

(Re)constructing the Incipit: Narrative Beginnings in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and Freud's *Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis*

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The drastic and self-conscious deflection from conventional narrative models in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) invites a reflection on the limits as well as on the possibilities of the notion of narrative structure. Through an apparently mimetic move, the novel poses its metaliterary question by organizing itself on two dialectical levels; it is the ensuing ironic contrast that gives rise to a critical undertaking. On a microscopic or fragmentary level, each of the ten different stories that Calvino begins to tell follows those very narrative conventions which are then put into question by the macroscopic attempt to unite all of them within the boundaries of one cover, of one book—if not exactly of one text. Each of the stories articulates with vehemence a set of rigidly followed narrative and generic rules, which is quickly overturned by an inevitable friction with the sheer presence of nine other such stories. For although each seems to function well within its own conventions, none of these narrations succeeds in reaching a conventionally satisfactory end. Hence the striking peculiarity of a structure formed by an assemblage of ten *incipits*, which in turn alternate with chapters where the story of the Reader ("il Lettore," the Male Reader) and the Other Reader ("la Lettrice," the Female Reader) is told. This is the telling of a reading which mirrors that of the general reader and which in this way allegorizes many tenets of literary theory, especially reader-response theory in which the text anticipates the reader's participation in its actualization; but this

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE STUDIES, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1993.
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telling is also a conventional, perhaps even a banal love story. Reading-story and love-story are combined to form an alternative plot with which the general reader can easily identify and which will at least attempt to compensate for the disadvantage and the inevitable frustration of the lack of apparent continuity in the sequel of *incipits*.

This insistence of the beginning of the story as the structuring—and de-structuring—force of the text is also a necessary precondition for Freud's psychoanalytic understanding of the Rat Man, the patient described in his *Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* (1909). What constitutes Freud's work seems to be precisely a therapeutic quest for the beginning, whose overwhelming importance gets diffused in the text through a plurality of beginnings; these correspond in turn to the plurality of stories that develop in the case study insofar as the latter is a "polycephalous" genre. In addition to the beginning of the case study itself, the story of the treatment also requires its own beginning. Moreover, the purpose of the entire treatment is to attain the beginning of the illness, its ultimate origin. This "actual" beginning, however, is displaced in these *Notes* outside, or rather around, the text—in the notorious footnote number thirty-eight.¹

The distance placed between the text and its inception may be regarded as a sort of exorcism against the ineluctably determining power of the beginning with respect to the unfolding of the entire story. The footnote stands at the very origin of this narrative and, as will become increasingly clear, of Freud's other narratives, too. For the power of the narrative beginning runs a serious risk of becoming a black hole that denies existence to the rest of the text. *Winter's Night* is very well aware of this possibility: "Perhaps his reading is so intense that it consumes all the substance of the novel at the start, so nothing remains for the rest. This happens to me in writing: for some time now, every novel I begin writing is exhausted shortly after the beginning, as if I had already said everything I have to say."² This reflection by the fictional novelist Silas Flannery occurs in the text immediately before the description of the novel which Flannery wants to write and which happens to be an exact description of *Winter's Night* (WN 197–98). Fear of the beginning is thus placed next to the inevitable existence of the text as it develops beyond its beginning, even though this text may be nothing more (and nothing less) than a collection of such beginnings.

The discontinuity of such an accumulative structure is justified in the

first chapter with an assertion which stresses the link between narrativity and temporality (a link discussed at length by Georges Poulet, for example): "the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot love or think except in fragments of time each of which goes off along its own trajectory and immediately disappears" (WN 8).³ Although this explosion of time, central to the atemporality of the unconscious, engenders a multiplicity of stories and therefore also of beginnings, there must nevertheless be in the text *one* unquestionable beginning which constitutes the justifying referent of narrativity, even though it may not quite correspond to that absolute beginning which the reader expects. And how can one question the beginning without questioning the entire text? In Freud's account not only the beginning but also the end are displaced in a footnote. They are situated around the text proper, in a place that has been aptly called the "paratext."⁴ The Rat Man's illness begins at footnote number thirty-eight and it ends in footnote number nineteen (RM 102), which happens to be placed at the very end of the text, after the last words of the last section. Is this an end after the end, just as the other footnote was a beginning after the beginning? It is in this last footnote and not in the body of the text that both the death of the Rat Man during the Great War and, more important, the restoration of his mental health after psychoanalytic treatment are announced. If the beginning and the end both lie in "paratextual" footnotes, the apparent end of the actual text is also but another beginning, for the last paragraph of this case study outlines the beginning of another case-study: "I have at present an opportunity of studying a lady suffering severely from obsessional acts . . ." (RM 102).

