

P. J. KLEMP

"SHE MADE US DO WHAT SHE WANTED":  
DESIRE AND THE OTHER READER'S  
READING IN ITALO CALVINO'S  
*SE UNA NOTTE D'INVERNO UN VIAGGIATORE*

After reading a story that abruptly breaks off because the book was mis-bound, the Lettore, Italo Calvino's initially isolated protagonist in the hyper-novel *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, becomes upset.<sup>1</sup> "Scagli il libro contro il pavimento" – so begins the list of indignities that he wants to inflict on the text, a breathless catalogue stretching out to include dozens of acts of revenge, such as hurling, shredding, and throwing the offending volume

"fuori . . . dall'atmosfera, dalla biosfera, dalla stratosfera, dal campo gravitazionale, dal sistema solare, dalla galassia, dal cumulo di galassie," until it is received by nonbeing (26). Taking a more practical course of action, he begins a journey to find the complete novel and hence to give closure to his reading experience. But that journey grows even more frustrating after the Lettore meets Ludmilla Vipiteno, the Lettrice (or Other/Female Reader), and his pursuit of a text becomes hopelessly confounded with his pursuit of her. When asked if he is interested in Cimmerian literature or in Ludmilla, the Lettore "dovresti rispondere che non sai più distinguere il tuo interesse per il romanzo cimmerico o quello per la Lettrice del romanzo" (49; see Mazzoni 60). Occupying a central place in Calvino's novel, Ludmilla's desire and literary taste shape the Lettore's urge to find novels and govern each character's perceptions of the very novels he finds.

While critics have noticed that Ludmilla directly tells the Lettore her definitions of a satisfying novel, thus initiating his many quests to find the object of her desire, they have too readily assumed that she always uses such unmediated communication. It is true, as Francine du Plessix Gray comments, that Ludmilla's "constant, insatiable desire for a new book, an ever better book, a perfect book . . . provokes the invention of each subnovel" (23) and, as Franco Ricci remarks, that she "dictates the novels she wishes to read" (98 n18), but these observations overlook the changing means by which her desire or literary taste is conveyed during the course of Calvino's book. After Ludmilla and the Lettore have shared four novels and she tells him that "Il romanzo che più vorrei leggere in questo momento . . .

dovrebbe avere come forza motrice solo la voglia di raccontare, d'accumulare storie su storie" (92), her desire and literary taste are conveyed only indirectly, with the exception of her later explanation that "A me . . . piacciono i libri in cui tutti i misteri e le angosce passano attraverso una mente esatta e fredda," which she tells the Lettore in her apartment after they become lovers (157). After Chapter 5, on every other occasion where she explains her literary preferences, she does so indirectly: through the letters of the translator Ermes Marana (126), the diary of the novelist Silas Flannery (192), the testimony of her sister Lotaria (217), the long-distance inferences of Director General Arkadian Porphyritch (242), and the dream the Lettore has while in Ircania (245). These pieces of second-hand evidence leave significant questions about why Ludmilla's desires are related indirectly and whether these are accurate expressions of her literary taste.

In addition to misrepresenting the nature of Ludmilla's assertions of desire and taste, and thus avoiding questions of motive and accuracy, critics have failed to deal with the full complexity of another key issue. Is her literary desire consistently and directly satisfied? Critics respond unanimously in the affirmative:

It is Ludmilla who announces in each chapter the type of readings she would like to pursue; subsequently all characters and situations emanate from and revolve around her. (Ricci 94)

. . . the *incipits* begin to be designed specifically according to her expressed formulation of "the book I would like to read now . . ." as it develops from chapter to chapter. (Orr 211)

Her apparently insatiable, heterogeneous, and catholic literary appetites provide the spur and the blueprint for each of the text's novelistic fragments. (Cotrupi 283-84)

Calvino always gives her (in the next titled chapter) exactly what she has asked for in the immediately preceding numbered chapter. (Feinstein 153)

The novels Ludmilla calls for do indeed appear with remarkable consistency, though the indirect statements attributed to her should raise questions about whether they accurately convey her desire or stand as (generally male) interpretations of that desire. Furthermore, no critic has noted that, while Ludmilla reads the first four novels and possibly the last novel that her tastes define, she never receives or reads the remaining ones. That her desire is communicated to the Lettore in various ways suggests that it directly and indirectly shapes his quest to find novels and each character's interpretation of them.<sup>2</sup> That these novels answer Ludmilla's needs, even if she does not read them, suggests that they directly and indirectly satisfy her desires.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in the early stages of the quest, Calvino's novel emphasizes the power of, and the connections between, the female imagination and desire. Though the Lettore now has a companion on his quest, she is more than his equal. Her background is filled with much wider reading experiences (30), as he learns when they meet – in a bookstore, of course – and as they pursue the conclusion(s) of the abruptly terminated novel(s), she has a clearer sense of their goal. Because Ludmilla is, as the Lettore comments, “sempre d'un passo almeno più avanti di te” (71), she is able to define her own desire:

Mi piace sapere che esistono libri che potrò ancora leggere. . . – dice, sicura che alla forza del suo desiderio devono corrispondere oggetti esistenti, concreti, anche se sconosciuti. (71)

