

## NOTES AND SHORT ESSAYS

### Note on Calvino's Narrative Devices in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*

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When the authorial narrator in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* speaks directly to his reader in the early moments of the story, he is following one of fiction's traditional conventions. The narrator in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, for example, apologizes to his reader in the Prologue to Part One for his "sterile and uncultivated wit"<sup>1</sup> in spreading Don Quixote's story. In Fielding's *Tom Jones*, the narrator intersperses his historical account of Tom Jones's exploits with innumerable genial and instructive asides to his audience of naive readers. The narrator in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* asserts his creative omniscience—"novelists have the privilege of knowing everything"<sup>2</sup>—and proceeds to enumerate his readers' moral shortcomings even as he sketches the moral decay permeating the world of *Vanity Fair*. More recently, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* John Fowles creates a bearded narrator in his own image who reminds his reader of the social and economic framework of Victorian England and admits that even the novelist cannot control his fictional characters.

Calvino, however, departs from the tradition by creating a narrator who insists on making his reader the protagonist and placing him at the center of his story: his narration of the reader's actions and thoughts is addressed to the reader himself. In the process of using a second-person mode of narration, the narrator creates a character, a reader called Reader, who is both particularized and generalized. That is, some specific male reader is undergoing the experiences that are narrated, yet the narrator purposely avoids revealing the Reader's name, physical attributes, occupation, and so on.

All the characters in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, including the protagonist, fill particular roles in this comical allegory about the reading experience. The protagonist is the Reader, representative of every reader; the narrator purposely describes him in broad terms in order to generalize him as much as possible. Ludmilla, with whom the Reader falls in love, shares the Reader's interest in completing the reading process and is tagged the Other Reader. Lotaria, her twin sister, is a critical reader in the worst sense—she reads only to confirm what she already believes. Irnerio, a friend of Ludmilla's who creates sculptures using books as raw materials, is the Nonreader. Silas Flannery, an ageing, prolific Irish writer, is Ludmilla's ideal model of the writer (she, in turn, is his ideal reader). Ermes Marana, an unscrupulous translator, is the serpent in the garden of literature who attempts to undermine the relationship between author and reader. Mr. Cavedagna is the

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<sup>1</sup>Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*, trans. Samuel Putnam (New York: Viking, 1949), I, 11.

<sup>2</sup>William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. 31.

harrided publisher whose contact with Ermes Marana has resulted in a fiasco of false texts distributed publicly.

The comic plot involves the Reader's frustrated attempts to finish any one of the ten novels that he begins reading. After buying Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, he discovers upon reaching page 32 that the facing page is 17; the printer has inadvertently bound in a batch of duplicate signatures, and pages 17 through 32 repeat themselves for the remainder of the book. When the Reader returns to the bookstore and asks for an accurate copy of the Calvino novel, the clerk informs him that the story he has begun reading is not Calvino's. The publisher has just sent the bookstore a form letter explaining that an error at the bindery has resulted in a mix-up in printed signatures, and those in the book with Calvino's name on it are actually from the Polish novel *Outside the Town of Malbork* by Tazio Bazakbal. At the bookstore the Reader meets the Other Reader, a very attractive woman who shares his interest in solving the puzzle about the incomplete Calvino (or Bazakbal) story. The Reader soon realizes that he is as interested in developing a relationship with the Other Reader as he is in locating the story he has begun.

When the Reader gets home and opens the Bazakbal novel, he discovers that the story inside has nothing to do with the story in the defective earlier novel. He resumes his search for the completion of his reading experience, but continues to be stymied by one complication or another as he stumbles into a web of spurious translations of obscure texts and mistaken identities. Eventually, the Reader realizes that he should quit worrying about the unfinished novels and tend to his own story. He marries the Other Reader, and in the final lines of the novel they are in bed—she has closed her book and is ready for sleep, while he is nearly finished reading Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. The Reader completes his reading of this Calvino novel at the same time that the actual reader finishes his reading of what may, or may not, be the same text.

The narrator recounts the Reader's story from a second-person point of view rather than from the traditional third-person mode. Thus the narrative, told in the present tense, unfolds in the following manner: "Slowly a man materializes in the hall, you see his shadow through the curtains, a leather windbreaker, a step indicating a familiarity with the place but hesitant, as of someone looking for something. You recognize him. It is Irnerio."<sup>3</sup> In addition to describing the Reader's actions and observations, the narrator frequently addresses the Reader imperatively and suggests that he proceed in a particular fashion. The narrative opens with a typical example of this form of authorial advice: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade" (p. 3). What happens to be a comment directed to any reader of this novel soon develops into an ongoing communication with a particular reader.

In effect, the narrator creates a protagonist who oscillates between being a generalized, passive reader of the story and a specific, active character in the story. The narrator advises the Reader that "Who you are, Reader, your age, your status, profession, income: that would be indiscreet to ask. It's your business, you're on your own" (p. 32). Later, the narrator reiterates this notion: "Reader, we are not sufficiently acquainted for me to know whether you move with indifferent assurance in a university or whether old traumas or pondered choices make a universe of

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<sup>3</sup>Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 148. All subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text. The Italian edition, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* was published in 1979 by Giulio Einaudi editore of Torino

pupils and teachers seem a nightmare to your sensitive and sensible soul" (p. 47). Yet the narrator is sufficiently acquainted with the Reader to recount his intimate thoughts—"At this point three simultaneous desires are competing in your soul" (p. 131)—and to detail his movements as the story's protagonist.

