On Italo Calvino
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who (and this is the song’s refrain) “does for him what mother never did for her son.”

The other stories in the collection each tackle a logos associated with a particular discipline—anthropology, musicology, historiography, the history of science—and turn it inside out, with dependably humorous results. Every code, lingo, and sliver of shop talk is handled with such reverential delicacy that it is impossible not to get the giggles. The title of one of the stories, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” reverberates sonorously from the depths of its own well (drilled unsuspectingly by T. S. Eliot’s prior use of the phrase). Isn’t this what Pierre Menard had in mind?

John Morse
On Italo Calvino

Italo Calvino’s If on a winter’s night a traveler (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, $12.95) is another novel written about itself. Its main character is a reader who sets out in the first chapter to read Italo Calvino’s new novel, If on a winter’s night a traveler. The themes are fundamentally self-conscious, if by that we mean that they are mostly concerned with literary matters. And it is experimental. It is a second-person narration, in which you the reader are referred to throughout as if you were the main character, or, put differently, in which the main character, the Reader, is referred to throughout as you. But wait. Don’t go away. This one is fun. And different.

First, it’s easy to read: no tortured syntax, no monkeyshines with paragraphs or punctuation. Roughly half of the book is in the form of a conversation (admittedly one-sided) between the author and you the reader, or Reader, and the writing style is of the sort appropriate to a conversation, easy, confidential, intimate.

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; the TV is always on in the next room. . . .

Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. . . . having your feet up is the first condition for enjoying a good read.
Adjust the light so you won’t strain your eyes. Do it now, because once you’re absorbed in reading there will be no budging you. . . . Try to foresee everything that might interrupt your reading. Cigarettes within reach, if you smoke, and the ashtray. Anything else? Do you have to pee? All right, you know best.

Second, the book is not really about writing at all. It’s about reading. The hero of this book is not some tortured or harried Author; the hero is the tortured or harried Reader. And it is not the process of writing that shapes this book; it is the process of reading that does the shaping. Third, the book is not bogged down in the intricacies of 20th-century literary theory. The kind of reading that shapes this book is not the fancy, bells-and-whistles reading that bristles with philosophical and literary-critical apparatus or that weaves strange and wonderful fairy tales about Discourse and Codes, Structures and Resonances. Instead this book sets out to redeem a different kind of reading experience, the simple voracious reading of the amateur reader. This is the reader who, like the hero of this book, enjoys the idea of sharing impressions about a book, but who often feels in over his head, intimidated by another’s breadth of reading or confused by the academically formulated question; the reader who stalks the public library but feels ill at ease on a university campus; the reader who, like Ludmilla, the beautiful Other Reader, does not “use books to produce other books” but who just likes “to read books and nothing else.”

In a way, this book disarms the would-be critic. So many of the traditional critical gambits are so effectively brushed aside that one feels disinclined to reassert them. We are dissuaded from spending too much effort trying to find similarities between this and other works of the author (better to enjoy the experience of “confronting something and not quite knowing what it is”). We are made to feel the folly of launching into high-powered historical and political readings that want to know the author’s position with regard to “Trends of Contemporary Thought and Problems That Demand a Solution” or that analyze books “according to Codes, Conscious and Unconscious, and in which all Taboos are eliminated, the ones imposed by the dominant Sex, Class, and Culture.” And we are shown the agonies to which deconstruction subjects a book, leaving it “crumpled, dissolved, [so that it] can no longer be recomposed, like a sand dune blown away by the wind.”

How then do we talk about this book? Fortunately the book does offer a program. In the penultimate chapter, the Reader becomes involved in an impromptu colloquium about reading with several other readers around a table in the public library.

The moment has come for you to speak. “Gentlemen, first I must say that in books I like to read only what is written, and to connect the details with the whole, and to consider certain readings as definitive; and I like to keep one book separate from the other, each for what it has that is different and new; and I especially like books to be read from beginning to end.”

The whole can be described as follows: If on a winter’s night a traveler is composed of 12 numbered chapters that trace the adventures of the Reader who would like to read a book all the way through, but who encounters instead a series of ten novel fragments that break off just as he is getting
involved. The agents of his frustration include printing and binding errors, theft, the vagaries of the academic world, forgeries, and political intrigue. Each time the Reader is frustrated in his attempts to finish a story, he sets out on an investigation to find the rest of the text of the story. And each time, he finds instead another story waiting to be read, each one more engrossing than the last. These are the ten novel fragments, that alternate with the numbered chapters which describe the Reader's quest. The fragments are gentle, sometimes even affectionate parodies of different literary styles, and each looks to be the beginning of a detective or mystery story.