While the beginning of this passage uses a direct assertion to state Ludmilla's wishes explicitly, the subsequent conviction that concrete objects (or goals) match the “forza del suo desiderio” is the product of an interpretive leap by the Lettore who, as critics have noted, displays “totalizing efforts” (Sorapure 707) and a “tendency to reify reading” (Salvatori 208). Swayed by these interpretive strategies, the Lettore's explanation of Ludmilla's views is echoed when their meeting with Professor Uzzi-Tuzii continues. “Leggere,” Uzzi-Tuzii says,

è sempre questo: c'è una cosa che è lì, una cosa fatta di scrittura, un oggetto solido, materiale, che non si può cambiare, e attraverso questa cosa ci si confronta con qualcos'altro che non è presente, qualcos'altro che fa parte del mondo immateriale, invisibile, perché è solo pensabile, immaginabile, o perché c'è stato e non c'è più, passato, perduto, irraggiungibile, nel paese dei morti. . . . (71)

By glancing at the spiritual realm and a poststructural hermeneutics, the professor nudges Ludmilla beyond what he, like the Lettore, perceives as her formalist perspective, her metaphysics of textual presence. Arguing that “Ludmilla offers . . . salvation to the Male Reader,” Madeleine Sorapure explains that she brings “a world of presence, of diversity and plurality and life, to a character who has been pursuing a fundamentally inhuman, metaphysical ideal” (708). Although Linda C. Badley refers to Ludmilla as “the naive reader,” she also points out that her “‘common’ reading is meant to be the least simple, most vital, and most inter-communicative of activities”

(106).<sup>4</sup> When Ludmilla elaborates on her goal, she follows Uzzi-Tuzii's lead and articulates a more open-ended poststructural perspective that allows for textual absences and gaps, as well as desires:

O che non è presente perché non c'è ancora, qualcosa di desiderato, di temuto, possibile o impossibile. (71)

Having intuited that Ludmilla's powerful desire and imagination surpass his, the Lettore makes a related concession:

Come potrai tenerle dietro, a questa donna che legge sempre un altro libro, in più di quello che ha sotto gli occhi, un libro che non c'è ancora ma che, dato che lei lo vuole, non potrà non esserci? (71)

Not only do Ludmilla's desire and imagination outstrip the Lettore's, for she can simultaneously hold multiple texts in her mind, but if he worries about never locating the conclusions to the novels he has been reading, the strength of her desire guarantees that the book she seeks, her goal, must exist. In *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, the Lettore fully understands and is certain to satisfy her own imaginative needs, her wishes and desires. This desire governs Ludmilla's interpretive strategies, though she rarely discusses how she reads and we rarely see her reading.

While Ludmilla's reading strategies are the subject of speculation (or interpretation) by various characters – including the Lettore (92), the novelist Silas Flannery (192), her sister Lotaria (44), and Arkadian Porphyritch, the Director General of the State Police Archives in Ircania

(242) – some of them do not understand her literary tastes. And most of them lack an interest in her crucial motivating force, the desire that defines what she wants to read and that she discusses explicitly and frequently. On the first four occasions when she makes such assertions, she does so directly to the Lettore. After beginning *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, filled with locomotive steam and the evening's darkness and fog, Ludmilla pronounces the story too unfocused. She admits to appreciating bewilderment in a novel's opening pages, but promptly states another criterion that forms part of her literary tastes:

Preferisco i romanzi . . . che mi fanno entrare subito in un mondo dove ogni cosa è precisa, concreta, ben specificata. (29)

This leads to one of the moments in Calvino's novel when the Lettore –



who just described *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, with its clouded pages and dissolving sentences (11-12), as "Proprio sul più bello" (27) – abandons his own taste and falls into step with Ludmilla's literary desire. He suddenly believes that novels presenting concrete worlds are a positive thing that "val la pena" (30). Once the Lettore accepts her judgment about matters of literary taste – that is, once he concedes the power of her desire – the direction of his quest is clear. He pursues and locates the object of Ludmilla's wishes, *Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork*, which tells the coming of age story of Ponko and Gritzvi as they prepare to change places. This novel conveys "la solidità" (36), starting with a precise, minute description of a frying onion, including its veins, colors, and smells: "Qui tutto è molto concreto, corposo, designato con sicura competenza" (33); "Il romanzo che stai leggendo vorrebbe presentarti un mondo corposo, denso, minuzioso" (41). Not only does the beloved possess full knowledge of her own desire, but the lover's quest attempts to satisfy it.

This process occurs again and again in Calvino's novel. As Ludmilla's tastes keep shifting, her desire motivates the Lettore to find the appropriate novels. After reading *Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork*, Ludmilla expresses reservations about the literary criteria that she just invoked about a text in which everything is "precisa, concreta, ben specificata," about this book in which things are "massicce da poterle toccare":

ma ci si senta intorno la presenza di qualcos'altro che ancora non si sa cos'è, il segno di non so cosa. . . . (45)

The Lettore attempts to qualify her views by arguing that the current novel, *Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork*, contains just this "elemento di mistero" (45), not in its plot but in such extratextual issues as the identity of its national origin and geographical details. This minor disagreement turns out to be the last time in Calvino's book that the Lettore will even begin to question Ludmilla's desire or taste, except for much later, when he does so boldly – but only in the safe context of a dream (244-46). In their relationship, however, quibbling turns to questing, as the Lettore is led to *Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa*. Translated orally to Ludmilla and the Lettore by Professor Uzzi-Tuzii, this novel tells of an isolated man's awkward encounters with Miss Zwida and Mr. Kauderer, who pull him into conspiracies involving a midnight meeting in a graveyard and a jail-break. This text thrives on precisely the mysterious presences that Ludmilla now desires, as its narrator announces:

Vorrei che questo aleggiare di presentimenti e di dubbi arrivasse a chi mi leggerà non come un ostacolo accidentale alla comprensione di ciò che scrivo ma come la sua sostanza stessa; . . . l'importante è che gli venga trasmesso lo sforzo che sto compiendo per leggere tra le righe delle cose il senso elusivo di ciò che m'aspetta. (60)

Having located the desired novel, the Lettore finds that his success is met with a change in Ludmilla's taste.

