things, timely closure and compelling narratives. Compounding the problem are the fickle tastes of readers (exemplified by Ludmilla's shifting attitudes about the "ideal" novel) and readers' tendency to stereotype characters. In "Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork," the narrator derides the reader's inability to develop an evolutionary perspective:

di modo che ogni personaggio riceve già una prima definizione da questo gesto o attributo, non solo ma si desidera anche di sapere di più, come se l'arricciaburro già determinasse il carattere e il destino di chi nel primo capitolo si presenta maneggiando un arricciaburro, e già tu Lettore ti preparassi, ogni volta che nel corso del romanzo si ripresenterà quel personaggio, a esclamare: "Ah, è quello dell'arricciaburro!," impegnando così l'autore ad attribuirgli atti e accadimenti che s'intonino con quell'arricciaburro iniziale. (34-35)
For Silas Flannery, readers are vampires sucking the life out of the writer’s belabored prose (170), and when afflicted with a bad case of writer’s block, he obsesses over how to please the female reader he sees through his spyglass:

mi dico che il risultato dello sforzo innaturale cui mi sottopongo scrivendo dev’essere il respiro di questa lettrice, l’operazione del leggere diventata un processo naturale, la corrente che porta le frasi a sfiorare il filtro della sua attenzione, a fermarsi per un attimo prima d’essere assorbite dai circuiti della sua mente e sparire trasformandosi nei suoi fantasmi interiori, in ciò che in lei è più personale e incomunicabile. (169-70)

Elsewhere we learn that, in order to better satisfy readers, publication houses have consulted machines designed to gauge reader satisfaction, thereby enabling them to increase book revenues. As events at the publishing firm underscore, books have become a corporate venture, a collective enterprise that responds more to market fluctuations than personal inspiration. Motivation is supplied by high-paying sponsors who pay to see their products hawked in print. Books are written on demand, and follow the trends dictated by consumers (“Come potrai tenerle dietro, a questa donna che legge sempre un altro libro, in più di quello che ha sotto gli occhi, un libro che non c’è ancora ma che, dato che lei lo vuole, non potrà non esserci?” [71]).

The writer’s distaste for closure is not shared by the Lettore, for whom the promise of an ending, of seeing the narrative culminate in some logical sequence of anticipated events, remains an unshakeable expectation. The Lettore craves closure, the moment of greatest narrative intensity, the moment when anticipations are fulfilled, when desire is satiated. Without the reasonable expectation of completion, the reader has no desire to begin at all, as his violent over-reaction to the defective book hyperbolically illustrates (26-27). Termination is the hero-reader’s most pressing preoccupation; even in his first exchange with Ludmilla, the Lettore already has climax on his mind (“Speriamo, — dici, — d’aver preso una copia buona, stavolta, impaginata bene, che non restiamo interrotti sul più bello, come succede . . . [30-31]). Questing narrative closure that threatens to elude him, the Lettore crosses continents in search of books with endings and ultimately succeeds in finding and finishing one.

The conflict established between writers who valorize the seductive pleasures of beginnings and readers who hunger for climax is allegorized in a number of sexual encounters between dominatrix women and their reluctant male participants, an allegorization that provides yet another dimension to the sexual/textual relationship uncovered by Teresa de Lauretis. Irina emasculates the gallant and romantic Alex Zinnober, reducing him to sexual servitude (88). In “Guarda in basso dove l’ombra s’addensa,” Bernadette forces Ruedi to assist her in achieving the sexual climax he inadvertently interrupted:

Quanto a me, preso così di sorpresa, con le reazioni fisiche che andavano per conto loro preferendo evidentemente d’obbedire a lei piuttosto che al mio animo esterre-
Madame Miyagi entraps her student houseguest in an aggressive sexual stranglehold (207-08). A nymphomanic Sheila-Alfonsina-Gertrude-Lotaria attempts to have her way with the Lettore (“Così dicendo Sheila-Alfonsina-Gertrude s’è buttata su di te, t’ha strappato di dosso i panni del carcerato, le vostre membra nude si mescolano sotto gli armadi delle memorie elettroniche” [220]).

