Both in *Truth and Method* and *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Hans-Georg Gadamer repeatedly advances the "reading of a text" as an analogue for the act of human understanding. For those interested in reclaiming, assessing, and defending the primacy of the role and the function of the reader in the understanding and interpretation of a text, Gadamer provides enormous support and enormous challenges.¹

In "On the Problem of Self-Understanding" he contends that "the understanding of a text has not begun at all as long as the text remains mute. *But a text can begin to speak*" (emphasis added).² Although at this point in this particular essay Gadamer defers a discussion of the "conditions that must be given for this actually to occur," he elsewhere argues that the otherwise mute text will be given a voice only if and when the reader, having sensed "what is questionable" in the text, will initiate a stringent, relentless hermeneutical conversation with the text and with himself, the ultimate goal of which is to destabilize through further questions the presumed finality of both the text's and the reader's current opinions.³ The fruitfulness of such conversation is then dependent on the extent to which the reader is able to resist the unilateral assertion of both the text's and his own point of view.

²*Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 57. Further citations will appear in the text as *PH*.
Clearly the responsibility with which Gadamer entrusts the reader is as demanding as the commitment that such responsibility requires of that reader. In fact, if the fundamental prerequisite of the question that can rescue the text from its “lifeless rigidity” is that it produce “self-understanding of the interpreter as well as what is interpreted” (PH, p. 58), the fundamental condition that can enable the questioner to ask such questions is that he, through relentless reflexivity, examine and call into question all those prejudices—which Gadamer provocatively calls “prejudgments” and “preunderstandings”—that may compromise the direction of the inquiry.

Although Gadamer’s argument about the advantages of understanding one’s “understanding” and of applying the hermeneutical model of dialectical questioning and reflexivity to the practice of reading is persuasive, it is, ironically, in a moment of “blinded vision” that he most convincingly demonstrates the necessity for even the most sophisticated readers to carry on relentlessly “the art of questioning . . . [i.e.,] the art of thinking” (TM, p. 330).

In the foreword to the second edition of Truth and Method, Gadamer affirms that his “real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing” (p. xvi, emphasis added). I would like to focus on the rich ambiguity of this statement—an ambiguity heightened by the fact that the sentence appears at the end of the paragraph in which Gadamer outlines “the intention and claim” of his work in response to some misunderstandings (misreadings?) it apparently led to. Gadamer opens his foreword with a defense of his (as yet?) unchanged position:

The second edition of Truth and Method is virtually unaltered. Its readers include its critics, and the attention that it has received undoubtedly obliges the author to improve the whole by drawing on all the really valuable suggestions they have offered. And yet a line of thought that has matured over many years has its own stability. However much one tries to see through the critic’s eyes, one’s own generally pervasive viewpoint prevails.

The three years that have passed since the publication of the first edition have proved too short a time for the author to put the whole again in question, and to use effectively all that he has learned from criticism and from his own more recent work. (TM, p. xvi, emphasis added)

It is difficult to determine whether the statement about his real philosophical concern, which comes after the two paragraphs quoted above, is an acknowledgment of the danger of prejudices, or another
moment of blinded vision. In either case, what is important to notice is the extent to which even the most careful method of reflexivity cannot totally escape the very restrictions it questions.

That statement is significant in yet another way, since in spite of Gadamer's real concern ("not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing"), his contribution to our understanding and to our practice of reading can be said to stem, in great part, specifically from what he shows us he does when he reads, examines, and questions his understanding of "understanding" and, more generally, from what he might not prescribe but certainly, in his praxis, he suggests we ought to do. I think it fortunate that, in spite of Gadamer's claims to the contrary, his inquiry into the conditions of our knowledge and the function of reflection—which, in the case of the knowledge a reader generates, he tersely sums up in the statement, "To understand a text is to come to understand oneself in a kind of dialogue" (PH, p. 57)—has important theoretical and practical applications.

Because in the context of this essay I want to explore the possibilities of Gadamer's method rather than the limits, I will not raise further questions about the possible constraints of some of his premises. However, since it is relevant to what I am about to discuss, I must at this point at least call attention to Gadamer's ambiguous acceptance—perhaps a trace, a debris of his inquiry into theological and juridical hermeneutics—of that special gift, the divination that enables readers endowed with "imagination" to ask the right question both of themselves and of the texts they read (PH, p. 12).

Given the current educational crisis, I have grown particularly suspicious of theories of reading that, even by hinting at the power of divination, either invalidate the teaching of reading or reduce it to the teaching of syllabification, communication, and extraction of information. The fruitfulness of Gadamer's method is that although, fortunately, it does not produce a system of rules that will generate understanding, it can, through continuous practice, train readers to develop a forma mentis which questions with relentless intellectual rigor the very questions it raises. Ultimately, I believe, Gadamer's greatest merit is that he shows us that, because we cannot always extricate ourselves from the pervasiveness of our viewpoints, we ought to be alert to detect our own moments of blindness, to acknowledge them as such, and through an inquiry into what has determined them, to turn them into new, perhaps unexpected, insights.
In order to test the possibilities to advance one’s self-understanding—understanding is for Gadamer necessarily self-understanding—in the act of reading that Gadamer’s hermeneutical conversation promises, I propose a reading of Italo Calvino’s If on a winter’s night a traveler. Calvino’s text, I suggest, can be read as an answer to the general question of writers’ authority and readers’ autonomy and to the more specific question of whether readers can claim autonomy from a writer’s authority when that authority is inscribed in the text in such a way that a reader’s actualization of the text can itself be said to constitute a form of entrapment.

“You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, If on a winter’s night a traveler.” Such are the words that mark the incipit of Calvino’s text, whose very last sentence reads, “I’ve almost finished If on a winter’s night a traveler by Italo Calvino.”

Lifted out of the whole text—“whole” assumes a peculiar significance in this context since it inscribes but does not contain within itself its various subparts, its “holes,”5 that is, its various truncated narratives, its unfinishable stories—and read retrospectively, the novel’s first and last sentences arrange themselves, in this sequence, as a microtext. Each subpart of this microtext can function for its readers both as a trace toward (a reading hypothesis, an already inscribed projection whose fruition, however, is hypothetical since it rests on a reader’s possible actualization of it), and a reminder of (another reading hypothesis, since it is contingent on a reader’s former actualization) certain fundamental questions about reading to which this text can be said to be an answer.

With the exception of the question about the genre of the text (new novel = nouveau roman?), this microtext, which I have arbitrarily arranged as a kind of “preface,” a guiding principle for the following article (I assume responsibility for the inaccuracies of truth that the conventions of language and written discourse enmesh me in), lists, though not necessarily in the order I have followed, the various subquestions I have asked of the macrotext in an attempt to answer what


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can be defined as its ur-question. Does this mean that I have asked the appropriate questions or that I have been framed? Does in fact "to ask the appropriate question" mean to be framed? Is the "reader's autonomy" an invalid concept since, it can be argued, the reader who asks the question that the text is an answer to is after all the reader who is the most sensitive to the text's authority?

The "macrotext," the script marked by that emblematic beginning and ending, is divided into twelve "chapters" that each function as a "frame." Chapters one to ten are each followed by a narrative whose title they invariably announce. (I am arbitrarily separating the chapters from the narratives; this separation, however, is meant to be unstable, since the structure of If on a winter's night a traveler posits and is posited by the continuous interplay between them.) The chapters sequentially recount the increasingly more complicated adventures of a "Lettore" (an unnamed male reader) and a "Lettrice" (a mysterious female reader named Ludmilla) who are caught in the web of consequences spinning from their original decision to buy an "entertaining" book, If on a winter's night a traveler by Italo Calvino, and the subsequent decision to return it when they discover that they bought a faulty copy. Through an error of the bindery, the printed signatures of that book became mixed with those of another new publication, the Polish novel Outside the town of Malbork by Tazio Bazakbal (T, p. 28); this is the plausible explanation the bookseller gives the angry Lettore, an explanation that immediately sets up the possibility for a whole series of mixed-up printed signatures. What follows could be read as a sui generis Crime and Punishment plot—a text woven into the fabric of this text (see pp. 177–78)—or as a sui generis enforcement of the "contrapasso" law. Having tasted the flavor of the Polish writer's style, and having started reading a narrative that was inter-


7The use of this term is supposed to be "innocent," though its having already been used in its negative connotation (as when I asked, Does in fact to ask the appropriate question mean to be framed?) calls into question the very possibility of its being innocent.