Her current literary tastes call for something quite different from "la presenza" around things and "il segno di non so cosa," a novel far removed from *Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa*:

Il libro che ora avrei voglia di leggere è un romanzo in cui si senta la storia che arriva, come un tuono ancora confuso, la storia quella storica insieme al destino delle persone, un romanzo che dia il senso di stare vivendo uno sconvolgimento che ancora non ha un nome, non ha preso forma. . . . (71-72)

The quest for such a book leads the Lettore and Ludmilla to a seminar at the university, where they hear Lotaria read the beginning of *Senza temere il vento e la vertigine*, the account of Alex, Irina, and Valeriano's participation in an unidentified, highly fluid "rivoluzione segreta" (88), though these characters "restano all'oscuro di molte circostanze sia storiche che geografiche" (82). Besides meeting Ludmilla's requirement of "la storia quella storica insieme al destino delle persone," this novel satisfies her desire for "un tuono ancora confuso" with "immagini un po' approssimative" of "i carriaggi" crossing the city (79) and with "notazioni climatiche: acquazzoni, brinate, corse di nuvole, bufere di tramontana" (84). Yet when she and the Lettore leave the seminar, Ludmilla describes *Senza temere il vento e la vertigine* too as something that "non è il mio romanzo ideale" (92), calling for another to replace it:

Il romanzo che più vorrei leggere in questo momento . . . dovrebbe avere come forza motrice solo la voglia di raccontare, d'accumulare storie su storie, senza pretendere d'importi una visione del mondo, ma solo di farti assistere alla propria crescita, come una pianta, un aggrovigliarsi come di rami e di foglie. . . . (92)

Though Ludmilla soon changes her mind, and the Lettore silently registers his frustration ("Ecco, siamo alle solite") only to come to agree with her new

view once more ("In questo ti trovi subito d'accordo con lei" [92]), this particular statement of desire and literary taste reverberates in the memory of various characters. Ermes Marana recalls that Ludmilla expressed "il bisogno di vedere uno che fa i libri come una pianta di zucca fa le zucche" (153), and Silas Flannery writes that she used the metaphor of a pumpkin vine to describe "il suo modello ideale di scrittore" (189). When the assertions that Marana and Flannery attribute to Ludmilla accurately echo the statement of desire she made to the Lettore after the seminar, there is a strong suggestion that these men, unlike most of the characters in the novel, begin to grasp the nature and significance of her desire and literary taste. To answer Ludmilla's need for a story based on "la voglia di raccontare" – that is, to demonstrate his awareness of her wishes – the Lettore finds just such a text in the publishing house of Mr. Cavedagna, who describes *Guarda in basso dove l'ombra s'addensa* as a "romanzetto da due soldi" (100). Though the story of Jojo's murder at the hands of Ruedi and Bernadette, and their attempts to dispose of the corpse, which accompanies them in the car when they have sex, is not lacking in smutty content, Ruedi comments on exactly the sense of experiential and narrative profusion that Ludmilla requested:

. . . non ho fatto altro che accumulare passati su passati dietro le mie spalle, moltiplicarli, i passati. . . . Sto tirando fuori troppe storie alla volta perché quello che voglio è che intorno al racconto si senta una saturazione d'altre storie che potrei raccontare e forse racconterò o chissà non abbia già raccontato in altra occasione, uno spazio pieno di storie. . . . (105, 108-09)

This novel would appear to satisfy Ludmilla's requirements, but *Guarda in basso dove l'ombra s'addensa* never leaves Cavedagna's publishing house (115). For the first time in Calvino's book, Ludmilla does not read the novel that the Lettore finds for her, indicating that a change is occurring in their relationship and in the way she communicates her tastes to him.

When Ludmilla shares her literary tastes with the Lettore in face-to-face meetings during the first half of Calvino's novel, she initiates quests that reveal a great deal about the processes of reading and interpretation. Most significantly, Ludmilla may be the only character who fully comprehends not only the central role of desire in these processes but also the exact nature of her own ever-changing desire or literary taste. The Lettore's exasperated response to her variable tastes – "Ecco, siamo alle solite" – implies that she is fickle (see Muratore 114), a trait that is not apparent in other aspects of her life, such as her apartment or her dealings with men. And no other character, including the sister who enjoys criticizing Ludmilla, accuses her of fick-



leness. Her changing criteria for good literature, then, signal both her “incontentabilità” and “inquietudine” (192), according to Flannery’s perceptive interpretation, as well as her developing desire and taste. Having that desire is not the same as satisfying it, however, so in addition Ludmilla locates what she needs – or, more accurately, finds the means to locate it when she inspires the Lettore to pursue the reading material she desires. Infatuated with her, the Lettore suddenly has the unerring ability to find the books she describes; with a full understanding of her own desire, Ludmilla recognizes that these books represent an attempt to satisfy her precise needs. From an essentialist perspective that emphasizes presence, therefore, the various quests appear highly successful, since the quester attains the object of the woman’s desire.

