

## ITALO CALVINO

*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*  
Torino: Einaudi, 1979. Pp. 263.

With his last novel, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, Italo Calvino offers his literary public a clear and exceptionally coherent view of the fundamental elements of his poetics.

It is the story of two young lovers of literature who, having become involved in the reading of ten novels, find themselves forced to leave their venture unfinished because of a series of peculiar, unexpected difficulties which range all the way from simple typographical errors to the confiscation of books and the circulation of counterfeit texts.

This conscious appeal to a certain *poetics of incipit*, reminiscent of the *Arabian Nights*, is the pretext that enables Calvino to develop a complex metaliterary theme.

What appears immediately conspicuous in this novel is Calvino's semiotic world view, easily recognizable by readers familiar with his previous works. Exemplary of the Borgesian relationship of equivalence existing between book and universe and between words and things, 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. Thanks to a kind of persistent osmosis involving life and literature, the vicissitudes of the protagonists increase proportionally to those contained in the unfinished novels they begin to read and eventually abandon.

From the intricate plot within which frenetic Ariostesque pursuits tail-gate the scattered manuscripts, emerges another fundamental trait of Calvino's art: the recovery and reappraisal of language as a game seen as a reaction to the constricting efficiency of capitalistic productivism and as a liberating alternative (thanks to its inexhaustible possibilities of variation and permutation) to the sterile, mechanized, circumscribed preoccupations of contemporary men.

In his earlier production (from *Il visconte dimezzato* to *Le città invisibili*) Calvino had exploited to a large extent the dynamics of contrast between characters and situations: here he practically exhausts all its pos-

sibilities. The dialectical play at times involves the polarities author-reader, at times the young protagonists (man and woman, or two women with antithetical characteristics), at times the diverse types of authors (the tormented type and the prolific one), at times novels themselves, divided here into real and counterfeit, and finally the various contrasting codes of interpretation which progressively integrate one with the other. It thus becomes evident that literature—and life which it represents—is an organic whole of opposing elements that productively coexist and do not annihilate each other.

The structure of the novel can best be described as a series of reflections produced by mirrors that face each other, or as an equally complex set of Chinese puzzle boxes. In this manner Calvino constantly and deliberately manipulates the readers by shifting their focus of attention from a vertiginous illusion of totality to an equally exasperating illusion of nothingness. The ten different narrative voices heard in the reading of the novels within the novel, each being an elusive image of the other, an author who is present as different reflections of himself in the act of orchestrating all the dimensions of the incomplete stories, a reader who undergoes multiple metamorphoses, a polisemic code of interpretation that is asserted against univocal, dogmatic perspectives—all these expand to include the multiple and disparate aspects of the idea of being and the act of writing, and ultimately converge in a paradoxically fertile annihilation which generates an absolute openness towards hitherto inconceived possibilities.

In accordance with the principle of reversibility already clearly illustrated in his later novels, Calvino here focuses on what he considers the two fundamental dimensions of literature: its authenticity as a living entity (within which words can become themselves the things they designate), and its supreme artificiality, the sum-total of structural mechanisms, stylistic devices, the unstable relationship author-character-reader, the very limitations of the act of writing as a representational process. The author seems to appear everywhere in the novel but his manifold presence contributes only to blur out his image. The same is true of his characters who are ultimately reduced to pure *functions* and eliminated from the novel before they become crystallized into fixed forms or into mere autobiographical profiles. This principle of

reversibility leads naturally to the conclusion that to write means also to be written, that to read is equal to being read and that falsehood coincides with truth. It also follows that not being able to read a book to the end does not constitute the defeat of the reader as a consumer of literature; it is rather the greatest victory he can hope for. It means he can free himself from the dulling effects of traditional reading and approach the literary text with a reawakened sensitivity and a new openness of mind.

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### WOLFGANG ISER

*The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*  
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. Pp. 239. \$15.00.

*The Act of Reading*, which Wolfgang Iser describes as "a book of Germanic phenomenology," is an outgrowth of two earlier essays, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction" (German, 1970; English, 1971) and "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," the concluding chapter in *The Implied Reader* (German, 1972; English, 1974). If at times ponderous, labyrinthine, and puzzling, *The Act of Reading* is also genuinely exciting and is properly labeled by its publisher "an important and fundamental work." The impressive number of sources, German and English (not French), cited by Iser suggests that his work is in part a synthesis, though, of course, he argues against some of the points of his predecessors, such as Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, Simon O. Lesser, and Roman Ingarden. *The Act of Reading* is also another sign of the growing disenchantment with New Critical procedures and the seemingly endless "readings" or "interpretations" of novels: in his "Preface," Iser observes that "one task of a theory of aesthetic response is to facilitate intersubjective discussion of individual interpretations" and that "such an intention is a reaction to the spreading dissatisfaction arising out of the fact that text interpretation has increasingly become an end in itself."

Given Iser's terminology—"repertoire," "perspectives," "strategies," "horizon," "the wandering viewpoint," "protrusion," "retention," "perceptual *noema*," "ideation," "gaps" or "blanks," "vacancies," "theme-and-horizon structure," "negation," "negativity," "syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes," etc.—and the complexity of his schema, summarizing remarks will be especially inadequate. In any case, Iser is interested in describing "articulated reading moments" and more generally the interaction between a reader and a text, which is not a reflection of any given reality. (He is not concerned with retrospective views, surely the basis for most literary criticism.) It is this interaction which produces the aesthetic object, and the "meaning of a literary text" certainly is not a "detachable message" but rather "a dynamic happening." Such "a reader-oriented theory," Iser admits, "is from the very outset open to the criticism that it is a form of uncontrolled subjectivism"—and he continues to worry about "subjectivism" from time to time throughout the book. Very generally, Iser perceives within texts four "perspectives" (narrator, characters, plot, as well as "intended reader," "a sort of fictional inhabitant of the text") which are intermittent and never coincide or mesh, but which the "wandering viewpoint" of the reader does interweave. Also, "gaps" occur ("suspensions of connectability" between textual or perspective segments), and these stimulate the reader to "ideate": "By impeding textual coherence, the blanks transform themselves into stimuli for acts of ideation," that is, imaginative activity or production of meaning on the part of the reader. Though texts are inevitably "indeterminate," especially some modern ones, Iser also explains that "consistency-building is the indispensable basis for all acts of comprehension." Some of his most illuminating explanations are those on "gestalt coherence" (pp. 118-25). If I understand correctly, in the dynamic process of reading, one gestalt gives way to another, closure depending on a particular reader's selection. With Joyce, Beckett, and occasionally the *nouveau roman* in mind, Iser offers brief but helpful comments on "a new mode of communication" in which an "openness of structure" necessitates the increased activity of the reader. And there is much more which even the most quarrelsome literary theorists should find engaging and for the most part, I hope, cogent.

Possible limitations? After several readings of Iser's book, I continue to worry