8Since the Italian terms denote gender, I have opted to retain them instead of Weaver's "Reader" for the male protagonist and "Other Reader" for the female protagonist. "Reader" will be used throughout to refer to the reader of the text (If on a winter's night a traveler), both the hypothetical reader with whose hypothetical reading I identify and the hypothetical reader from whose hypothetical reading I want to dissociate mine. I am aware of the possible confusion that this choice may generate; I hope, however, that the context will clarify possible ambiguities.
rupted at its climax, the Lettore decides to turn down the bookseller’s offer of replacing the “defective Traveler with a brand-new one in mint condition,” and not giving “a damn about that Calvino any more” (T, p. 28), he opts for a copy of what he thinks is Bazakbal’s novel in order to find out how it ends. The Lettrice, who happens to be in the bookstore for the same reason, and who has already made the decision to exchange her book for the Polish, soon becomes caught in the ensuing series of events.

Predictably, the Lettore and the Lettrice’s paths, having intersected in the bookstore, lead them toward many readings (nine more apocryphal, unfinished, narratives—an adequate Dantesque punishment for their desire for closure as well as for their obvious disregard of Calvino’s “authority”), and eventually toward each other. At the end of the novel, for reasons that may have to do with his improved reading habits, the Lettore shares with us the ultimate reward of being “almost finished” reading Calvino’s novel. As we shall see, what being “almost finished” comes to signify for the Lettore and for us may establish the difference between the reader who is the “subject matter” of our reading—i.e., the Lettore, the character caught within the frame—and the reader who, as the Subject of reading, that is, the Subject who reads, is, one could argue, outside that frame. Thus, if whatever happens to the Lettore and the Lettrice—who, in their search for the author-ized ur-narrative, meet an increasing number of readers/characters whose (mis)readings constitute a remarkable taxonomy—is the script of the novel, whatever we make happen, as we exercise our privilege (if we so choose) to participate and to reflect on the performance of that script, constitutes the event of reading Calvino’s text. Set in these terms, the difference between “happens to” and “make happen” seems to be definable in terms of “autonomy,” although the prospects of that autonomy are immediately called into question when we reflect about the extent to which we ourselves are subject to the framing of the frame.

The literary trick—the characters’ chase of the nonexistent manuscript, which, it turns out, is the manuscript for the “hypothetical reader”—of course, is not new. What is remarkable, however, is the depth and proliferation of reflection on the act of reading that the dismantling, the demystification, of this writing device makes possible for the hypothetical reader who, through reflection, strives to bring to consciousness those subconscious elements that are part of, and shape, the act of reading itself. To invoke reflection, however, is not sufficient. Reflection, after all, can be but a mirroring back of what we delude ourselves we are seeing. The kind of reflection that can con-
tribute to a reader’s understanding of the forces that determine his or her response to a text—an understanding that is the prerequisite for possible modifications of one’s reading strategies—I see as the reflection that breaks the circle of solipsism by means of a kind of complex polyphonic questioning: the “questioning of the questionable,” as Gadamer suggests, and I would add of the so far unquestioned, which consistently, sequentially or simultaneously, moves through Gadamer’s triadic stages of “kennen,” “wiederkennen,” and “herauser-kennen.” Of the three phases that for Gadamer constitute the hermeneutic process, the “herauserkennen” phase is the richest in possibilities, though, I suspect, the least practiced. Though most reading practices (I would say, even the most simplistic) can hardly avoid engaging in “understanding” (kennen) and “interpreting” (wiederkennen), it is possible to imagine reading practices, even sophisticated ones, that do not bring back to that very practice, i.e., do not “apply” (and consequently neither learn from practicing nor modify, if necessary, that very practice), what the reader has learned in the act of reading (herauserkennen).9 By thematizing the mechanism of its own production, Calvino’s text reveals simultaneously its technique’s potential for automatism as well as for fruitful reflexivity both about the act of writing and about the act of reading that must actualize that writing. Calvino’s text, I will argue, points toward a practice of reading that seems to posit as the only alternative to being “framed” by one’s own unexamined understanding and interpretation the opening up of that circle through further questioning.

As far as the Lettore and the Lettrice are concerned, the framing device sets up a series of machinations and detours that keep them from fulfilling their desire to bring their reading to closure. Thus their desire becomes the raison d’être of If on a winter’s night a traveler, since the plenitude, the fulfillment, of that desire would have resulted in the scarcity—the absence—of the novel. Conceived as characters who are flawed, at their very inception, by the inability to reflect on what constitutes their flaw, they are framed and condemned to suffer repeated frustrations. But while their suffering may result in our enjoyment, our awareness of their being framed does not necessarily result in our not being framed.

Like the Lettore and the Lettrice and the various other readers/characters, in the act of reading this text we too can be framed by

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9See PH, p. 14, and TM, part II, but particularly pp. 274–305, for the hermeneutic problem of “application,” which Gadamer considers “as integral a part of the hermeneutical act as are understanding and interpretation” (p. 275).
the role we choose as readers unless we read and question ourselves as we read, unless we engage in a dialogical/dialectical relationship both with the text and with our reading of the text so as to lay open and hold open ever new possibilities to "sustain the presumed finality of both the text’s and the reader’s current opinions."¹⁰

As we, amused and detached, observe the characters caught in the network of the frame’s machinations, we are not only made to assent, like docile schoolchildren, to the aesthetic creed of lack of closure; we are also continuously made to yearn for it by being subjected to seeing all of our predictions and projections completely fulfilled, and also by finding them reified in the text. For example, in chapter two, as we read about the Lettore who is about to resume reading what he thinks is the Polish narrative, we have already been made to surmise, and we don’t need to be told, that what he will read is not what he thought he would read. If, to check the reliability of our intuition, we were to glance through the text at the titles of the subsequent narratives, or through the concluding paragraphs of the chapters that precede each narrative, we would soon be in a position to predict that the trick is going to be repeated eight more times. If like the Lettore we were to play the game of the “circling of the book,” of “reading around it before reading inside it” (T, p. 8), and we were to read the titles consecutively (actually, if we looked at the index pages we would spare ourselves the labor of leafing through the book), we would soon realize that the ten titles arrange themselves into a sort of microtext that guides us toward the seemingly unambiguous question of the last title:

If on a winter’s night a traveler, Outside the town of Malbork, Leaning from the steep slope, Without fear of wind or vertigo, Looks down in the gathering shadow, In a network of lines that enlace, In a network of lines that intersect, On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon, Around an empty grave, What story down there awaits its end? (Emphasis added.)

At this stage in the time-flow of reading, some readers may plausibly argue that this microtext functions as a kind of riddle that teases them into an awareness of the game they are about to play: the “down there” where the story awaits its end recedes farther and farther in the indeterminacy of a tenuously illuminated abyss. Having already identified the Lettore’s flaw as an excessive desire for closure, readers may at this point read the text’s “instructions for meaning production” (in

¹⁰Linge, “Editor’s Introduction,” PH, p. xxi.
Wolfgang Iser’s terms) as a restatement of the principle of lack of closure. As readers continue reading the macrotext, however, they will discover, in chapter eleven, the extent to which even this projection had been programmed and anticipated when they read how the readers/characters in the library stumble on the same hermeneutic key just by listing the various titles of the narratives that have constituted the supposedly unsuccessful search of the Lettore and the Lettrice.