But Ludmilla’s prompt and consistent dissatisfaction with that object calls into question the entire essentialist enterprise. Her dissatisfaction and fluctuating tastes suggest that the quest has not actually located the object – indeed, that there is no object or objectified thing to be located, perhaps that quests represent doomed efforts to totalize. Instead, the perceivers, both the Lettore and Ludmilla, have been predisposed by infatuation and by desire to foreground the elements that enable the reading of a novel in which everything is “precisa, concreta, ben specificata” (*Fuori dell’abitato di Malbork*) or that allow it to contain “il segno di non so cosa” (*Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa*), as it arrives “come un tuono ancora confuso” (*Senza temere il vento e la vertigine*) and piles “storie su storie” (*Guarda in basso dove l’ombra s’addensa*). Just as Ludmilla’s desire and taste predispose the Lettore’s perceptions to find just the novels that she inspires him to seek, so these forces shape her reading of those novels. Her formalist certainty that these novels exist and “alla forza del suo desiderio devono corrispondere” (71) is matched by his imposition of a totalizing interpretation of that desire, according to which she lacks “un libro che non c’è ancora ma che, dato che lei lo vuole, non potrà non esserci” (71). Even Lotaria, a “radical structuralist-feminist Critic” (Badley 103), would remind these characters that the books they seek “non potrà non esserci” precisely because reading experiences are constructions that emerge from the active engagement of a reader’s ideology with a text. When Lotaria and Flannery discuss literary theory, he disapproves of just this aspect of her reading techniques: he believes that she has read his novels “solo per trovarci quello di cui era già convinta prima di leggerli” (185). In *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, Ludmilla’s desire, the Lettore’s infatuation, and their quest demonstrate that reading cannot be otherwise: as the product of desire (one’s own and others’), back-



ground, ideology, and culture, literary taste necessarily leads each reader in certain directions and away from others. Desire and taste create the conditions, the predisposition and alertness to certain phenomena, as well as the blindness to others, which guarantee that the Lettore (and Ludmilla, and we) cannot *not* find the stories he seeks.

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A significant change in how Ludmilla communicates her literary tastes and how she and the Lettore experience reading accompanies developments in their relationships with texts and with each other. Beginning with *Guarda in basso dove l'ombra s'addensa* and continuing to the end of Calvino's novel, the Lettore travels around the world alone in pursuit of the conclusion of whatever novel he is currently reading and of the "traduttore mitomane" (131), Ermes Marana, a quest that gives him no opportunity to share his reading experiences with Ludmilla. In an action that is related to the new physical distance between the two readers, Ludmilla still outlines her literary tastes – but for other characters, and only once more for the Lettore. His global quest, an extension of the book's first (and only) quest for a woman and a novel's conclusion, starts in Cavedagna's publishing house, where the Lettore pores over the pages of Marana's correspondence with the firm. From these documents, he learns that Ludmilla – or a lookalike, or possibly one of Marana's textual fabrications (everything, including the chronology, becomes blurry once this forger enters Calvino's novel) – asserts an interest in different reading material:

I romanzi che preferisco . . . sono quelli che comunicano un senso di disagio fin dalla prima pagina. . . . (126)

These words, these desires, though conveyed through Marana's correspondence rather than Ludmilla's conversation, continue to define the Lettore's goal and, true to form, he finds *In una rete di linee che s'allacciano*. The narrator of this story, a visiting professor who has been involved in a "sgradevole equivoco" with a female student (138), is an obsessive-compulsive individual, with a streak of paranoia, who feels the need to respond to a single stimulus:

La prima sensazione che dovrebbe trasmettere questo libro è ciò che io provo quando sento lo squillo d'un telefono, dico dovrebbe perché dubito che le parole scritte possano darne un'idea anche parziale: non basta dichiarare che la mia è una reazione di rifiuto, di fuga da questo richiamo aggressivo e minaccioso, ma anche d'urgenza, d'insostenibilità, di coercizione che mi spinge a obbedire all'ingiunzione di quel suono. . . . (133)

While this character's mental landscape and anxious state contribute to "un senso di disagio" that the figure in Marana's correspondence calls for, Ludmila never reads *In una rete di linee che s'allacciano*. The Lettore brings the book to a café to share with her (131), but she does not join him. Instead, making an explicit connection between her desire and the novel he is reading, she contacts him by telephone and invites him to her house (141). After he arrives and they move beyond the "primo incontro" and into "il possibile avvenire d'una convivenza" (156), Ludmilla directly states her literary tastes to him for the last time:

A me . . . piacciono i libri in cui tutti i misteri e le angosce passano attraverso una mente esatta e fredda e senza ombre come quella d'un giocatore di scacchi. (157)

In Ludmilla's house, the Lettore finds the next novel, *In una rete di linee che s'intersecano*, which, even if she owns it, they do not share. "Voltando le spalle a Ludmilla" (160), he begins a book in which a collector of reflective devices narrates with an intention that matches her textual desire:

Queste pagine che sto scrivendo dovrebbero anch'esse comunicare una fredda luminosità da galleria di specchi, dove un numero limitato di figure si rifrange e si capovolge e si moltiplica. (162-63)

Since the two lovers meet again only late in the novel, when the Lettore decides to propose to Ludmilla, subsequent statements about her literary taste are conveyed to him not through conversations but through indirect means. Indeed, Ludmilla's next criterion for good literature is related in Silas Flannery's diary, for she told him that

I romanzi che m'attirano di più . . . sono quelli che creano un'illusione di trasparenza intorno a un nodo di rapporti umani che è quanto di più oscuro, crudele e perverso. (192)

Never explicitly hearing or reading this statement – but since it appears in a numbered chapter or part of "un possibile romanzo da vivere" (32), we assume that the Lettore experiences this diary as a part of his life – he receives Flannery's copy of *Sul tappeto di foglie illuminate dalla luna*, the Japanese erotic novel that describes the complex relationships among Mr. Okeda, Madame Miyagi, their youngest daughter, Makiko, and the narrator, an academic who works as Okeda's assistant. The narrator summarizes those relationships in terms that recall Ludmilla's latest literary desire:

Ero destinato a impigliarmi sempre di più in un groviglio di malintesi, perché ormai Makiko mi considerava uno dei numerosi amanti di sua madre e Miyagi sapeva che non vedevo che per gli occhi di sua figlia, ed entrambe me l'avrebbero fatta pagare crudelmente, mentre i pettegolezzi dell'ambiente accademico . . . avrebbero gettato una luce calunniosa sulle mie assiduità in casa Okeda. . . . (208-09)

The final statement about Ludmilla's tastes – that is, the final one for which she is certainly or probably the source, even if, like a number of her recent assertions, it is communicated indirectly – reaches the Lettore in Ataguitania, where a Lotaria lookalike named Corinna-Gertrude-Ingrid-Alfonsina-Sheila-Alexandra explains her sister's views about reading material:

Mia sorella dice sempre che ama i romanzi in cui si sente una forza elementare, primordiale, tellurica. Dice proprio così: tellurica. (217)

When a computer prints the beginning of *Intorno a una fossa vuota*, the Lettore examines it. He may be uncertain about the identity of Corinna-Gertrude-Ingrid-Alfonsina-Sheila-Alexandra (is she Lotaria?) or the sister who likes to feel a novel's telluric strength (is she Ludmilla?), but *Intorno a una fossa vuota* meets the definition of a good novel that he just heard. In this book, young Nacho Zamora learns of his father's fight with Faustino Higuera:

Dal momento in cui decisero che dovevano combattersi a morte, fu come se l'odio tra loro si fosse spento: e lavorarono d'amore e d'accordo a scavare la fossa. Poi si misero uno da una parte l'altro dall'altra della fossa, ognuno impugnando un coltello con la destra, e col braccio sinistro involto nel poncho. (233)

As *Intorno a una fossa vuota* narrates Nacho's search for his roots and identity, this telluric text focuses more and more closely on the plot of ground where his father defeated his opponent, whose mysteriously empty grave becomes the site of Nacho's duel against Faustino, whether father, son, or reincarnation, we never learn. That Ludmilla never reads *Intorno a una fossa vuota* is hardly surprising, for she has not shared a textual experience with the Lettore since *Senza temere il vento e la vertigine*. But he now receives no statement – from a conversation with her or from someone's recording of her views – of what shape her new literary desire will take.

Because Ludmilla's desire and literary taste have become integrated into

the Lettore's identity and have thus shaped his perceptions, when he is left without her direct or indirect guidance on his quest for the first time since they met, he manifests desire and literary taste that have been shaped by hers and that in turn link him to her. Near the end of his stay in Ircania, the Lettore dreams that he is in a train in which travelers are reading books that may be the complete novels he has been unable to find. Grabbing one of the novels, he looks through the frosted window and sees another train, traveling in the opposite direction and carrying someone he takes to be Ludmilla. The quester tells her, "più a gesti che con la voce" (245), that his journey was successful: "Ludmilla, il libro, . . . l'ho trovato, è qui" (245). So consistently has Ludmilla conveyed her various desires, and so thoroughly has the Lettore internalized them, that she responds in his dream just as she did when they had conversations in real life:

Il libro che cerco . . . è quello che dà il senso del mondo dopo la fine del mondo, il senso che il mondo è la fine di tutto ciò che c'è al mondo, che la sola cosa che ci sia al mondo è la fine del mondo. (245)

The Lettore's reaction indicates that he is not a mere puppet who bows to Ludmilla's every desire. For the first time in the novel, he dares not only to qualify her views (as he did after they read *Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork* [45]) or to experience silent frustration (as he did following *Senza temere il vento e la vertigine* [92]), but openly to disagree with her – in a dream:

Non è così, – gridi, e cerchi nel libro incomprensibile una frase che possa smentire le parole di Ludmilla. (245)

That the book he reads in the dream corresponds to his desire and taste, rather than to hers, indicates that the Lettore is experiencing some individuation of his identity, an identity that has been defined in part by Ludmilla. However, the fact that he still finds the book incomprehensible reveals that these aspects of the Lettore's identity, like his limited ability to contradict Ludmilla and become a fully participating member of their relationship, are in their formative stages and remain largely unknown to him.