In telling the Reader's story, the narrator pointedly orders the Reader about when he determines that such prompting is necessary. Thus he observes that "They page you. It is your name the waiter is repeating among the tables. Get up, you're wanted on the telephone" (p. 140). He even compliments the Reader, as in this instance early in the story: "You went to the bookshop and bought the volume. Good for you" (p. 4). Thus the narrator not only tells the Reader his own story, he coaches him through the process of acting out his story. The clearest example occurs late in the story (pp. 217-18) when the narrator exhorts, if not browbeats, the Reader into action, reminding him that as the protagonist in his own story he is responsible for the shape of its plot. The Reader must recognize that he is not simply a reader of his own story; he is an active agent in its unfolding.

The narrator acknowledges his own preoccupation with the rather experimental narrative form he is using and explores some of its implications with his audience.<sup>4</sup> The narrator abruptly addresses Ludmilla for the first time ("What are you like, Other Reader?") and points out to her the ongoing ambiguity he has attempted to develop while speaking to his narratee-protagonist in the second person (p. 140). He then clarifies her role in the story by telling her that he introduced her "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" (p. 141). After chatting with the Other Reader over the space of several pages, the narrator senses that the Reader may be anxious about his role and, therefore, reassures him that his position in the novel is a secure one.

After speaking earlier of the need for a third person to interact with a second person (the narrator, of course, is the first person), he postulates that "for a second-person discourse to become a novel, at least two you's are required, distinct and concomitant, which stand out from the crowd of he's, she's, and they's" (p. 147). One might question the narrator's necessity for addressing Ludmilla as well as the Reader in order for his discourse to become a novel. In fact, the narrator casts Ludmilla as a narratee in one scene only; he returns her to third-person status for the remainder of the story. Nevertheless, the narrator explores the possibilities of his discourse with two narratees as they act on their attraction for each other and end up in bed. The narrator advises his impassioned narratees that "What you are doing is very beautiful but grammatically it doesn't change a thing. At the moment when you most appear to be a united *voi*, a second person plural, you are two *tu's*, more separate and circumscribed than before" (p. 154).

In addition to exploring the physical and emotional intimacy between the Reader and the Other Reader, the narrator establishes his own sort of narrative intimacy with the Reader. The discourse develops into an extensive sharing process as the narrator participates in the Reader's experiences by simultaneously creating them and describing them to his narratee-protagonist.

In taking on the role of the narratee's prompter, or adviser, the narrator reminds him of what he should be thinking about and even motivates him to take an active role in the scene that is unfolding. By adopting this imperative stance toward the Reader, the narrator periodically sounds like the Reader's conscience, and his voice assumes an implied intimacy with the Reader's interior world of

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<sup>4</sup>John Updike speaks admiringly of "this mobius strip of a new twist on literary self-consciousness." See "Readers and Writers," *New Yorker*, 3 August 1981, p. 90.

thoughts and impulses. At one point in the narrative, in fact, the narrator rather coyly suggests that he may resemble the Reader more than one realizes. When he initially refers to Ludmilla as *you*, he observes that "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" (p. 141).

Like many aspects of the narrative, however, this potential doubling is only an illusion of sameness. By establishing the Other Reader as a secondary narratee and then addressing her first individually and then together with the Reader in bed, the narrator operates at a distinct authorial distance from his smitten characters. He is neither the Reader nor the Other Reader. Yet narrator and Reader are inextricably bound together by the narrative itself, for the Reader acts out the story of his life as the narrator simultaneously recounts the story to him.

## Two Forster Novels and an Indian Prince

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From December 1923 to May 1924, J. R. Ackerley was in India acting as Private Secretary to the Maharajah of Chhatarpur, the central figure in his book *Hindoo Holiday* and the man who is generally conceded to have sparked E. M. Forster's characterization of Godbole in *A Passage to India*. He may also, as we shall see, have influenced characterization in *Maurice*. Forster himself stayed with the Hindu prince twice—in 1913 when he visited India with Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson and in 1921 when he returned to serve as interim Private Secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas. He found the man odd and compelling: "He is 5 feet high and has no bridge to his nose, and he usually wears a frock coat of magenta velvet, and earrings of diamond;"<sup>1</sup> he has "a most unusual character—mystical, and sensual, silly and shrewd;" "India will certainly never look upon his like again."<sup>2</sup> It was, in fact, Forster who pressed his friend Ackerley to take the position as the Maharajah's Private Secretary.

In 1932 Ackerley published *Hindoo Holiday*, his account of his stay in Chhatarpur. Forster, of course, would not have had access to the book before he published *A Passage to India* in 1924, but he did have at least two of Ackerley's long letters from Chhatarpur to help recapture the flavor of the intriguing monarch. Forster prized these letters and even read passages to others, praising the impression they gave of "someone who had lived in the country for years."<sup>3</sup> He was frankly pleased to share vicariously in court life, and he welcomed the spur the letters gave to his own work on *A Passage to India*. In January 1924 Forster wrote to Ackerley, "Your letters were a godsend to my etiolated novel."<sup>4</sup> Clearly, Forster appreciated

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<sup>1</sup>Letter to J. R. Ackerley, qtd. in *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster*, 2 vols., Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank, eds. (Cambridge: Belknap, 1983), II, 35.

<sup>2</sup>E. M. Forster, *The Hill of Devi* (New York: Harcourt, 1953), pp. 196-97.

<sup>3</sup>Neville Braybrooke, ed. *The Letters of J. R. Ackerley* (London: Duckworth, 1975), xxv.

<sup>4</sup>Letter to J. R. Ackerley, qtd. in Lago and Furbank, II, 48.