At this point let us consider various feasible and acceptable responses, and let us try to “interpret” them: some readers might see the episode in the library as a reflection, a mirroring back, of their earlier projection, and, for this very reason, they might experience satisfaction in the fulfillment of that projection; some readers might, instead, feel dissatisfaction since they have to share their findings with the caricaturelike characters in the library; some readers might even conclude that the characters’ stumbling on what could possibly be an interpretive key—whether or not the characters’ awareness and reflexivity be considered inferior to that of the readers of the macrotext—could be read as a parody of the committed and conscientious reader, or even of the much debated concept of “interpretive community.”11 These reflections could be said to exemplify what I have earlier suggested could be called “circular reflections.” As a way out of this circularity, readers may turn their own responses into a text to be analyzed in light of the unexamined assumptions that have shaped their responses.

Although “satisfaction” and “dissatisfaction” are feasible actualizations of readers’ responses, they run the risk of stifling the continuous reflexivity of the act of reading that this text fosters and demands. Both responses can be said to belong to a nontransactional way of reading because, while they are seemingly open to the text, they are so in light of an ideal text which is paradoxically the reader’s text and against which the writer’s text is measured and evaluated.

Considered from the perspective of Gadamer’s hermeneutical conversation, the two following readings of If on a winter’s night a traveler, by Cesare Garboli and Cesare Segre, respectively, could be said to be indicative of readings that do not move beyond “the presumed finality of both the text’s and the reader’s current opinions” (PH, p. xxi; emphasis added).

Cesare Garboli denounces Calvino’s excessive attention to the narrative technique, which he sees as a sign of sclerosis, a malaise, a de-


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generation into coquetry of that childlike penchant for play that had characterized Calvino's writings:

Nell'ultimo Calvino ciò che sorprende non è l'artificio formale, l'organizzazione del gioco: questi sono fatti superficiali. Se c'è una cosa che sorprende, nel Calvino di oggi, è l'ostinazione a inscenare mediazioni e dialettiche sedendo ad un tavolo che non lo interessa più, e giocando a un altro che non gli piacerà mai. Lo spettacolo non è di quelli che si godono, perché in tutto questo mediare e combinare ogni opposto . . . nessuna gioia assiste la vecchia maniera di raccontare, e nessun piacere accompagna i trucchi che la uccidono. . . . Non è il tecnicismo il pregio, come si crede, dell'ultimo Calvino. . . . La novità . . . non sta nel gioco, ma nella disfunzione, nella sproporzione per cui il gioco è così inferiore al malessere che lo ispira; sta nella sazietà, nel senso inatteso di sconfitta che percorre le pagine truccate riempiendole di una pena segreta . . . .

Garboli’s “interpretation” seems to have been determined by the reader’s/critic’s preference for an ideal text, a model to which If on a winter's night a traveler is compared—a model constructed out of what Garboli evaluates as the best of Calvino. It is undeniable that all readers approach the reading of any text with certain expectations, however vague or spurious they may be; it is even more undeniable that a critic familiar with the writer's oeuvre will approach the reading of any of the writer’s texts with even clearer expectations (in this case, the critic's expectations will perhaps more clearly be focused on the formal features of the text). However, such expectations are worth examining and, when necessary, modifying so that they may not preclude other possible transactions of understanding between text and reader.

Significantly, the very same tricks that Garboli sees as a symptom of malaise, Cesare Segre sees as a source of pleasure both for the writer and the reader. Segre suggests that the considerable fulfill-

12“What is surprising, in the latest Calvino, is not the formal artifice, the organization of the game—these are superficial features. If there is something that is surprising in Calvino, today, it is his obstinate staging of mediations and dialectics while he sits at a table that no longer interests him, while playing at another table that he'll never like. The spectacle is not an enjoyable one because in this mediating and combining of every opposite . . . no joy pervades any longer his old storytelling, no pleasure accompanies the tricks that stifle it. . . . Technicism is not, as some claim, Calvino's value. . . . The novelty . . . is not in the game, but rather in the dysfunction, the disproportion that makes the game so inferior to the malaise that has inspired it; the novelty is in the satiety, in the unexpected sense of defeat that runs through the trick-burdened pages and fills them with secret pain . . . ” Cesare Garboli, “Come sei, Lettrice?” (“What Kind of Reader Are You, Lettrice?”), Paragone Letteratura, 366 (Agosto 1980), pp. 69–70; translation mine.
ment of expectations that this text provides is such that the reader (i.e., the readers of the novel) “può compiacersi della propria intelligenza, a buon mercato” (“can congratulate himself for his acumen—cheaply”). In his thorough (almost archaeological) reading of Calvino’s text, Segre comments on most of the writer’s strategies. Chapter eight, he points out (and he verifies his “reading” by calling on the authority of Calvino himself), contains not only a definition of the narratives that follow each chapter of the frame, but also an analysis of the function of the frame—in terms of writing, that is. Segre also reminds us of how, in the various chapters of the frame, Ludmilla’s programmatic statements about the novels she would like to read, and about what novels should be like (T, p. 180), constitute an introduction to the narratives that follow. Ludmilla, for instance, announces a particular preference in chapter two:

“I prefer novels . . . that bring me immediately into a world where everything is precise, concrete, specific. I feel a special satisfaction in knowing that things are made in that certain fashion and not otherwise, even the most commonplace things that in real life seem indifferent to me.” (T, p. 30)

Her preference is fulfilled by the narrative that follows, “Outside the town of Malbork,” in which everything “is very precise, things with their nomenclature and the sensations that things transmit” and in which “characters take on form gradually in the accumulation of minute details and precise movements, but also of remarks, shreds of conversation” (T, p. 35). And Ludmilla’s quite different, apocalyptic desire in chapter ten is of course fulfilled by the narrative titled “What story down there awaits its end?”:

“The book I’m looking for . . . is the one that gives the sense of the world after the end of the world, the sense that the world is the end of everything that there is in the world, that the only thing there is in the world is the end of the world.” (T, p. 243)

However, to agree with Segre that the readers’ response to this text’s repeated confirmations of projections might be (should be?) one of “easy gratification” raises certain problems for readers who focus less on the primacy of the text (i.e., the writer’s/text’s authority) and more on the operations by which that text can be brought to life (the

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13Cesare Segre, “Se una notte d’inverno uno scrittore sognasse un aleph di dieci colori” ("If on a winter’s night a writer dreamt an aleph of ten different colors"), Strumenti Critici, 39-40 (Ottobre 1979), p. 179.
reader’s autonomy). First of all, the theory of easy gratification simultaneously privileges and undercuts both the writer’s technique and the reader’s responsiveness to that technique. Second, it gives both the text and the reader’s response a finality that, it seems, this text openly and consistently questions (or at least makes it possible to question). Third, it a priori invalidates another kind of gratification—a gratification that is far less dependent on what Garboli convincingly defines as “the law of demand and supply,” which keeps the plot going and relies on the “automatism” of the reader’s response, and much more on some readers’ commitment to carry on relentlessly “the art of questioning . . . [i.e.,] the art of thinking.” There are times when sections of the frame (i.e., the chapters) question our obliviousness to some of the most elusive thoughts that our minds formulate during the act of reading—thoughts that we often leave submerged at a preconscious level, thus depriving ourselves of the opportunity to better understand our own ways of understanding. Stylistically closer to the reflections on the act of reading that the narratives both describe and foster, these sections tease us into an acknowledgment both of the perils of automatic reading and of the relentless concentration that autonomous reading demands, and suggest that even the frame—in spite or perhaps because of its overt artificiality—can provide us with a speculum meditandi on the act of reading.

