THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

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RMST 202

Romance Studies, Modernism to the Present

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If on a Winter's Night a Traveler: Italo Calvino and the Ends of Discourse

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If on a Winter's Night a Traveler: Italo Calvino and the Ends of Discourse

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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You are about to begin watching
a lecture about Italo Calvino’s novel,
If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler.

Are you the kind of person who watches or reads such lectures in the hope of finding out something new?

Are you the kind of person who watches or reads such lectures in the hope of finding out something new?

Or is this another chore, something else you have to find time to do amid other responsibilities?

In fact, on sober reflection, you prefer it this way, confronting something and not quite knowing yet what it is.

Calvino’s novel plays with the reader, raising and then dashing expectations of what fiction is all about

The book is as much metafiction as fiction.
This is part of its postmodernism,
its ludic break with convention and its
diffidence towards closure.

On the other hand, at least at first, it is very familiar, addressing you in the second person (“you”) and acknowledging aspects of the reading experience that other novels take for granted or prefer to ignore.

It acknowledges the reader’s presence and their (your) contributions to story-telling, inviting them in and making the Reader a character.

It acknowledges the reader's presence and their (your) contributions to story-telling, inviting them in and making the Reader a character.

Without readers, after all, there would be no authors.

Calvino’s assumptions about his readers can be read either as a gentle critique of ideology, or as a symptom of the way his book still shores up gendered expectations about authorship and authority.

METAFICTION AND MATERIALILTY

If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller is metafiction, a fiction about fiction.

If on a Winter's Night a Traveller is metafiction, a fiction about fiction.

It does not pretend to offer a self-enclosed world, to hold up a realistic "mirror" to reality.

It acknowledges that novels are constructions, which draw on textual strategies to attract and ensnare readers who have many other demands upon their time and attention.

It directly addresses the reader,
to make plain the expectations and
implicit contract that are the basis for
reading and writing alike.

It also reminds us that a book is a physical as well as a discursive artifact—a thing that has to be written and produced, printed and circulated, accessed and bought (borrowed or stolen), and then opened and read in a particular setting of time and place..

“In the shop window you have promptly identified the cover with the title you were looking for. [. . .] Having rapidly glanced over the titles of the volumes displayed in the bookshop, you have turned toward a stack of If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler fresh off the press, you have grasped a copy, and you have carried it to the cashier” (4-5, 6).