The plot, the story—that necessary middle element—is enclosed between highly mobile and even volatile points whose wavering instability in both Freud's and Calvino's texts validates the reader's impression of the fictional nature of narrative closure. This fictionality turns into a humorous game with the usual endings of Calvino's ten *incipits*, each caused by a highly unlikely succession of material stumblings in the chain of book and text production. The first sixteen pages of the first book that the Reader buys repeat themselves throughout the text; in the second book, after the first chapter, for every two printed pages there are two blank ones; the author of the third book commits suicide after writing the first chapter; the fourth book is torn to pieces so that it may be analyzed by many different study groups at once; the photocopied part of the fifth book ends abruptly; the sixth book is stolen by the strange figure of a Non-Reader in

order to be incorporated into a sculpture; the seventh book is stolen by U.F.O. fanatics who believe it contains a message from extra-terrestrials; the eighth book is confiscated by customs officials in South America; the text of the ninth book is jumbled up by a computer that was supposed to scan it; finally, the author of the tenth and last book is arrested just as he is about to give it to the Reader. The series of interruptions leads both the thematized Reader and us the readers to a heightened awareness of “the role of the reader” (also the title of a book by Umberto Eco) in the realization of the text, in its “concretization” (Ingarden’s term).⁵ The interruptions highlight the fact that, as Eco puts it, “the text is a lazy mechanism,” a mechanism, that is, which urges its reader to introduce meaning: “a text wants someone that helps it to function.”⁶

This exchange between text and reader in the production of meaning is thematized throughout *Winter’s Night*. In the first *incipit*, for example, we read the narrator’s apostrophe to the R/reader: “Watch out: it is surely a method of involving you gradually, capturing you in the story before you realize it—a trap” (WN 12). The framing function of the plot, its conventionally established emphasis on the definition of boundaries, is both thrust to the foreground and questioned at once by its own multifarious presence. By its excessive production of beginnings and ends, the text both underlines and puts into doubt the need for their very existence. There must be beginnings, yet it seems as if there must not necessarily be a, or even less, *the* beginning. At the same time, the structure of the chapters where the story of the Readers is told reinstates the need for such a determined and determining beginning through an ironic procedure so typical of Calvino’s writing. As Jerry Varsava remarks of *Winter’s Night* and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*:

there is an unmistakable self-parodic element in *Winter’s Night* that deflates any notion that this novel has achieved the status of an objective critique of the Western literary tradition, or of some part of it. . . . This “happy ending” effects a closure of plot, a closure destabilized, however, by the novel’s irony and metafictional commentary.⁷

It is this constant self-ironizing that preserves the ludic character of the text, even—or especially—in its more metafictional (and potentially authoritarian) moments.

This critical self-reflection can be observed in the first *incipit*, where the implicit importance of the beginning is undermined by the absence of what is supposed to follow the beginning and thus confer upon it its rightful significance—a significance based at all times on the existence of a text which comes after the beginning and in relation to which the beginning itself acquires a meaning. As the narrator states, “a situation that takes place at the opening of a novel always refers you to something that has happened or is about to happen, and it is this something else that makes it risky to identify with me, risky for you the reader and for him the author” (WN 15). The risk is that of being framed (“Let us see, Other Reader, if the book can succeed in drawing a true portrait of you, beginning with the frame and enclosing you from every side, establishing the outlines of your form” [WN 142]), of being trapped in a plot which cannot be linear any longer because of the explosion of time but which draws nevertheless on conventions of linearity for its coming into being and for its successful functioning in general.