The next book he finds, *Quale storia laggiù attende la fine?*, tells of a narrator who erases and simplifies in order to create a world in which there is a greater probability of meeting friends, including Franziska. By portraying a reality that has been reduced "a un foglio di carta dove non si riescono a scrivere altro che parole astratte, come se tutti i nomi concreti fossero finiti" (254), this novel begins to satisfy not the desire and literary taste expressed



in the Lettore's attempted contradiction of Ludmilla's views, which remain incomprehensible, but the ones formulated in his dream projection of her. When the narrator of *Quale storia laggiù attende la fine?* uses his own thoughts to reconstruct reality, the novel continues its movement toward the end of the world:

. . . il nulla è più forte e ha occupato tutta la terra. . . . Sul suolo che mi separa da Franziska vedo aprirsi delle fessure, dei solchi, dei crepacci; . . . questi interstizi s'allargano, presto tra me e Franziska si frapponrà un burrone, un abisso! Salto da una sponda all'altra, e in basso non vedo alcun fondo ma solo il nulla che continua giù all'infinito; corro su pezzi di mondo sparpagliati nel vuoto; il mondo si sta sgretolando. . . . Franziska! Ecco, un ultimo balzo e sono da te! (253-54)

The desires manifested in the Lettore's dream – to be able to gauge Ludmilla's literary wishes with confidence and to conclude his quest by being reunited with her – produce the literary taste that is satisfied by a novel about the end of the world. Just as he modified his taste to suit hers when she expressed dissatisfaction with the fog and bewilderment of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (30) and when she changed her mind after reading *Senza temere il vento e la vertigine* (92), here he provides her with a novel about the end of the world, despite his belief that “Non è così” – that this is not the subject of the volume he is holding in his dream.

As the novel he finds in real life embraces the end of the world, it simultaneously retreats from that vision in a way that points to the force behind the Lettore's contradictory impulse when he argued against Ludmilla's desire and taste in his dream. Indeed “Non è così” in the story because the end of the world is miraculously replaced by the narrator's meeting with Franziska:

È qui, è di fronte a me. . . . Oh, ma sei proprio tu! . . . Senti, conosco un caffè qui all'angolo, pieno di specchi, con un'orchestra che suona dei valzer: m'inviti? (254)

The desire and taste revealed by this novel figure the Lettore's need to simplify the world and rejoin Ludmilla, also at a café, where they had arranged what would have been other opportunities to share textual experiences (131, 141). Creating another bridge, the desire manifested in *Quale storia laggiù attende la fine?* forms the sequel to the Lettore's falling in love (151). The question that Franziska asks when this novel breaks off – “m'inviti?” – appears to be the projection of a Lettore who, having been conditioned by Ludmilla's desire and taste, now scripts her words, inscribing his learned

desire on her and empowering her (through an invitation to invite him) to empower him (to make the invitation).

This novel, with its magical reunion of the narrator and Franziska, provides the necessary foundation for the apparently abrupt decision that signals the next stage in the relationship between the Lettore and the Lettore: “Poi fulmineamente decidi che vuoi sposare Ludmilla” (261). Yet the Lettore fails to recognize that he does not operate with complete free choice. Since the beginning of the book, Ludmilla’s desire has informed his desire and shaped his quest, which both now continue on a trajectory consistent with the inspiration and motivation that she provided. The pattern of their relationship is clear, though not to both parties. Once Ludmilla has inscribed or constructed the Lettore’s desire, that desire in turn inscribes hers – when Franziska asks the narrator to ask her, “m’inviti?” in the final novel that the Lettore finds, or when the Lettore decides to marry Ludmilla – in a circular process that places Ludmilla’s potent desire at the beginning, middle, and end. Teresa de Lauretis describes the complex relationship of gender and power in *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*:

... the female reader here is finally re-contained within the frame of the book as merely a character in a man’s fiction, reduced to a portrait, an image, a figure of the male imaginary. . . . Because . . . Woman is still the ground of representation, even in postmodern times. Paradoxically, for all the efforts spent to re-contain real women in the social, whether by economic or ideological means, by threats or by seduction, it is the absent Woman, the one pursued in dreams and found only in memory or in fiction, that serves as the guarantee of masculinity, anchoring male identity and supporting man’s creativity and self-representation. (82)

Ludmilla’s actions demonstrate that desire always finds – cannot *not* find – the desired object (the Lettore) or text (the novels he locates, even without her direct guidance) on which to inscribe itself.

The Lettore’s actions show that he too always finds – cannot *not* find – exactly the novel that he seeks, the novel (and meaning) that is about the Lettore or his wishes. As Calvino’s book proceeds from novel to novel, the objects of the quest reveal a pattern not only in Ludmilla’s tastes and texts but also in the Lettore’s understanding of them. The three novels that he finds in response to her direct statements of desire and that they share (*Fuori dell’abitato di Malbork*, *Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa*, and *Senza temere il vento e la vertigine*) move from the concrete to the abstract and then to the historical and highly personal, even erotic, as the last one explores the tangled relationship – based in part on espionage and betrayal, in part on