In chapter nine the Lettore, in one of the many detours he must endure, flies to South America in search of a certain Ermes Marana, who he thinks is responsible for the mixed-up case of the apocryphal manuscripts. The chapter begins with “You fasten your seatbelt. The plane is landing” (T, p. 210). Then, for twenty lines or so, the text moves away from the “plane” of exterior actions to a “plane” of interior actions (the pun is quite accidental and, by the way, “unreadable” within the Italian language). The shift is demarcated by the resumption of the sentence “The plane is landing,” which then leads to a description of the Lettore coming down the steps and going through passport control and customs still immersed in his reading, the book still in his hands. The Lettore’s mental activity, contemporaneous with yet surpassing and transcending the external actions is so described:

To fly is the opposite of traveling: you cross a gap in space, you vanish into the void, you accept not being in any place for a duration that is itself a kind of void in time; then you reappear, in a place and in a moment with no relation to the where and the when in which you vanished. Meanwhile, what do you do? How do you occupy this absence of yourself from the world and of the world from you? You read; you do not raise your eyes from the
book between one airport and the other, because beyond the page there is the void, the anonymity of stopovers, of the metallic uterus that contains you and nourishes you, of the passing crowd always different and always the same. You might as well stick with this other abstraction of travel, accomplished by the anonymous uniformity of typographical characters: here, too, it is the evocative power of the names that persuades you that you are flying over something and not nothingness. You realize that it takes considerable heedlessness to entrust yourself to unsure instruments, handled with approximation; or perhaps this demonstrates an invincible tendency to passivity, to regression, to infantile dependence. (But are you reflecting on the air journey or on reading?) (T, p. 210)

Glossing over, for the moment, the metaphor for reading that this passage constructs—atemporal, aspatial, suspended between an arbitrary beginning and an arbitrary end—I want to focus on the parenthetical question at the end of the passage to suggest that what Segre calls gestures of “easy gratification” might indeed reveal themselves as ploys which, if not deployed, might severely curtail our attempt to establish our autonomy from the writer’s authority. But in order to make my point, I must myself make a detour and go back to the beginning:

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. Best to close the door . . .

Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach. In an easy chair, on the sofa, in the rocker, the deck chair, on the hassock. In the hammock, if you have a hammock. On top of your bed, of course, or in the bed. You can even stand on your hands, head down, in the yoga position. With the book upside down, naturally.

Of course, the ideal position for reading is something you can never find . . .

Well, what are you waiting for? (T, p. 3)

How can we, as readers, respond to, and control, this “voice” that, almost in the same breath, sets our mind wandering and blocks its incipient activity through a series of commands that cannot function as commands—in terms of speech act theory they are “infelicitous”—except perhaps under hypnosis (“Relax . . . Concentrate . . . Dispel every other thought . . . Let the world around you fade . . .”), and which furthermore are invalidated by a string of other commands that call attention to that very world (“Best to close the door . . . Find the most comfortable position”) we are supposedly to let fade?
How do we as readers respond to this voice that at the outset calls our attention to the book which, as an object of consumption, can be bought and possessed ("So, then, you noticed in a newspaper that If on a winter's night a traveler had appeared," the new book by Italo Calvino, who hadn't published for several years. You went to the bookshop and bought the volume. Good for you" [T, p. 4]), handled, carried, and owned ("you have grasped a copy, and you have carried it to the cashier so that your right to own it can be established" [T, p. 6]) in a text that continuously eludes us, in a text that, in Roland Barthes's words, "decants the . . . [book] from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice"?14

How do we as readers respond to this voice that, while seemingly poking fun at the preliminary rituals of the Lettore (the "circling of the book," the "reading around it before reading inside it," the pleasure of lengthening the thrill of "confronting something and not quite knowing yet what it is" [T, pp. 9–10]), confronts the "professional" reader with the possible realization that his or her strict, scientific methodology may be at odds with these spontaneous pleasures? Is it only the Lettore/character that is being made fun of? What stance do we take?

Of course, at the very moment we start formulating these questions, we are caught in the game that Calvino's text maps out for us. We soon realize the extent to which the rules that constitute the "reading game" of If on a winter's night a traveler may destroy our illusions of autonomy. What alternative do we have when even to learn the rules and to accept to play by those rules is to be played by those rules? What alternative beside refusing to read (which itself is a deferral to the writer's authority)? The only alternative, I would suggest, is to attempt to recover, to understand, and to make our own the fundamental concern that must have motivated this text, to ask "the question that it seeks to answer and that it poses again and again" (PH, p. 21) to its readers, to play the writer from a position closer to (though admittedly never identical with) Calvino's, in the belief that "Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as writing, but also nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind" (Gadamer, TM, p. 145)—a belief that may justify the following chiasmic relationship:

reader's autonomy//writer's/text's authority
writer's/text's autonomy//reader's authority


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The “I” that says “you” in the very first line of *If on a winter’s night a traveler* is, it does not take long to discover, a “ludic” I, one that, to make the game worth playing, requires a complementary “ludic” attitude in whoever accepts the challenge to play; the alternative to playing with the I is to be played by the I, like the Lettore, the Lettrice, and the various other readers/characters in the novel.

Unlike the Lettrice, who is predominantly referred to in the third person, the Lettore is consistently addressed as “you” by the ludic I, this elusive, invisible, and crafty puppeteer who sets in motion and controls the machinations of the story as well as the Lettore’s every thought. That “you” who immediately becomes a you-other-than-ourselves comes to constitute a trap for us not so much because we might run the risk of slipping into the pronominal space that the you-Lettore occupies, but because, having been made to take an ironic, omniscient stance toward him, we might pass judgment on him without realizing that we are passing judgment on ourselves.15 The way in which the ludic I sets us up is quite skillful: the ludic I refrains from concretizing the Lettore in terms of tangible or visible attributes:

Who you are, Reader [Lettore], your age, your status, profession, income: that would be indiscreet to ask. It’s your business, you’re on your own. What counts is the state of your spirit now, in the privacy of your home, as you try to re-establish perfect calm in order to sink again into the book; you stretch out your legs, you draw them back, you stretch them again. (T, p. 32)

The inclusion of this commentary within the text seems to serve the function to alert readers to the fact that, given the fluidity of “characterization,” identification with the Lettore ought to be constantly monitored. Since the Lettore’s intense desire for closure has already marked him as the “type of reader” we want to dissociate ourselves from, however, this warning seems redundant, unless in its redundancy it might be warning us against excessive dissociation. Although we are set up to be voyeurs, we can redirect the glance toward ourselves; by becoming voyeurs of ourselves as voyeurs we may come to the conclusion that we need to erase the ironic distance—the stance of superiority—that separates us from the Lettore as we recognize in his shortcomings and prejudices our own, and in this moment of reflexivity we may achieve critical self-consciousness.

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15The moment the “you” becomes a character in the novel, that “you” becomes differentiated from us, that differentiation increasing or decreasing according to the way in which one thinks of oneself as a reader.
As the Lettore moves from one reading to another he becomes, in many ways, a better reader; his initial motivation to bring his reading to closure becomes less directive. In Ludmilla he has now found a reason to read and to live his readings as never before:

something has changed since yesterday. Your reading is no longer solitary: you think of the Other Reader [Lettrice], who, at this same moment, is also opening the book; and there, the novel to be read is superimposed by a possible novel to be lived, the continuation of your story with her, or better still, the beginning of a possible story. 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. Does this mean that the book has become an instrument, a channel of communication, a rendezvous? This does not mean its reading will grip you less: on the contrary, something has been added to its powers. (T, p. 32)

(As professional readers involved in teaching students how to read we might reflect, glossing over the instrumentalization of reading, on the difference that motivation can make, on the transaction that motivation can trigger, and on ways to enable our students to train themselves to acquire motivation.)