The beginning thus acquires a complex semiotic function, which is in some respects independent of the rest of the story yet usually functions right next to it. The beginning has to be exorcised so as to tame its immense and otherwise intractable power as well as the threat it poses of sucking the whole tale inside itself in the process of reading and writing. Nevertheless, it is this very ability to take in the entire story that turns it into a process of desire and therefore of metonymic displacement aimed at (pleasurably) postponing the narrative end: as Roland Barthes comments about the “gradual unveiling” of both the “text of pleasure” and striptease, “all the excitement lies in the *hope* of seeing the sexual organ (the school-boy’s dream) or of knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction).”⁸ *Winter’s Night* prolongs the pleasurable movement of desire by multiplying the number of beginnings—why restrict oneself to only one beginning if one may have ten instead? “There are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents— . . . And only *one* for birthday presents, you know,” as Alice so eloquently puts it. An alternative may of course be a text that is only a beginning (one continuous birthday, or rather, un-birthday). The eighth chapter of the novel (consisting of Silas Flannery’s diary) weighs this possibility:

I would like to be able to write a book that is only an *incipit*, that maintains for its whole duration the potentiality of the beginning,

the expectation still not focused on an object. But how could such a book be constructed? Would it break off after the first paragraph? Would the preliminaries be prolonged indefinitely? Would it set the beginning of one tale inside another, as in the *Arabian Nights*?
(WN 177)

Calvino's solution, different from all of the above, could logically follow them, forming a fourth, hypothetical choice: would it have several beginnings, generically different from one another yet all following equally recognizable literary conventions? Indeed, the fascination with the *incipit* corresponds to a fascination with the rites of textual entrance and with the possibilities that these allow by opening and/or closing a number of narrative directions: "I feel the thrill of a beginning that can be followed by multiple developments, inexhaustibly, I am convinced there is nothing better than a conventional opening, an attack from which you can expect everything and nothing" (WN 177).

The potentiality of the beginning, however, is not what exhausts its signifying capacity, since the beginning is also, ironically enough, always already begun—a characteristic which makes its definition difficult if not altogether impossible. The charm that the *incipit* exudes in Calvino's text cannot be reduced to an ingenious exploitation of conventions and potentiality, although it is precisely in such terms that, as we have seen so far, the status of the beginning tends to be self-critically considered in *Winter's Night*. For as soon as the linguistic ambiguity of the story comes into play in the text the cards are reflexively reshuffled. The Italian word *storia* means at once story, history, and romance or love story. Is this ambiguity not always present to some degree and in a more or less concealed way in the text? At the beginning of the romance between the Reader and the Other Reader, the possibility of talking about a beginning as a definable unit is questioned for the first time, and even then this doubting is distanced by being placed in parentheses:

(To begin. You're one who said it, Ludmilla. But how to establish the exact moment at which a story [or a romance] begins? Everything has already begun before, the first line of the first page of every novel refers to something already happened outside the book. Or else the real story is the one that begins ten or a hundred pages further on, and everything that precedes it is only a pro-

logue. The lives of the individuals of the human race form a constant plot . . .)

(WN 153)

The dominant quest of *Winter's Night* is one of beginning(s), an endeavor unceasingly destabilized by the stealthy infiltrations of romance and history into the story or plot, the always-already accomplished entrance of the romance (*storia*) and the history (*storia*) into the story (*storia*). The roots of its own indefinability and interruption are thus already inside the *storia* (as well as inside the *incipit*), so that the multiplication of beginnings may be seen as nothing but an ironic negation of the conceptual viability of the "beginning." In fact, the contamination of romance and story is postulated much before the troublesome question "how to establish the exact moment at which a story begins?" It appears precisely during the first encounter of the Reader with the Other Reader: "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" (WN 32).

Although it subverts the possibility of talking about the beginning as a definable unit, this mutually contaminating interaction is quickly perceived as the object of desire which the text strives for, the book which is pursued throughout the chapters as well as throughout the *incipits*. The Other Reader says, "the book I would like to read now is a novel in which you sense the story arriving like still-vague thunder, the historical story along with the individual's story . . ." (WN 72). By the ninth chapter, the contamination is completed in an irreversible fashion, attracting the wrath of the narrator against the Reader: "But do you imagine it can go on in this way, this story? No, not that of the novel! Yours! How long are you going to let yourself be dragged passively by the plot?" (WN 218). The story of the Reader and the story of the novel are obviously indistinguishable, being impossible to define in the discourse of *Winter's Night* as well as in that of reader-response theory. It is with an analogous understanding, then, that Wolfgang Iser writes: "this virtual dimension [the product of a creative activity . . . which endows the text with its reality] is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination."⁹