The link between sexuality and textuality is established openly virtually from the outset. Indeed, the sexual dimension to the act of reading is the novel’s controlling metaphor, an observation confirmed by Nella Cotrupi’s observation that the quest for an authentic text neatly parallels the quest for sexual fulfillment (282-83). For the Lettore, the seductive foreplay of narrative has penetration and climax as its desired and fundamental goal. The book in fact is nothing but a convenient pretext designed to facilitate the sexual conquest of Ludmilla:

Certo, anche questo girare intorno al libro, leggerci intorno prima di leggerci dentro, fa parte del piacere del libro nuovo, ma come tutti i piaceri preliminari ha una sua durata ottimale se si vuole che serva a spingere verso il piacere più consistente della consumazione dell’atto, cioè della lettura del libro. (9)

The writer, however, holds a less goal-oriented view and during the love scene between the Lettore and Lettrice, offers the startling affirmation that climax is not necessarily terminal, and may in fact be just another beginning:

Vi si può riconoscere una direzione, il percorso verso un fine, in quanto tende a un climax, e in vista di questo fine dispone fasi ritmiche, scansioni metriche, ricorrenze di motivi. Ma il fine è proprio il climax? O la corsa verso quel fine è contrastata da un’altra spinta che s’affanna controcorrente, a risalire gli attimi, al recupero del tempo? (156)

This ambivalence towards textual closure, like the male character’s resistance to sexual climax, is linked perhaps to a discomfort with the negative connotations surrounding endings in general. Disintegration and decomposition, the abrupt loss of creative potency, the non-functional impotence of spent energy are associations that males and writers logically find displeasing. In consequence, despite the commonality underscored between the pleasurable acts of reading and lovemaking cited in the text (“l’aspetto in cui l’amplesso e la lettura s’assomigliano di più è che al loro interno s’aprono tempi e spazi diversi dal tempo e dalllo spazio misurabili” [156]), a less poetic similarity can also be discovered: both activities end with the disempowerment of the writer in one case, and the male lover in the second. After the textual/sexual act, the agent of creation is rendered useless and insignificant, and is left vulnerable to those “consumers” for whose benefit it was performed. The unstoppable narrative, then, can be viewed as a defensive strat-
eigy by which the writer refuses to relinquish power, a reluctance to leave the text in the hands of others wherein it cannot fail, as Nuccia Bencivenga asserts (11), to become “other.”

Conversely, the link between readers and sexual aggressiveness (characteristic of women more than men in Calvino’s text) is not likely to be a matter of pure coincidence. Since neither the principal writer in this text nor the male characters depicted therein seem particularly eager to finish the task at hand, external forces are required to move things along. Calvino’s climaxes all tend to depict impatient women in control of passive male subordinates. Alex Zinnober is very much in Irina’s power (“Cercavo di sfuggire addentrandomi con movimenti striscianti verso il centro della spirale dove le linee sussussiavano come serpenti seguendo il contorcersi delle membra d’Irina, snodate e inquiete, in una lenta danza in cui non è il ritmo che importa ma l’annodarsi e lo scioglcersi di linee serpentine” [88]). Bernadette, not Ruedi the Swiss, is in control of the sexual event (111). The young student so fond of ginkgo leaves is unable to escape Madame Miyagi’s seductive grasp (207). The Lettore falls victim to the sort of woman he rather dislikes (220).

In Calvino’s textual world, then, traditionally passive roles of reading and feminine sexuality assume active, if not controlling, postures. Just as women are responsible for controlling the sexual encounter, readers in general and the Lettore in particular dominate and control writers. And although Melissa Watts contends that the notion of reader supremacy is valid only if we read the text from a Barthesian perspective, that is to say, one that articulates the view that the birth of the reader is always at the death of the author (705), it bears repeating that it is the Lettore who pronounces the novel’s approaching termination, the final gesture of emasculation that began, in the interpretation of Teresa de Lauretis, with the Lettore’s lascivious joy in slicing open the book’s pages (138).3