In chapter three, as the story gets complicated through further machinations, the Lettore's reading becomes more complex: the more mysterious and unreachable Ludmilla becomes, the more entangled the Lettore becomes with her and with the fictional characters who seem to refract and reverberate some of her mysteriousness:

to be sincere you should answer that you can no longer distinguish your interest in the Cimmerian novel from your interest in the Other Reader [Lettrice] of that novel. Now, moreover, the professor's reactions at the name Ludmilla, coming after Irnerio's confidences, cast mysterious flashes of light, create about the [Lettrice] an apprehensive curiosity not unlike that which binds you to Zwida Ozkart, in the novel whose continuation you are hunting for, and also to Madame Marne in the novel you had begun to read the day before and have temporarily put aside, and here you are in pursuit of all these shadows together, those of the imagination and those of life. (T, p. 51)

As the shadows of his imagination and those of life intermingle, the Lettore moves increasingly away from his original ideal of reading as something “easily defined . . . [and] enjoyed without risks.” Coincidentally, the more involved he becomes with the experience of reading, the more risks he takes in pursuit of his desire, the more asser-
tive he becomes. And his assertiveness pays off: in chapter seven, he finally manages to make love to the elusive Ludmilla. As the two are apostrophized by the ludic I, who gives an account of their love-making in terms, of course, of “reading,” we realize that, of the two, the Lettore is the one who has come to enjoy reading more, because however naïve and gullible, he at least has learned to open himself to, and to systematically experience, what the text suggests:

Ludmilla, now you are being read. Your body is being subjected to a systematic reading, through channels of tactile information, visual, olfactory, and not without some intervention of the taste buds. Hearing also has its role, alert to your gasps and your trills. It is not only the body that is, in you, the object of reading: the body matters insofar as it is part of a complex of elaborate elements, not all visible and not all present, but manifested in visible and present events: the clouding of your eyes, your laughing, the words you speak, your way of gathering and spreading your hair, your initiatives and your reticences, and all the signs that are on the frontier between you and usage and habits and memory and prehistory and fashion, all codes, all the poor alphabets by which one human being believes at certain moments that he is reading another human being. (T, p. 155)

If Ludmilla’s body is the object of reading, at least it is so as “part of a complex of elaborate elements, not all visible and not all present,” as a network of possibilities, in other words, that even a systematic and thorough reading cannot exhaust. The Lettore’s original flaw, his desire to achieve closure, still taints his reading habits, but he has certainly progressed in his attempts to relax the boundaries of the text. The Lettrice’s reading method, on the other hand, seems to be based on the technique of prereading or skimming—a technique that in this country is currently advocated in “How to Read” college textbooks—which supposedly will lead her to ask the hermeneutical question that will enable her to connect the “partial inspection” to a “wider spatial reconnaissance”:

And you, too, O Reader [Lettore], are meanwhile an object of reading: the Other Reader [Lettrice] now is reviewing your body as if skimming the index, and at some moments she consults it as if gripped by sudden specific curiosities, then she lingers, questioning it and waiting till a silent answer reaches her, as if every partial inspection interested her only in the light of a wider spatial reconnaissance. Now she dwells on negligible details, perhaps tiny stylistic faults, for example the prominent Adam’s apple or your way of burying your head in the hollow of her shoulder, and she exploits them to establish a margin of detachment, critical reserve, or joking intimacy; now instead the accidentally discovered detail is excessively cherished—for
example, the shape of your chin or a special nip you take at her shoulder—and from this start she gains impetus, covers (you cover together) pages and pages from top to bottom without skipping a comma. Meanwhile, in the satisfaction you receive from her way of reading you, from the textual quotations of your physical objectivity, you begin to harbor a doubt: that she is not reading you, single and whole as you are, but using you, using fragments of you detached from the context to construct for herself a ghostly partner, known to her alone, in the penumbra of her semiconsciousness, and what she is deciphering is this apocryphal visitor, not you. (T, pp. 155–56)

It has been suggested that the Lettrice, the “other half” of the Lettore, is his antithesis and his privileged half. If the Lettore represents stupidity, the argument goes, the Lettrice represents “mystery” and displays a “singular literary taste.”16 But to attribute this much value to the Lettrice’s programmatic expressions, and hence to dissociate oneself completely from the Lettore, may entrap us within the cogwheels of Calvino’s game and may make us oblivious to the warning that the ludic I addresses to the Lettore (but which may as well be addressed to us): “If you continue lending yourself to this game, it means that you, too, are an accomplice of the general mystification” (T, p. 218). Thus it seems appropriate to suggest that, as we read Calvino’s novel, we should neither privilege nor condemn categorically any one reader’s methodology, any one reader’s practice of reading, but rather see them as the configuration of the mise en abîme game that is the structuring principle of the novel itself: in this way each reading can reflect and shed light on other readings, including, and especially, our own.

To dismiss, for example, Ludmilla’s sister—Lotaria—as her “diagnostic mirror image” (T, p. 215) who reads like a computer, and relies on the reading accuracy of machines rather than on the richness of the reader’s imagination, could prevent us from acknowledging her incisive characterization of Ludmilla as an escapist and regressive reader who reads “one novel after another, but . . . never clarifies the problems” (T, p. 44). Similarly, to view Silas Flannery (see chapter 8) as the epitome of mystification could blind us to his demystifying insight about Ludmilla: “The quality of perennial dissatisfaction seems to me characteristic of Ludmilla: it seems to me that her preferences change overnight and today reflect only her restlessness” (T, p. 192). Nevertheless, as we agree with Flannery’s characterization, we should not lose sight of the fact that it is Ludmilla’s insatiable desire for read-

16Garboli, p. 67.
ing that generates, in a chain of demand and supply, the particular narratives which, while “almost” fulfilling her ever-changing needs, provide us with Calvino’s memorable reflections on the act of reading. Each reader/character contributes something to our understanding of the reading process; even the “non-reader,” who in order to become a non-reader must unlearn how to read; even the “eight readers” in the library whose individual approaches, if dialectically conceived, provide us with a rich and kaleidoscopic view of the phenomenology of reading. It seems plausible to suggest, then, that the construct of the frame can be construed as a compendium of ways of reading, and that within this frame the ludic I, under the pretense of instructing, admonishing, and challenging the readers/characters—his silent addressees—invites us to join him in his attempt to grapple with, and to reflect on, the endless and labile configurations our minds de/re/construct in the act of reading.

Speaking about the relationship between text and reader in contemporary literature, Calvino once said:

Il gioco può funzionare come sfida a comprendere il mondo o come dissuasione dal comprenderlo; la letteratura può lavorare tanto nel senso critico quanto nel senso della conferma delle cose come stanno e come si sanno. Il confine non sempre è chiaramente segnato; dirò che a questo punto è l’atteggiamento della lettura che diventa decisivo; è al lettore che spetta di far sì che la letteratura espilichi la sua forza critica, e ciò può avvenire indipendentemente dalla intenzione dell’autore.¹⁷

Calvino, like Gadamer, posits a text’s critical force, that is, the text’s potential to bring about understanding of the text and self-understanding of the reader/interpreter, as a function of the reader’s attitude. (Critical force in this context I read as a text’s potential to foster critical thinking about thinking itself, which is the fundamental prerequisite to critical thinking about society, institutions, etc.) What Calvino is suggesting here seems to be the appropriate antidote for what Linda Hutcheon considers as the peculiar lack of interest among contempo-

¹⁷“The game can function as a challenge to understanding the world or as a deterrent from understanding it; literature can function as a critical force or as a confirmation of things, both as they are and as they are known to be. The borderline is not always clearly marked; I shall say that it is a reader’s attitude that becomes the decisive factor; it is the task of the reader to make it possible for reading to function as a critical force, and this can happen independently from the author’s intention.” Italo Calvino, “Cibernetica e fantasmi,” cited in Contardo Calligaris, Italo Calvino (Milan: Mursia, 1973), p. 99; translation mine.
rary readers and critics for the kind of fiction of which *If on a winter's night a traveler* is an example:

The fiction that is discussed in *Narcissistic Narrative* is, in some dominant and constitutive way, self-referring or autorepresentational: it provides, within itself, a commentary on its own status as fiction and as language, and also on its own processes of production and reception. I have often wondered if this might be one of the reasons why its didactic lessons have been so little heeded. Might metafiction, in its self-analytic overttness, be perceived as pre-empting the critic's role as commentator?\(^{18}\)

I think it is indeed tempting to dismiss Calvino's didacticism because it preempts the reader's role as commentator; but, of course, a reader/ critic can choose and strive to be other than a commentator; a reader/ critic can also be, as I will try to demonstrate, the silent, though not silenced, addressee as well as the silent interlocutor of the text's questions, a relationship that, as we shall see, casts into doubt the antimony we seem to read inevitably in the construct, writer's authority/reader's autonomy.