The distasteful fusion perceived by the narrator between the story of the novel and the story of the R/reader has a parallel in the confusion

which develops and finds its material support in the character of the Reader-protagonist, who is at once a literary character, an allegory of the "implied reader" (in Iser's sense), and a possible representation of the actual reader, the addressee of the text. The story/romance that the Reader contemplates from his first meeting with the Other Reader leads to a continuously played out analogy of desire(s): the desire for the book which he is pursuing and beyond whose beginning he can never move (although in the very last chapter the Readers are seen in bed reading *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino) and the desire for the Other Reader which in the end he succeeds in carrying through to its climax, although not necessarily to its satisfaction. As the Reader is waiting for the Other Reader in a café, his expectation for the text which he is reading becomes entangled with his expectation for the woman: "You concentrate on your reading, trying to shift your expectation for her to the book, as if hoping to see her come toward you from the pages" (WN 140).¹⁰

This merging of desires through the confusion of their objects throws the question of the beginning into another frame of reference, which constantly moves from histories to stories, romances, and then backwards all over again. The body becomes a text and vice versa, so that when finally the story/romance is consummated, it is nothing but an act of reading, upon which the frustrated search for the book/story is thrust so as to be given some vicarious satisfaction and thus be made less painful. The analogy starts with an obvious irony: "Lovers' reading of each other's bodies (of that concentrate of mind and body which lovers use to go to bed together) differs from the reading of written pages in that it is not linear" (WN 156). We can only chuckle at this statement, in a book where interruption and return are the rules of the reading game; but more later about the metadiscourse on the plot carried out in this passage.

One cannot fail to recognize in this text the extreme point to which the knot of the romance/story is taken. The linguistic and conceptual link is temporal as well as spatial. Not only do the story and the romance proceed along parallel lines and become therefore subject to confusion in time, but also the very structures on which this double temporal sequence develops, the book and/or the body, become inseparably joined together, even if there is no underlying pun: "Today each of you is the object of the other's reading, each reads in the other his or her unwritten story" (WN 156).¹¹ The point, however, is that this story, the Reader's as well as the

Other Reader's, is in fact very legibly written. (Conversely, Barthes maintains, "does the text have a human shape, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body.")¹² The analogy of book and body turns each of them into pleasurably written or, better yet, *historiated* physical objects. The bodies become actual stories in the temporality which is inscribed upon them, while the beginning in its sublimated form (which perhaps exists only in an outdated imaginary) is a maze of story, romance, and history.

One of the leading master dialecticians of labyrinths is, of course, Sigmund Freud. In the famous footnote number thirty-eight of the *Notes*, he postulates the beginning of the Rat Man's narrative and everyone else's through a nexus of tales (RM 63–66). The very aim of psychoanalytic therapy is the (re)construction of the patient's biography as a story. Steven Marcus points out that the implication of Freud's case studies is that "a coherent story is in some manner connected with mental health. . . . Inversely, illness amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself."¹³ As a consequence, the account of one's life is intimately linked to fictional storytelling. The history of childhood as it is rewritten in puberty, in the form of a romance, is inscribed in the history of the patient; it is to be read and decoded by the analyst, the mastermind of the plot, which is at all times also a conspiracy. The polysemy of Calvino's triple significance of "story" is woven throughout Freud's footnote in the choice of similes. The process of remodeling childhood memories is compared to "the process by which a nation constructs legends about its early history," while the memories of auto-eroticism are turned into memories of object-love, "just as a real historian will view the past in the light of the present" (RM 64). These amorous-historical processes, however, are all carried out in a literary manner, as can be seen in Freud's description of "the clearest traces of the presence in [the patient's] mind of an imaginative production of a positively epic character" (RM 65). Hence, the beginning of the patients' history is also the beginning of their story. Their auto-eroticism is turned into a love-story, as the frog into a prince, through the spellbinding kiss of literature, the production of a narrative romance. The beginning of the story is then the history of the romance, as the beginning of the history is the story of the romance. But then, Calvino's question turns up again: how to determine when a story begins?