Since the Reader, the one who is the main character in the story, is referred to as you, the reader, i.e., you if you decide to read this book, can go along with this gimmick and identify with the character as much or as little as you please. And if you can go along with it you are treated to the lovely feeling that Calvino has woven a fine fantasy just for you. One of the best parts of the fantasy is Ludmilla, the beautiful and intelligent Other Reader. The Reader meets Ludmilla in chapter two when he goes back to the bookstore to return his defective copy of *If on a winter's night a traveler*. She too has purchased a defective copy, and they both have decided to read instead a book by Tazio Bazakbal, *Outside the town of Malbork*, whose beginning they believe they have already read bound inside the covers of *If on a winter's night a traveler*. The bookstore owner points out Ludmilla, and the Reader is given what feels like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to strike up a conversation with this beautiful stranger. The opening moments of the conversation are, as the author points out, a little awkward. But she smiles, and by and by she gives you her telephone number.

Ludmilla's presence in the story serves to remind the reader (lowercase r) that Calvino's story is after all a fantasy, for Ludmilla possesses strange and mysterious characteristics. One of the strangest is her ability to determine the qualities of the next fragment the Reader will encounter. On various occasions Ludmilla states what kind of novel it is that she would like to read next, and the next novel that the Reader begins fulfills those requirements.

Calvino describes the different aspects of the experience of reading in loving detail. In the early chapters he describes the physical aspects of reading, the smell and feel of a new book, the sensations that go with separating uncut pages with a paper knife, the appearance of book spines arranged along a shelf. Calvino describes the joy of tracking down a reference in an atlas or encyclopedia, picking up on an author's stylistic tricks, and of sensing the ways authors and readers will anticipate one another as they read or write along. As the book progresses Calvino takes us on a tour of the readerly world and neatly satirizes each of its outposts: the bookstore that contains all the books you ought to be reading for all the different reasons; the library where all of the books the Reader seeks are in the card catalog but none, for a series of familiar reasons, is available; the university with its eccentric characters, fiery discussion groups, and a one-man department devoted to the literature of the world's only modern dead language, which, unfortunately, includes no finished works; and the publishing house, constantly on the brink of chaos and held together only through the efforts of a single elderly editor, Mr. Cavadagna.

Unlike many of today's writers, Italo Calvino does not lead a second life on a university campus. His other life is in a publishing firm, so perhaps it is not surprising that he has developed a keen sense for what it is like to be a reader outside of the academy. Not that this book is not populated with scholars,
critics, avant-garde artists, and political ideologues, but in spite of their best efforts a series of stories does emerge. At one point, Professor Uzzi-Tuzii, the professor in the one-man department, is sight-translating a story for the Reader. His translation is awkward at first, overly pedantic, cluttered with complicated glosses and descriptions of grammatical rules.

Then, little by little, something started moving and flowing between the sentences of this distraught recitation. The prose of the novel had got the better of the uncertainties of voice; it became fluent, continuous; Uzzi-Tuzii swam in it like a fish. . . .

Now, around you, there is no longer the room of the department, the shelves, the professor; you have entered the novel, you see that Nordic Beach, you follow the footsteps of the delicate gentleman. You are so absorbed that it takes you awhile to become aware of a presence at your side. Out of the corner of your eye you glimpse Ludmilla. She is seated on a pile of folio volumes, also completely caught up in listening to the continuation of the novel.

This is one of the little victories in this book, and it is repeated several times. Despite garbled translations, uncertain authorship, and cumbersome political and historical-critical apparatus, the stories do survive. A good book and an avid reader seem able to triumph over all.

The reader of this book likewise experiences a little victory, for despite a format that seems designed to frustrate, the work, as a whole, is satisfying. The fragments establish and then meet a set of expectations: that they be pleasingly imitative; that they break off just as a plot line emerges. And the frame story of the Reader helps keep the novel moving. But finally the reader’s sense of the book’s wholeness comes from Calvino’s exploration of the readerly world: the diversity of literary forms, the critical landscape, the private pleasures, the shared experiences. It is this inventory, with its sense of fullness and good fellowship, that leaves the reader satisfied when, at last, beckoned to bed, you respond, “just a moment, I’ve almost finished If on a winter’s night a traveler by Italo Calvino.”

Part II of our Special Feature on

\{IN RE\} NOVATIVE FICTION

will appear in the next issue.