orgiastic activities – of Irina, Alex, and Valeriano. Whether or not she reads them, all of the novels produced under Ludmilla's direct guidance feature strong female characters – perhaps Zwida and Brigd in *Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork*, but certainly Miss Zwida in *Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa*, Irina in *Senza temere il vento e la vertigine* ("ci faceva fare quel che voleva" [78]), Bernadette in *Guarda in basso dove l'ombra s'addensa* (whose male narrator, during their comic sexual encounter, preferred "d'obbedire a lei piuttosto che al mio animo esterrefatto" [111]), and the gun-toting Elfrida, who acts as a *dea ex machina* in *In una rete di linee che s'intersecano* ("Sapevo del pericolo che ti minacciava e sono riuscita a salvarti," she tells the narrator [168]). When Ludmilla provides direct guidance but does not read the novels, they continue to follow the trajectory that her desire has established, focusing on love triangles in the story of Bernadette, Ruedi, and Jojo (*Guarda in basso dove l'ombra s'addensa*), which includes the element of comic violence, and in the story of the mirror-collecting narrator and his relationships with his wife Elfrida and mistress Lorna (*In una rete di linee che s'intersecano*).

When Ludmilla provides neither direct guidance nor partnership in reading, the force of her previous influence on the Lettore's desire leaves him fully capable of locating stories that are consistent with the direction her desire and taste had been taking. The novels he finds are dominated by relationships whose nature grows increasingly complex and illicit – between the visiting professor and his student, Marjorie Stubbs (*In una rete di linee che s'allacciano*); between Madame Miyagi, her daughter Makiko, and the narrator who works for Mr. Okeda (*Sul tappeto di foglie illuminate dalla luna*); and between Nacho, Amaranta, and Jacinta, who may be his sisters (*Intorno a una fossa vuota*). And the level of eroticism continues to increase, particularly in *Sul tappeto di foglie illuminate dalla luna*, as does the level of violence in *Intorno a una fossa vuota*. When no further direct communication occurs between the Lettore and the Lettore and they no longer share the experience of reading, the Lettore has fully internalized Ludmilla's desires, which allows a new element to appear in the final two stories. Aggressive male behavior makes its first sustained appearance in the novel, when Nacho assaults Amaranta and Jacinta in *Intorno a una fossa vuota* and when the unnamed narrator of *Quale storia laggiù attende la fine?* uses mental erasure to restructure his world and manipulate a meeting with Franziska. Throughout Calvino's novel, the Lettore's internalizing of Ludmilla's desires is accompanied by an interiorization of the novels he finds, which transform into increasingly abstract and erotic tales of complex relationships and male aggressiveness.<sup>5</sup> As Irina Piperin says sarcastically in



*Senza temere il vento e la vertigine*, grasping a point that the novel's two male characters will never see: "I sogni maschili non cambiano" (85). The Lettore, like Ludmilla and led by Ludmilla, finds novels that answer his desires as these have been shaped by her desires – or he (mis)reads them in such a way that they do.

\* \* \*

The Lettore's experiences – his quest and (mis)reading – are instructive for all readers, showing how relentlessly we project ourselves into the texts we find. When Calvino's novel journeys into Ludmilla's house, life, and relationships independent of the central male character, a disclaimer immediately appears: "Non credere che il libro ti perda di vista, Lettore" (147). When the Lettore is apparently removed from his quest for Ludmilla, as he travels to remote Ataguitania, searching for a forger but encountering only the "società carceraria che s'estendono sul pianeta," a question pops up: "È ancora la tua storia, questa, Lettore?" (216). Yes, of course, it is still his story, and in a moment he is proclaimed "il protagonista assoluto di questo libro" (220). If we are always at the center of the stories we read, this is because our reading of them emerges from our own desire, which is shaped by other people's desires, and from our background, culture, and ideology. Hence we must not share Silas Flannery's yearning to return to a condition of "una lettura disinteressata" (169) or join Mr. Cavedagna in his dream about going back to the chicken coop of his youth, where he engaged in reading untouched by professional concerns or the years of personal experience that now shape his perceptions (97). Most of all, we must not participate in the Lettore's dream "di ritrovare una condizione di lettura naturale, innocente, primitiva" (93), a dream he never escapes, since even near the end of the book he presents a naive, essentialist view of the reading process:

. . . a me nei libri piace leggere solo quello che c'è scritto; e collegare i particolari con tutto l'insieme; e certe letture considerarle come definitive. . . (258)

By missing the lesson that we cannot *not* find exactly the stories we seek – and that we will be the protagonists of those stories, whose source and subject matter will be our desires – the Lettore remains unaware of the nature of perception, including reading and interpretation.

By remaining alert, however, we realize that we, no less than the Lettore, are conditioned or constructed – in Calvino's novel, by Ludmilla's desire and