If there is a beginning, then it may be sought in footnote number

thirty-eight. But is there one? The literary nature of childhood romance is what casts the shadow of an even darker doubt on the issue. The story of the rat punishment itself had been read by the captain (RM 27)—possibly in Octave Mirbeau's *Torture Garden*, published in Paris in 1899—and Freud himself does not hesitate to “clarify” his hypothesis by means of various literary quotations from Goethe and Shakespeare to Ibsen, Sudermann, and Le Poitevin.¹⁴ Furthermore, the therapy itself begins because the patient happens to read one of Freud's stories, which acquire in this way an unequivocally generative power (RM 33).

This genealogical process spreads both within and outside Freud's text, in a ramification that infiltrates even into the description of the personal history of reading in *Winter's Night*. As with Freud's patient, it becomes apparent that all stories lead back to the Reader's childhood: “all the books I read are leading to a single book . . . but it is a book remote in time, which barely surfaces from my memories. There is a story that for me comes before all other stories. . . . In my readings I do nothing but seek that book read in my childhood” (WN 256). Just as the Rat Man's stories all point to the same childhood story/romance, so all the fictions read in *Winter's Night* point to an archetypal childhood parable. The question now is whether this is a story like all the others, or whether it holds a special place in the narrative hierarchy: “This flotsam of some childish reading should also be included in your list of interrupted books. But what title does it have?” (WN 258).¹⁵ Since the titles of the other ten *incipits* form a narrative when placed one next to the other, the title given to this childhood story is put at the end in yet another displacement of the beginning. The title chosen for the childhood legend is *He Asks, Anxious to Hear the Story*. The title figures the temporal inception of all reading because it is the first book ever read, and at the same time it reveals desire as the origin of all reading by postulating that a demand and some level of anxiety should be linked to the storytelling process.

Both story and history carry within themselves the remnants of their roots in the childhood primer on which the first reading was performed. However, this childhood book is also viewed as another one among the interrupted tales, and the question of where and when a story begins recurs once more. At the *end* of the book this question of *beginning* is partly and hastily relocated as a question of literary history with the statement, “The trouble is that once upon a time they all began like that, all novels” (WN 258). The issue is historically displaced so as to appear as

a purely modern concern. The phrase “once upon a time” is a modifier that destabilizes the statement by artificially severing the “modern” novel (written after “once upon a time”) from the “traditional” one in which the beginning, supposedly, did not cause problems.

Still, one cannot help but wonder whether it is in fact always the same story that the reader encounters. In the case of Freud’s text, this is certainly true: the various narratives may each have a different appearance, but in the final analysis it is always the same story that is being told. The captain’s story is also the literary text which he has read and which is disseminated around his telling of it; it is this narrative which proliferates pathologically in the Rat Man’s psyche. Thus, the different obsessions through which this story is repeated are also different manifestations of one archetypal tale: “if a number of obsessions succeed one another they are often—even if their wording is not identical—one and the same” (RM 80).

The obsessions are also narrations—pathogenic stories which therapy must replace with a narratively coherent biography. This process will restore the patient’s mental health once it has been repeated often enough to become convincing to the patient, who is its material support. In another footnote to his *Notes*, Freud asserts that “a sense of conviction is only attained after the patient has himself worked over the reclaimed material, and so long as he is not fully convinced the material must be considered as unexhausted” (RM 40). What patients have to work over and become convinced of is their own life-story, the history/romance whose structure and essence are explained in footnote number thirty-eight. Childhood memory is at the origin of all narrations and is not only a beginning but constitutes a story in its own right. This ab-original parable is an inevitable consequence of being human: all of the Rat Man’s narratives go back to the same plot, and all of Freud’s patients’ narratives go back to that same story (“doesn’t every story lead back to the Œdipus?” asks Barthes rhetorically).¹⁶ Œdipus thus becomes not only the archetypal modality of storytelling but also an inexhaustible pool of narrative material, whose elements are reshuffled and repeated *ad infinitum*.