I have so far spoken about the frame, deliberately looking over the crevices that plunge us into the narratives. It is on the reading of those narratives that I now want to reflect in order to suggest both their connections with and their otherness from the reading experience that the frame fosters. Although the narratives can be read as autonomous, open-ended tales, in the event that constitutes the reading of Calvino's whole text, they are inextricably intertwined with the frame; they are both the reward for the lesson learned in each chapter of the frame and the testing ground for that lesson. For theoretical reasons—which are themselves significant, as they are reminders of the inevitable reduction our reading experience undergoes as we try to render it through the logic of written discourse—I have had to defer the discussion of their reading.

In comparison with the connections between the various "chapters" of the frame, the connections between the narratives are delicate, veiled, unobtrusive. Although the narratives, both in style and content, are radically different from one another, subtle links between and among them are established through clusters of words or phrases that echo and reverberate from one narrative to the title of the next. In a "net-

work of lines that enlace,” in a “network of lines that intersect” (such are the titles of the sixth and seventh narratives, titles that seem to fix for a brief moment some of the kinetic configurations of reading that the novel fosters), the recurrence of lexical nuclei spins “a veil of . . . images that settles on” other images and blurs them, evoking “memories suspended like the smoke under the lamps” (T, p. 19).

For example, in the first narrative, “If on a winter’s night a traveler,” we read, “The city outside there has no name yet, we don’t know if it will remain outside the novel or whether the whole story will be contained within its inky blackness” (T, p. 14). A few pages farther into the narrative, we read: “I am looking from the outside at the life of an ordinary evening in an ordinary little city” (T, p. 17). As we continue reading, and we come to the second narrative, which is separated from the first by the second chapter of the frame, its title, “Outside the town of Malbork,” reactivates the memory of the lines quoted above. Although not within that novel, and although it might not be that town, a town does appear inside the novel we are reading through the magic of the “inky blackness.” Similarly, the title of the third narrative (“Leaning from the steep slope”) and a passage in it (“I felt a kind of vertigo, as if I were merely plunging from one world to another, and in each I arrived shortly after the end of the world had taken place” [T, p. 56]) come retrospectively to be seen as a prelude to both the title of the fourth narrative—“Without fear of wind or vertigo”—and to its theme, i.e., that very fear of vertigo that the title seems to deny:

I look through the spaces between the iron steps at the colorless flow of the river down below, transporting chunks of ice like white clouds. In a distress that lasts an instant, I seem to be feeling what she feels: that every void continues in the void, every gap, even a short one, opens onto another gap, every chasm empties into the infinite abyss. (T, p. 82)

In the narratives, the references, echoes, reverberations seem to be less fixed and less often restated by the confirmations of that ludic I who in the frame so often deprives us of the pleasure of discovery. In the narratives, it seems, we are allowed more autonomy as readers. As the frame releases us from its didactic clutches, we can immerse ourselves more fully in the reading experience. Both “oblivious and highly alert,” we can take in the “murmuring of indistinct voices from which a word or a phrase might emerge, decisive for what comes afterward” (T, p. 18). We later discover, however, that the autonomy we can enjoy in the reading of the narratives is relative to the awareness

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of the reading process that we may have achieved in our reflexivity on the function and constraints of the frame; and that the enjoyment of such autonomy is a “programmed response” determined by the frame’s didacticism. Though reluctantly, we may have to admit that once more we have been framed. Then what is the difference in the structuring of a reader’s response between what we can now call the “outer frame” (i.e., the chapters) and the “inner frame” (i.e., the narratives)? Why does a reader, though ultimately aware of the elaborate structuring of his response, experience in the narratives a sense of greater autonomy and gratification?

It could be argued that while the outer frame teaches us how not to read (taken individually, the various characters’ reading methods are always flawed) or how to read, provided we learn from the characters’ shortcomings (Gadamer’s “herauserkennen”), the narratives “reward” us by giving us the opportunity to practice the lessons we have been taught, to reflect on our reading practices, and to partake of Calvino’s most intimate formulations of the reading process at the very moment that they seem to be thought. The particular reward that the reading of the narratives seems to offer the reader is the possibility to understand the generative, if terrifying, metaphor for the reading process outlined at the end of the last quotation: a void that continues in the void, a gap that opens into another gap, a chasm that empties into the infinite abyss. The reward is contingent (that is, it is a hypothesis) on the reader’s ability to locate himself simultaneously inside and outside of the process through which the “I”—who in the narratives writes as he reads, and reads as he writes his own thoughts—acknowledges and invites a Barthesian abolition, or at least a diminution, of “the distance between writing and reading” (IMT, p. 162):

These remarks form a murmuring of indistinct voices from which a word or a phrase might emerge, decisive for what comes afterward. To read properly you must take in both the murmuring effect and the effect of the hidden intention, which you (and I, too) are as yet in no position to perceive. In reading, therefore, you must remain both oblivious and highly alert, as I am abstracted but prick up my ears, with my elbow on the counter of the bar and my cheek on my fist. (T, p. 18)

Camouflaged as the reader of a nonexistent text—a text that begins to take shape, and to change as it takes shape at the very moment that it is being read—the writer writes by “reading,” in a sense by actualizing, “the murmuring effect and the effect of the hidden intention, which [he, like the reader, is] as yet in no position to perceive.”

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The narratives, then, can be seen as the place where Calvino intimates that the processes of reading and writing, and the activities of the reader and the writer, are joined "in a single signifying practice" (IMT, p. 162); for the reader who relentlessly reflects on his own reading practice, however, the narratives become the place where the reader of If on a winter's night a traveler discovers the extent to which his role as reader of a text may approximate, parallel, and occasionally "erase" that of the writer of the text. "The extent to which," and "occasionally" and "may," of course, signify, as we shall see later, Calvino's practice as the magister ludi. The trap he is setting for us is more covert than the one he set for the Lettore and the Lettrice, and the various other readers/characters in the text. It is a trap that sets up the "occasion" and defines "the extent to which" the rapprochement of reader and writer is indeed possible. Ultimately, it can be argued, we too are made to pay for our hubris. But this, I suggest, may very well depend on our attitude.

In order to expose Calvino's strategy of deceit, I must now reenact the entrapment, my only hope being, at this point, that by attempting to pursue the "knowing of the known," I may escape being "fictionalized," like the various readers/characters in the novel.