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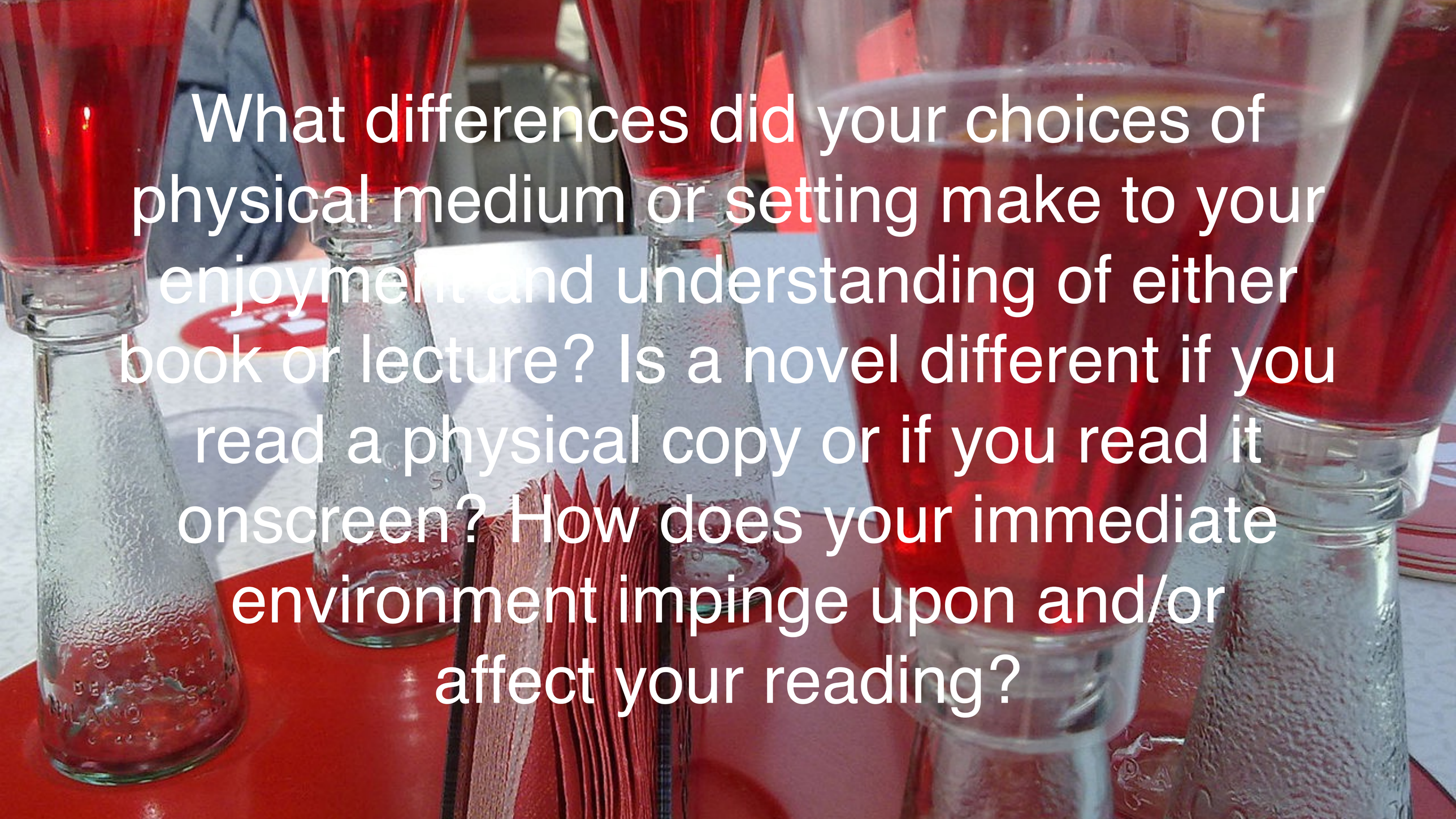
“Having rapidly glanced over the titles of the volumes displayed in the bookshop, you have turned toward a stack of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* fresh off the press, you have grasped a copy, and you have carried it to the cashier.” (6)

Any novel has to compete with everything else the world has to offer, in an accelerated economy of information and distraction.

What differences did your choices of physical medium or setting make to your enjoyment and understanding of either book or lecture? Is a novel different if you read a physical copy or if you read it onscreen? How does your immediate environment impinge upon and/or affect your reading?



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The material reality of reading usually goes without saying.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover!”

The physical infrastructure of pages and print, or pixels and platform, makes reading possible.

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pages and print, or pixels and platform,
makes reading possible.

Without it, there would be no book.

We often only notice the web of textures and things upon which reading depends when, for some reason, it breaks.

In Calvino’s novel, the web of things and relations in which books are enmeshed is continually breaking or being ripped apart.

“The novel begins in a railway station, [. . .] a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph. [. . .] The pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train. [. . .] All of this is a setting you know by heart, with the odor of train that lingers even after all the trains have left.” (11,12)

“Watch out: it is surely a method of involving you gradually, capturing you in the story before you realize it—a trap.” (12)

Outside the Town of Malbork

Outside the Town of Malbork

“An odor of frying wafts at the opening of the page.” (34)

“And so you see this novel so tightly interwoven with sensations suddenly riven by bottomless chasms, as if the claim to portray vital fullness revealed the void beneath.” (43)

“Another trap. Just when I was
getting involved in it,
when I wanted to read more.” (45)

And so Calvino’s novel continues,
a sequence of interrupted readings
caused by a series of mishaps.

Driven by the reader’s fantasy that
all narrative must come to its pre-ordained
conclusion, time and again we see
this quest waylaid by the
accidents of (mis)fortune.