taste – to (mis)read the texts we find. Kathryn Hume's general observation about Calvino – "He knows that we create such meanings" (6) – is reinforced by Marilyn Orr's remark about what Ludmilla, the Lettore, and presumably we readers should learn from Calvino's novel: "Reading is not a matter of finding the truth, then, but of perceiving and creating it" (217; see Cannon 106 and Bencivenga 4). When Ludmilla's desire calls for "i romanzi . . . che mi fanno entrare subito in un mondo dove ogni cosa è precisa, concreta, ben specificata" (29), for example, we are highly attentive – but selectively so, readily locating the "concreto, corposo" description in *Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork*, particularly when the frying onion focuses our attention in the opening scene (33). When the power of Ludmilla's desire conditions our perceptions and desires to find a wealth of "precisa, concreta, ben specificata" detail in *Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork*, it simultaneously predisposes us to be blind to the same phenomena in other novels. In *Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa*, Ludmilla's prompting makes us so eager to detect "la presenza" around things that we overlook the fact that the meteorologist Mr. Kauderer does his tasks with "scrupolo e metodica attenzione" (57), a habit the narrator inherits when he attends to the pluviometer, barograph, and anemometer (65-66). In *In una rete di linee che s'intersecano*, we foreground evidence that elicits "un senso di disagio" that Ludmilla wants, even as we slide over the narrator's remark that "Vorrei che tutti i dettagli che scrivo concorressero nel comunicare l'impressione d'un meccanismo d'alta precisione. . ." (164). And in *Sul tappeto di foglie illuminate dalla luna*, Ludmilla's interest in "un nodo di rapporti umani" holds our attention, causing us to neglect the narrator's explanation that "avrei voluto separare la sensazione d'ogni singola foglia di ginkgo dalla sensazione di tutte le altre" (199). Just as we are conditioned to look for the very elements that Ludmilla identifies, so we are conditioned to look for them only in the next novel we encounter. Thus we pay special attention to concrete details when reading *Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork*, but even when rereading we fail to see that the frying onion could be the perception of "una mente esatta e fredda," the criterion Ludmilla later invokes (157). Similarly, we miss the moment in *Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork* when Gritzvi attempts to clasp the "fantasmi femminili che svaniscono nella loro diversità irraggiungibile" (38), which fits Ludmilla's later criterion of "la presenza" around things, "il segno di non so cosa" (45), and we overlook information that satisfies the desire for tangled relationships – "quanto di più oscuro, crudele e perverso" (192) – which exist between Ponko, Gritzvi, Brigd, Zwida, and the Ozkart and Kauderer families.

Such shaping of our perceptions and interpretations, as well as the Lettore's, which leads us to emphasize some elements and neglect others, is also evident in the wide range of critical interpretations of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. When the author himself turns reader, Calvino pronounces that the book "concerns individuals confronted by a menace which comes from a powerful, collective, anonymous source of evil, individuals who have involved themselves in this danger because of the attraction of a female character" (Gray 22). Referring specifically to the ten novels, Nuccia Bencivenga observes an equally threatening pattern when each protagonist confronts "an incomprehensible situation, by a heavy blow, by a mysterious and unrelenting attack on his existence and identity" (8-9). Madeleine Sorapure sounds another pessimistic note when she argues that the fragmented novels are filled with "characters who misread signs in their obsessive drive toward a metaphysical ideal" (709). Viewing the novels from a very different perspective, however, some readers detect an optimistic pattern. In the last five novels that the Lettore finds, Mary Jo Muratore recognizes "an attempt to counter impending doom with scenes of last minute rescues" (112-13). And Marilyn Orr connects all of the novels to the lives of the Lettore and the Lettore: "Together these *incipits* form a mythic story that gives structure and meaning to the Readers' experience" (212-13). Conditioned by Ludmilla's cues, which are scattered throughout the numbered chapters, these diverse readings, and the one presented in this essay, testify not only to Professor Uzzi-Tuzii's view that "ogni interpretazione esercita sul testo una violenza e un arbitrio" (68) but also to the power of Ludmilla's desire.

*University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Both the translated quotation in my main title and the expression "The Other Reader" in the text of this essay come from William Weaver's excellent translation of Calvino's novel (78, 29). I use the translated quotation here because of its clear gender markers, which are not present in the Italian original. Throughout the essay proper, all quotations from Calvino's novel are taken from the 1979 Einaudi edition.

<sup>2</sup> Writing about Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, Geoffrey Green makes the following connection between the processes of writing and reading, as well as between the two main characters' roles: "Writing . . . is a specific process that occurs as a function of, in anticipation of, another process that has not yet taken place – reading. . . . It is for this reason that the Other Reader is able to predict – by giving shape to her own

desires for a text – the form of the text that the Readers encounter. . . . [I]t is that wanting that is incorporated into the process of writing" (103).

<sup>3</sup> Various critics have noted that desire occupies a central place in Calvino's novel. See de Lauretis 76, 81; Bencivenga 1-4; Mazzoni 59-60; Cotrupi 283-84; Green 103; Malmgren 107, 114.

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Hume provides a concise overview of how various critics perceive Ludmilla: "We find clashing responses to Ludmilla's demands for a different kind of fiction when she is scarcely launched in the one previously demanded. To some critics she is the innocent reader . . . or an amateur . . .; to [another critic], Ludmilla stands condemned for not developing a dialogue with the text, but simply reading for fun and escape. Some praise her dedication and openness, seeing in her an avatar of Calvino himself . . ., which Calvino reinforces with his statement, 'Ludmilla sono io' . . .; [another critic] sees her as the author who calls the texts into being. [Another critic], who makes much of the parallels between reading and sex, sees her insatiability as a variant on female sexual rapacity: 'Ludmilla cannot be satisfied textually by Calvino or any number of authors'" (123n15).

<sup>5</sup> Mariolina Salvatori comments on the Lettore's increasing assertiveness and willingness to take risks as the novel proceeds (197-98). Taking a broader view, Madeleine Sorapure perceptively observes that "the Male Reader's life resembles more and more closely the fictions he reads" (709).

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