This very notion of repetition is what may finally help to make some sense of the beginning of *Winter’s Night*, which questions whether the concept of beginning is viable at all after it has become apparent that a story, *any* story, is, at least to some extent, always already begun. The importance of repetition for the very existence of narrative development

has been convincingly discussed by Peter Brooks: repetition is what allows for duration in the text; it is that exorcistic practice which frees the text from being consumed by its own beginning—a fear all too present in *Winter's Night*, as we have seen.¹⁷ The narrative configuration of beginning, middle, and end as a structure based on repetition is critically reflected upon in Calvino's text at the exact moment of the first sexual encounter between the Reader and the Other Reader. Having ironically claimed a difference in the degree of linearity between the reading of the body and the reading of the pages, the text continues:

Lovers' reading of each other's bodies . . . starts at any point, skips, repeats itself, goes backward, insists, ramifies in simultaneous and divergent messages, converges again, has moments of irritation, turns the page, finds its place, gets lost. A direction can be recognized in it, a route to an end, since it tends towards a climax, and with this end in view it arranges rhythmic phases, metrical scansions, recurrence of motives. But is the climax really the end? Or is the race toward that end opposed by another drive which works in the opposite direction, swimming against the moments, recovering time? . . . What makes lovemaking and reading resemble each other most is that within both of them times and spaces open, different from measurable time and space.

(WN 156)

This last sentence, the fragment of an "erotics of reading" à la Barthes, runs contrary to the preceding ironic statement about the linearity of reading written pages as opposed to the non-linearity of reading bodies.¹⁸ The movements of bodily decipherment must be like the movements of actual reading, and the linearity of both is made impossible by the "drive which works in the opposite direction," a drive which resembles Freud's death drive.

Within the structure of the *incipits* in *Winter's Night*, the concept of repetition is manipulated in a rather unusual way. As Brooks notes, "repetition speaks in the text of a return which ultimately subverts the very notion of beginning and end, suggesting that the idea of beginning presupposes the end, that the end is a time before the beginning, and hence that the interminable can never be finally bound in a plot."¹⁹ This tension operates perversely in Calvino's text. During a reading of the various

incipits, one gets an uncanny sense of *déjà-vu*. It is sharp enough to be undeniable and nevertheless so slippery that it is difficult to pin down to any precise point in the text. It is undoubtedly a sense of repetition, but the object repeated does not let itself be identified easily. First of all, the language and the nationality of each of the ten *incipits* are different, ranging from French, Polish, or Japanese, to Cimmerian, Cimbrian, Ircanic, and so on; and then the genres are also different from one another, varying from a revolutionary melodrama to a postmodern and Borgean account of a game of mirrors.

Writing on *Winter's Night*, Nuccia Bencivenga seeks out and describes many of the similarities among the different *incipits*, especially the elusive recurrences of names and themes. This survey leads her in the end to suggest that "all stories may be *variants* of one another, *translations* of one another in different languages. . . . And so in a sense we are repeating the Reader's strange experience: at each sixteen-page signature, essentially the same story comes back to us."²⁰ The repetitions occurring throughout the *incipits* deny the status of the beginnings *qua* beginnings, and the recurrence of names and themes throws the question of referentiality onto a dimension different from that in which the Readers inside the text move. For them all too often the book's reference is, deceptively, to an outside world (this is especially true of Lotaria, the Other Reader's politically committed sister, who reads books through the computer's list of recurrences of words). But in the text the beginnings incessantly refer to one another, and the frame of reference thus becomes an internal matrix which may be entered from different points; the text becomes a microcosm of intertextual relations, a model in scale of the literary network of influences and determinations. Thus if Julia Kristeva defines intertextuality with the claim that "every text is absorption and transformation of another text," Barthes goes a step further by describing the intertext (with diction analogous to Calvino's) as "the impossibility of living outside the infinite text . . . the book creates meaning, meaning creates life."²¹

As the notion of the intertexts suggests, at the inception of the story, at the beginning of the beginning, there is always another narrative, another beginning. In Calvino as well as in Freud, a story, or better still, *the* story, is always to be found at the beginning of any narrative. This question of origins is fictionalized and anthropomorphized in *Winter's Night* through the mysterious figure of an Indian, a South American blind storyteller like

Borges, who is the mythical Father of Stories, “the universal source of narrative material, the primordial magma from which the individual manifestations of each writer develop” (WN 117). This man becomes Calvino’s fictional and anthropomorphic equivalent to Freud’s Œdipus complex as well as the universal equivalent to the image of the flotsam of the individual child’s book. It is from this origin that all the stories proceed. This mirroring process of text and person as producers of tales can be seen in the fact that, just as *Winter’s Night* carries on many stories within the same text, so also the Other Reader “herself reader of several books at once, to avoid being caught by the disappointment that any story [or romance] might cause her, tends to carry forward, at the same time, other stories [or romances] also” (WN 147). Similarly the Rat Man, in addition to carrying on different narratives of his obsessions at once, “always had several [romantic] interests simultaneously, just as he had several lines of sexual attachments, derived from his several sisters.”²²