Just as the reader is being drawn into the narrative fiction, the “real world” impinges and we have instead the (increasingly bizarre) tale of the reader’s efforts to see these stories to their end.

But the result is only further narrative proliferation.

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 intersect, on the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon around an empty grave—What story down there awaits its end? —he asks, anxious to hear the story.” (258)

The only narrative that reaches any kind of conclusion is the one that has to, somehow.

The only narrative that reaches any kind of conclusion is the one that has to, somehow.

This is Calvino’s novel itself.

“Just a moment, I’ve almost finished
If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler
by Italo Calvino.” (260)

Even a book made up solely of beginnings has to end somewhere.

all readers tire, and in the last instance ultimately die. Any discourse meets its limits in the concrete facts of contingency and chance, corporeal decrepitude and ruination. These are its ultimate constraints.

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ESCAPING GENDERED ENDINGS

Calvino perhaps inevitably comes to over-commit in his description of our (your) social and physical specificity.

“You are about to read Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler.*” (3)

“You are about to read Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler.*” (3)

“You are the sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything.” (4)

You, the reader, and the Reader who is a character in the chapters that alternate with the sequence of openings to (imaginary) novels increasingly diverge.

You are not “the” Reader; you are simply “a” reader, a reader whom the novel can never fully anticipate.

At the same time as there is identification with the Reader, there is also disidentification.

At the same time as there is identification with the Reader, there is also disidentification.

You are not exactly the reader that Calvino imagines you to be.

“Female readers of Calvino are at
an advantage when observing the quiet,
hidden workings of what one
calls ‘ideology.’ . . .

. . . When it gradually becomes clear that Calvino's 'Reader' is a *he*, that it is a male eye who reads and seeks the completion of each of the novels he starts, we, women, start to separate ourselves from our interpellation by the novel's *You*."
(Sigi Jöttkandt)

“What Calvino is subtly demonstrating for us is that what one believes are simply the normal workings of the world, the way things naturally are, is in fact a masculine perspective. The normal or default way of the world is the male one” (Sigi Jöttkandt)

“The readers may also be women [. . .], but the Writer or the Author is only and always male.” (Teresa de Lauretis)

“This vision of woman as passive capacity, receptivity, readiness to receive—a womb waiting to be fecundated by words (*his* words), a void ready to be filled with meanings, or elsewhere a blank page awaiting insemination by the writer’s pen—is a notorious cliche of Western literary writing.” (Teresa de Lauretis)

“For a woman to write is to usurp a place, a discursive position, she does not have by nature or by culture.” (Teresa de Lauretis)

Calvino’s playful questioning and subversion of the novel form do not go nearly far enough.

All this demonstrates the limits of Calvino's postmodern democratization of literature, of his revelation of its material conditions and his invitation to the reader to participate in the construction of the text.

“Foster [. . .] sees a ‘basic opposition’ in cultural politics today between a ‘postmodernism of resistance . . . which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo’ and a ‘postmodernism of reaction’ which repudiates modernism only to celebrate the status quo.”
(Teresa de Lauretis)

“Lotaria, the bad sister and mirror image of Ludmilla, is the negative image of Woman.”
“Lotaria [. . .] is the Non-Feminine Woman. Indeed, she is the feminist militant who doesn't read novels simply for the pleasure of reading but cannot help analyzing and debating them.” (Teresa de Lauretis)

Yet this counter-reading against the grain
of the novel, this impulse to debate
If a Winter's Night a Traveler, also saves it,
in that it identifies within it
a line of flight or escape.

“One is tempted to read Lotaria as the true postmodern writer/reader, the representative of a postmodernism of resistance who successfully escapes not only capture by the narrative [. . .] but also, and more important, captivity in the conjugal bed.” (Teresa de Lauretis)

All novels have to end, but their endings
are not necessarily pre-determined
by how they begin.

The basic premise of Calvino’s novel is that when a text breaks off, its future remains open, and so by implication even when we come to its final page, it could always have ended otherwise.

The novel only lives on in the debates and commentary that it provokes.

MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”

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