What has ended, however, is less Calvino’s novel than an unhealthy rivalry between artist and reader for Ludmilla’s attention. The battle is won ultimately by the Lettore, whose victory represents a triumph of mundane reality over the literary artifact. The Lettore’s anti-aesthetic bias manifests itself repeatedly: his pleasure in reading is superficial and motivated by the promise of personal gain; his purchase of the novel signaled a materialistic desire for appropriation over pleasure (6); his reading attention span is limited (“Non è troppo lungo, per fortuna” [8]); his interest in locating a complete copy is directly related to his amorous pursuit of Ludmilla (“con la fragile scusa del libro” [31]). Upon winning her heart and hand in marriage, reading is marginalized to the status of night-time ritual. Worse yet, he corrupts Ludmilla, now domesticated and bored with what used to be her raison d’être and guiding passion (“Non sei stanco di leggere?” [262]). But if the text exposes the reader’s fundamental bad faith and anti-aesthetic egocentrism, it reveals no less the writer’s infidelity to artistic purity as well. Confirms Nuccia Bencivenga, both the reading and the writing of a book are falsifications:
In a word, it is the story of a desire: the desire to write a story and read it; the desire to tell and to be told, to explain and to get an explanation. And, it is also the story of the impossibility of writing such a story, or of reading it. (13-14)

Silas Flannery’s obsession with pleasing the female reader in the deck chair and his clumsy attempt to seduce Ludmilla suggest that he, too, is having difficulty sacrificing the needs of the desiring self to the platonic pursuit of art.4 Not unlike the sensual Lettore, the writer craves the more immediate pleasures of flattery and fame to the elusive goal of artistic perfection. Writing thus becomes a motivated strategy, a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself, and constitutes an exercise in the art of eternal seduction, the ability to shift the locus of desire ever forward, to hold out the promise of satiation that is never forthcoming. In the view of Carl D. Malmgren, the text creates a longing for the narrative beyond that never comes (114). Since unending narratives are the surest way to maintain Ludmilla’s interest, the writer remains more preoccupied with his narrative seductions than with perfecting his art.

In this respect, perhaps the reader’s victory can in fact be said to serve the long term needs of both the writer and his artistry. By removing the object of desire from the writer’s focus, the reader does in fact force the writer to channel his sublimated urges into the writing of a truly objective endeavor, a novel engendered, controlled and terminated, not by the need to please climax-minded readers but by the desire to satisfy the private urges of his own poetic impulse. Careless of aesthetic risk, the rejected writer will be free to represent “il mondo illeggibile, senza centro, senza io” (180) for readers who will focus on that text alone, for the textual pleasure involved therein, with no pretext beyond that of immediate sensory gratification, and with neither the desire nor demand for timely closure. That “ideal” reader is clearly neither the Lettore nor the Lettrice of Calvino’s text, but it might be one of the collective readers Calvino addresses but does not name, readers that the Lettore and the Lettrice were ostensibly drawn to represent.

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NOTES

1 On the notion of the void in Calvino’s work, see Evrard.
2 The avoidance of narrative closure, it is worth noting, proved a successful strategy for the Sultan as well. Fearing the moment when the Sultana stopped reading (and suspecting all along that his enemies were encoding secret messages inside the texts), the Sultan hired Ermes Marana to keep the Sultana supplied with ample reading matter. Since the Sultan recognized that once his wife finished a book, her renewed dissatisfaction with life might well prompt her to initiate revolutionary violence, Marana’s unfinished novels provided a perfect means to forestall any post-narrative malaise.
3 Luisa Guj, too, holds the opinion that it is the author, rather than the reader who remains in control (67). Her argument, that it is the reader who is held captive by the author and not
vice-versa, does not necessarily reject a Barthesian reading, however. There is still no ultimate meaning to be recovered, just the "pleasure of the text" in all its ambiguity. See relevant remarks related to these issues in Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (147) and in The Pleasure of the Text. Umberto Eco, too, elaborates on the problematic of open texts in The Role of the Reader (47-66).

This is expressly stated by Flannery, notes Luisa Guj (70). Flannery bemoans the writer's inability to be objective. The writer can't write the word, and must instead write the self. See also, Paul Harris (75) where it is stated that desire and storytelling are here indistinguishable.

WORKS CITED