The first paragraph of the first narrative ("If on a winter's night a traveler") can be selected as an illustration of Calvino's strategy:

The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph. In the odor of the station there is a passing whiff of station café odor. There is someone looking through the befogged glass, he opens the glass door of the bar, everything is misty, inside, too, as if seen by near-sighted eyes, or eyes irritated by coal dust. The pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train, the cloud of smoke rests on the sentences. It is a rainy evening; the man enters the bar; he unbuttons his damp overcoat; a cloud of steam enfolds him; a whistle dies away along tracks that are glistening with rain, as far as the eye can see. (T, p. 10)

There have been times, in my repeated attempts to give an account of a possible reading of this passage, when I felt—I now know that I was "instructed" to feel—that the closest I could come to an understanding of Calvino's text was when I became its scribe. The performance of this form of writing, which is simultaneously a form of reading, a performance, in fact, in which the boundaries between the two activities are elided, is powerfully seductive. But the moment one consents, with all due irony, to become the Pierre Menard of this passage, one must also accept the threatening and paralyzing conse-
quences of this acceptance. As autonomous readers we are no more. The alternative, then, may be to accept that each attempt to describe a possible response to the passage may posit yet another reading, to accept that, with each successive reading, the gap between what one experiences as one reads and the phase of that experience one tries to account for opens wider, and to recognize that the more latent meanings one seems to uncover, the more the "spes hermeneutica" becomes a chimera. Except that, if I let the text engulf me, devour me, I will of course be silenced. Let me then suggest a possible reading of this passage, a reading that is a possible actualization of those instructions in the text that my approach enables me to read.

Let us assume that the interpretive key to this passage unlocks it as a text about the complexity of the reading process—a text that attempts "to transmit the writable that awaits to be written, the tellable nobody tells" (T, p. 171), that is, the writing of reading. In this case, the text’s resistance to be contained could be seen as an indication that this text—reading—cannot be bounded. We could argue that, as readers trained to be appreciative of, and cautious to impose strictures on, a text’s indeterminacy, we can claim for ourselves the right to write critical responses whose distinctive feature is indeterminacy. This claim, however, would be neither accepted nor recognized within the parameters of institutional written literary discourse.

In a lecture presented at the New York Institute for the Humanities, Calvino speaks of his practice as a writer:

I must say that most of the books I have written and those I intend to write originate from the thought that it will be impossible for me to write a book of that kind: when I have convinced myself that such a book is completely beyond my capacities of temperament or skill, I sit down and start writing it.

That’s what happened with my last novel, If on a winter’s night a traveler: I started imagining all the kinds of novels I would never write because I couldn’t; then I tried to write them and for some time I felt in myself the energy of ten different imaginary novelists.19

Although Calvino is concerned here with matters of writing, what he says about writing seems to be eminently appropriate to reading. "The urge for writing is always connected with the longing for something one would like to possess and master, something that escapes us" (NYR, p. 39). That “something” he longs for as a writer, the chimera he pur-

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sues, can be likened to that “something”—the complexity of thoughts, images, associations, and memories of other experiences, of other texts—that in the reading transaction a reader would like to possess. But if we want to retain a text’s indeterminacy, if in our reading we want to keep “intact all the seductions of desire,” as we reflect about and write about our reading practice, we can only hope, we must in fact settle for, “an occasional approach to that experience, not an arrival.”

When in the same lecture Calvino says of himself that “the moment my attention wanders from the settled order of the written lines to the movable complexity no sentence is able to hold entirely, I come close to understanding that on the other side of the words there is something words could mean” (NYR, p. 39), his words could be read as a commentary on the “movable complexity” that the opening passage of the first narrative in If on a winter’s night a traveler evokes. The text of the novel that begins in a railroad station is gradually erased by the “steam from a piston” which “covers the opening of the chapter.” The reader’s glance, wandering “from the settled order of the written lines” rewrites them, populates them with images always already known, until what the reader reads (writes) into the text merges with the words on the page, replaces them with other words, and other meanings, as the words on the page become more and more unreadable through the cloud of smoke that rests on the sentences. (Does this mean that as readers we can, in a sense, be more creative than as writers?)

Later in the narrative, the text reflects back to us, reminds us of, the confused yet vivid perception that the reading of the first page or so has generated: “The lights of the station and the sentences you are reading seem to have the job of dissolving more than of indicating the things that surface from a veil of darkness and fog” (T, p. 11). The search for the sentences, the search for the text that has generated the text “you are reading” (that “you” is all inclusive, it is us, the reader in the text, Calvino himself as the reader of the imaginary text) is futile but at the same time purposeful. It is futile because, Calvino suggests, the ur-text can never be read in its pristine form; it is purposeful because it calls attention to the irreducible elusiveness of the reading process. The mise en abîme structure of this text seems to demand of its readers a concomitant mise en abîme structure of questions and answers, “abyssal frames that engender each other without end or telos,”

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that the questioners of the text, questioned by the text, and questioning their very questioning of the text, resist the impulse of imposing closure on the horizons of understanding:

For a couple of pages now you have been reading on, and this would be the time to tell you clearly whether this station where I have got off is a station of the past or a station of today; instead the sentences continue to move in vagueness, grayness, in a kind of no man’s land of experience reduced to the lowest common denominator. Watch out: it is surely a method of involving you gradually, capturing you in the story before you realize it—a trap. (T, p. 12)

One more abyssal (abysmal?) frame. The confused perception I referred to earlier is now captured, involved, inscribed within the text; and so is the reader who, as he reads, becomes captive in a no man’s land of experience, enveloped in “a veil of darkness and fog” where his identity merges with the protean identity of the “I” that reads the blurred text, writes it, and enacts it as reader/writer/character/commentator. The role of the reader partakes of this plurality of roles, the transition from one to the other being simultaneously so gradual, sudden, and coterminous that it is impossible to demarcate the various phases.

Significantly, the language of the passages in which Calvino seems to reflect on this complex process is characterized by a synergistic synesthesia, a mode of perception that resists being concretized into one specific significance. 21 The passage defies conceptualization since conceptualization presupposes a segmentation and rearrangement of the total reading experience that would violate that experience’s multidimensionality. But as literary critics writing a response to this text, whatever the approach that shapes that response, we are bound by conventions that, as they impose order on the response, inevitably reduce its complexity. Are we then manipulated into acknowledging that this text sets itself beyond the grasp of literary criticism? And if so, what is the question about reading that we can “frame” out of and about this text?

The second narrative, “Outside the town of Malbork,” plays on the same deliberate blurring of a writing that actualizes itself into a reading which is both the erasure and virtual actualization of that writing:

An odor of frying wafts at the opening of the page, of onion in fact, onion being fried, a bit scorched, because in the onion there are veins that turn

21 For a discussion of the aesthetic of reception see Jauss, pp. 139–48.
violet and then brown, and especially the edge, the margin, of each little sliver of onion becomes black before golden, it is the juice of the onion that is carbonized, passing through a series of olfactory and chromatic nuances, all enveloped in the smell of simmering oil. Rape oil, the text specifies . . . (T, p. 34)

Like the passage from the first narrative, this passage too fosters the impression of a text erased as it is being read, the trace of the erasure producing a different text. The writer of the text we are reading poses again as the reader of a text that is beyond our reach, with the exception of its title and a few traces that are maddeningly elusive in their apparent specificity: “the opening of the page”; “Rape oil, the text specifies”;

and, further down:

Here everything is very concrete, substantial, depicted with sure expertise; or at least the impression given to you, Reader [Lettore], is one of expertise, though there are some foods you don’t know, mentioned by name, which the translator has decided to leave in the original; for example, schoëblintsjia. (T, p. 34)

“Here”? The deictic underlies the nonreferentiality of literary language. The gesture that could verify the deictic’s indicative function reminds us that in reading we are located, we exist, within aspatial and atemporal parameters. The absent presence—or present absence—of the translator in the text (which calls attention to William Weaver, the translator of Calvino’s text, and to us who in understanding inevitably translate) complicates even further the reader’s attempt to reach for the ur-text.22 Schoëblintsjia, the only trace beside “rape oil” left of that text, is deliberately called into question by the ludic I who, by mocking the Lettore for his tendency to reify reading (“you are ready to swear to the existence of schoëblintsjia”), seems to dare us not to do the same. But the ludic I who is reading/writing/narrating, admonishing, and instructing has engaged in the very same process of reification. The odor of frying, the onion being fried, its chromatic nuances, are, we must assume, his olfactory and visual actualization of a trace in the text he is reading and for whose reading he is claiming a certain kind of validity (“a bit scorched, because in the onion there are veins that turn violet and then brown”; emphasis mine). What is then the difference between the Lettore’s reification and the ludic I’s actualization (not to mention ours)? Is the difference, as Calvino playfully suggests, the Lettore’s (and our hypothetical) readiness “to

22See Gadamer on translation as an hermeneutical act, TM, pp. 345–51.
swear to the existence of . . .”? Is he suggesting we think about the ways we validate our interpretations?