How many stories are we, as readers, in the presence of? They could be many different ones, as these last two quotations suggest, or else, and more likely, all these narratives may be different combinations of the same primordial elements—be they the nexus of the Œdipus complex, the book read during childhood, or a mythical pool of narrative magma. Calvino’s inherently combinative aesthetics, so conspicuous especially in works such as *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, where the many configurations of tarot cards laid out on a table give rise to an equal number of different stories, is thrust to the foreground at the very end of the novel, where the list of titles of the ten stories read during the text is mistaken by some readers for the beginning of just another story. Underlying this passage is the thematization of one of the basic tenets of reader-response criticism—namely, that it is the reader who in fact accomplishes the realization of the text. As Iser puts it, “reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character.”²³ When the Reader tries to explain his misunderstanding to the other Readers, his objections are flatly ignored, for the mechanism of narrative interpretation, the “unfolding of the text’s inherently dynamic character,” has already been irreversibly set into motion by the temporal succession of the list of the titles, perceived now as the *incipit* of all stories, as the way in which all texts used to begin “once upon a time.”

For corroboration, one may look to Calvino’s essay “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” for a discussion of similar issues and a more linear treatment than

the complex and auto-referential *Winter's Night*. With his usual ludic attitude, Calvino states there that "the process going on today is the triumph of discontinuity, divisibility, and combination over all that is flux, or a series of minute nuances following one upon the other."²⁴ And in the awareness that writing is but a combinatory process of given elements, Calvino discovers no anxiety but rather a sense of relief and security, so alien to the nightmarish impression that any scholarly discourse on *Winter's Night* runs the risk of conveying.²⁵ For in this hybrid novel the play of beginnings (and/or of their absence), of repetitions (and/or of their concealment), and of climax (or of multiple climaxes), is always and foremost a play with literary discourse. It may involve a serious theoretical reconsideration of the notion of narrative development, but it is nevertheless always a game.

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NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, *Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis*, in *Three Case Histories*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963) 63–66. Further references will be given in the text as RM.
2. Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) 197. Further references will be given in the text as WN.
3. "Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence." Georges Poulet, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellaner, 2 vols. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984) 1: 52.
4. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982) 9–10.
5. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979); Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth Olson (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern UP, 1973).
6. Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula: La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi* (Milan: Bompiani, 1979) 52. Translation mine.
7. Jerry Varsava, "Calvino's Combinative Aesthetics: Theory and Practice," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 6 (1986): 17.
8. Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973) 20. All translations from *Le plaisir du texte* are mine.
9. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1974) 279. A similar premise also informs Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 20 ff.

10. Weaver here translates "attesa" with "concern," although I believe "expectation" is a more appropriate term.

11. I am here translating Calvino's "la sua storia non scritta" as "his or her unwritten story," rather than Weaver's too general "the unwritten story."

12. Barthes 30.

13. Steven Marcus, "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History," *Dora's Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 71.

14. Leonard Shengold, "More on Rats and Rat People," *Freud and His Patients*, ed. Mark Kauzer and Jules Glenn (New York: Jason Aronson, 1980) 2: 180–83.

15. Weaver translates the word "relitto" with the paronomastic "relic"; I opted for the literal "flotsam."

16. Barthes 75.

17. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985) 98–109.

18. One can compare with some amusement the style and content of Calvino's fiction with those of Iser's theory: "The act of recreation is not a smooth or continuous process, but one which, in its essence, relies on *interruptions* of the flow to render it efficacious. We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject: this is the dynamic process of recreation" (Iser 288).

19. Brooks 109.

20. Nuccia Bencivenga, "Caliphs, Travelers, and Other Stories," *Forum Italicum* 20 (1986): 9.

21. Julia Kristeva, *Σημειωτική: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969) 146, my translation; Barthes 59.

22. Sigmund Freud, "Original Record of the Case," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth P and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953–1974) 10: 273.

23. Iser 275.

24. Italo Calvino, "Cybernetics and Ghosts," *The Literature Machine*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Secker and Warburg, 1987) 9.

25. Calvino, "Cybernetics and Ghosts" 14–16.