As readers of If on a winter’s night a traveler we may be tempted at this point to dissociate ourselves in the narratives from the Lettore who, though more sophisticated than the Lettore/character in the chapters, is still teased (an indication of his inadequacy as a reader?) by the ludic I’s assertion that his alertness made him perceive from the very first lines that “this sense of concreteness . . . bears in it also the sense of loss, the vertigo of dissolution . . .” (T, p. 37). We might then decide that our association is with the ludic I, since by knowing the game he is playing we are indirectly playing the game. Moreover, since the ludic I can be thought of as being closer to Calvino than any of the readers/characters in the novel, we ourselves would be moving closer to Calvino. (Let me suggest that this may be responsible for the greater “gratification” the narratives seem to offer—a response which, if left “unquestioned,” may constitute a subtler form of entrapment.) We could even argue that this strategy might be seen as Calvino’s proclamation of the abolition of the boundaries between reading and writing, writer and reader. A reader, then, could indeed match a writer’s creativity, except that we cannot ignore that every move of ours has been planned, predicted, and even inscribed in the text. Like the I in “Leaning from the steep slope,” we may experience “a kind of vertigo, as if [we] were merely plunging from one world to another, and in each [we] arrived shortly after the end of the world had taken place” (T, p. 56). But I think there is another way of imagining how a reader’s “creativity” can approximate, in its kinetic sense, a writer’s creativity.

Significantly, beginning with the third narrative, the reflections about reading that this text engenders and thematizes shift focus. The center of consciousness is no longer a reader who writes a text that, for all its complexity, is both an erasure and a reduction of an ur-text, but rather a writer who is not only concerned with writing an all-inclusive text, a text that defies the fixity of writing, but also with writing a text that fosters a reading that can capture and actualize the writer’s intentions, rather than erase them.

The I that assembles and disassembles the text of the subsequent narratives is an I who is concerned with reading not as a perennial free play, substitution, or replacement, but rather with a reading that is structured by the writer’s rather than the reader’s free play:

All these oblique lines, intersecting, should define the space where we moved . . . (T, p. 80)
I’m producing too many stories at once because what I want is for you to feel, around the story, a saturation of other stories . . . (T, p. 109)

The first sensation this book should convey is what I feel when I hear the telephone ring. (T, p. 132)

These pages I am writing should also transmit a cold luminosity . . . (T, p. 163)

The recurrence of “should” could, of course, be read as an indication of the writer’s awareness that “the urge for writing is always connected with the longing for something one would like to possess and master, something that escapes us” (NYR, p. 39). “Should,” in other words, would indicate “conditionality”; that is, the possibility for the text to “define the space” (T, p. 80), to convey the sensation the “I” feels, to “transmit a cold luminosity” (T, p. 132) would be contingent on the narrative I’s ability “to possess and to master . . . [that] something that escapes us” (NYR, p. 39). I think it would be possible at this point to suggest that Calvino’s text is mocking its readers into the realization that though writers might celebrate the creativity and free play of the reader, they ultimately expect of their readers the response they have themselves envisioned. In fact, the whole text frames the reader’s response to such an extent that, it could be argued, the more active the reader, the greater the possibility of his being framed.

But let me now set up yet another abyssal frame, by means of which the text’s traces of “inky blackness” can come to foster a different realization. I have suggested earlier that, in his attempt to ask the question that a text seeks to answer and to pose again and again, a reader may indeed have to play the writer from a position close to though never identical with the writer’s. This, however, does not have to entail the antinomy that the concept reader’s autonomy/writer’s authority inevitably seems to suggest; the close-to-though-never-identical-with should imply an inevitable “otherness,” that otherness which writers who read their own writing (or readers who write their own readings) inevitably experience, whether or not and in whatever terms that realization be voiced; and even more so, writers who read somebody else’s writing or readers who write about somebody else’s reading. The realization that Calvino’s text may foster is that the possibility of mastering that “something that escapes us” is the chimera that haunts, and weighs down, every writer, whether that writer’s level of sophistication and reflexivity does or does not allow for the formulation of this realization. (I am thinking of our students who so often voice a version of this complaint.) That “possibility” is one that the
writer of a text may either choose to nullify—though, admittedly, this choice may not always be a conscious one—by deciding that his writing has achieved sufficient mastery over that something that escapes, or may choose to keep indeterminate, and thus forever possible, by writing the “escaping” itself, as Calvino so hauntingly does in the first and second narratives. And that possibility, of course, frames another possibility, a possibility that has a much stronger chance to remain a possibility because the already imperfect approximation between the writer and the reader of his own text will slide into further approximation when “another reader” (in the physical sense) is involved—another reader who, in order to understand the text, to interpret that understanding, and to apply the understanding acquired in the process to his understanding of that understanding, must try to recuperate the “sense” (Gadamer’s term seems to be so appropriate here) of the question that the text itself may question.

To a considerable degree, we have already said all we meant to say. . . . Since we have already said everything, the reader must bear with us if we continue on awhile. If we extend ourselves by force of play.23

If on a winter’s night [or on a summer’s night, or on any night, or day] a traveler (reader?), what will possibly happen?

It is significant that the condition one would expect the if of the title to define has not been settled. It is also significant that the title does not record the marks of ellipsis that would be the trace of an erasure of an intention that a reader would have to reconstitute. As it reads, however, the title suggests just a hypothesis, a hypothetical reading that the reader must continue to question, test, and reread, rewrite, reread. That if may come to loom terrifyingly in front of us—the more terrifying, in fact, the more we set up our relationship with the text in terms of the question of whose authority will have to be replaced for another’s autonomy to prevail—because that replacement can never be effected, as Calvino seems to suggest, even in the case of one’s reading of one’s own text.

Gadamer’s suggestion that the practice of reading be conceived as a dialogue, a hermeneutical conversation between text and reader,

23Derrida, p. 65.
offers a fruitful alternative to the antagonistic relationships between readers and texts that locate the power either in the text or in the reader, and this, I suggest, in spite of Gadamer’s perplexing reliance on textual divination and reader’s imagination. If we, following Gadamer’s advice, start questioning our preunderstanding of the relationship between authority and autonomy as inescapably antinomic, we may be able to conceive that relationship in more productive, though not necessarily more optimistic, terms. We can suggest that a reader comes to approximate a writer’s author-ity when he comes close to an understanding—always to be questioned and tested—of what the question that may have motivated that writer’s writing of his text may be. The difficulty in this reading practice is to prevent “the finality of both the text’s and the reader’s current opinions” to frame the reader, even knowing that it is the very nature of human understanding that makes the entrapment possible. As Gadamer argues, and as I have argued in Gadamer’s case, the “moments of blindness” are inevitable—what is not inevitable, however, is either our inherent blindness to their occurrence or our passivity to their ineluctability. Both attitudes threaten us to make us miss the opportunity to frame the “moments of blindness” into occasions for further readings, conversations, and meditations on the act of reading that is understanding, that is thinking.

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