

*A Paper on Italo Calvino*

*When you come to a railway that crosses your path while driving, what type of railway crosser are you? Do you brake and downshift, easing the load on your suspension? Do you feel every slow descent of the tires as they rattle through the gates? When you do, are you thinking that maybe it would be better to speed up instead? Maybe with enough speed your tires could skim it, vibrating, just barely, the cab and the driver inside. Do you search for the best line of approach at the first sight of a crossing? Which is better, the high side, rarely traveled and unique? Or do you aim for the channels dug low by years of previous traffic—a time-tested approach. Maybe instead you are the sort who does not put much thought into crossing railroads. Maybe, at the sight of a crossing, you simply hold your coffee in the air, suspending it on a loose elbow, and charge through, taking the vibrations for what they are.*

You have just started reading my paper. Perhaps you were well-situated behind your desk: Coffee, mineral water, a stack of papers and a red pen, maybe some type of snack with figs in it. The papers were moving smoothly from one stack to another; then *THIS* comes along and jams the entire rhythm. “It will probably be jamming the shredder soon,” you think to yourself, smiling. You scan the first page, if you haven’t already. It has no thesis. You flip to the second page: nothing there either—leaving you instead with only this nonsense about railroads—terrific. You moisten the tip of your pen, flex your hand, and assume the attack position. This is going to be a long one. However, before you ravage this poor boy with ink you decide to consult a colleague of yours. He too has a copy of the paper. There may have been some mistake.

You find your colleague’s office easy enough. The colleague however, is always a challenge.

“Uzzi, are you in?” you tap a knuckle on the door frame and peek inside.

“What do you want?” a voice mutters from somewhere behind a bookshelf.

“I was wondering if you had the paper by Andy Graff, I can’t seem—”

The voice cuts you off, coming now from under a desk pushed against the wall, “I don’t have anything, no one gives me any—did you say Andy Graff?”

“Yes, I just began reading his paper and it seems to be missing a thesis,” you tell him, taking a few steps into the small space.

“Oh, yes!” says Professor Uzzi-Tuzii, appearing instantly at your side, “I certainly am aware of that student. He brings me copies of all his writing; I rather like it, nice kid that one.”

“Do you have a copy of his latest essay, *A Paper on Italo Calvino*?”

“Hmm, yes I believe I do—great paper.”

“Well it’s strange, my copy seems to be missing its thesis statement,” you tell him again, “Does your copy have one?”

“Oh yes, and a fine one indeed,” he says, as he begins rummaging about his desk, “I don’t seem to know exactly where I put it, but I know it is here somewhere.”

“Well, when you find it, would you mind dropping by my office?” you ask, angling back toward the door. “I suppose for now I can read it without.”

“Yes, that will have to do,” he says, “and I’ll bring it as soon as I find it.”

You thank him and turn to close the door on your way out. He’s rattling about beneath the desk again.

“Great paper,” he’s saying, “great paper.”

The next few lines bring you back to the meat of the essay, and there may even be some sort of point soon. Probably several paragraphs full of dreadful exposition, but at least reading this drivel gives you time to plan a grocery list. You take a moment to reflect on the last few weeks: Shakespeare, a lot of him. Such a complete saturation actually, that even food began tasting like Macbeth. It was interesting though. What was it that actor had said? He implied that mimicking the masters of his art in no way cheapened his own interpretation of a particular piece—similar to how a writer’s work is influenced by the books he is reading. Interestingly, this influence soon assimilates, becoming the writer’s own. The master’s influence acts as a sort of permission, allowing the pupil to conduct his art in a manner he may have never considered. It opens his eyes to new possibilities.

I have always judged an author by the extent to which he can make a book disappear. If an author can make his ink dissolve, if he can keep the actual physical process of reading at bay, then I consider him talented. Italo Calvino is not that writer. I recall my

first encounter with his queer text: how I was shaken, how smoke drifted over the first few paragraphs, how my jaw dropped and eyes opened. Calvino not only makes his reader aware, but then constantly reminds him that he is indeed holding a book in his hands. I never even imagined that this type of writing could exist, that it would be this great, or that it would be allowed. I found freedom in his style. In his words, I found something else.

Any writer practices his art with intent. He has a point to make. How that meaning is perceived though, is dependent on the reader. The author, liberated and powerful within the form of his art, creating and destroying what he will, is powerless to control its outcome. Each reader brings with him different expectations, making each relationship between a writer and his readers unique. Take for example the process of concretization—a normally invisible phenomenon brought to light in Calvino’s novel. In the first incipit tale, we find ourselves in a train station, observing a lone traveler. Calvino, as a writer, becomes trapped, “in that nontemporal trap which all train stations set. A cloud of coal dust still hovers in the air of stations all these years after the lines have become totally electrified” (12). The reader automatically writes in whatever he perceives, crowding out an author’s intent. “You, reader, believed that there, on the platform, my gaze was glued to the hands of the round clock of an old station . . . but who can say that the clock’s numbers aren’t peeping from rectangular windows, where I see every minute fall on me with a click like the blade of a guillotine?” (13).

However, more than expectations can influence a reader’s perception of a text. Take Calvino’s example in chapter eleven of a reader describing his experience: “I too feel the need to reread books I have already read. But at every rereading, I seem to be reading a new book, for the first time. Is it I who keep changing and seeing new things of which I was not previously aware?” (255). The meaning of a text can change for even a single reader. That which draws his attention during a particular season or mood may not in another. A reader’s perceived meaning of a text depends on what he unconsciously sees or does not see in the author’s intended message. He constructs a meaning completely independent of the author’s design, indeed leaving the writer powerless over his own words.

A line of action snaps through the center of this fading essay. It is a woman bursting through your door waving a fistful of paper. Seeing who it is now, you relax your judo defense posture, and pick up the chair you sent skidding into the cabinet.

“Have you read this garbage!” the woman says, obviously upset. “I thought I was going to be sick and have to wipe my mouth with it. It has enraged me incalculably! It is people like this,” she paused, holding the paper at arms length, catching her breath, “that little symptomatic weasel!”

“What are you reading?” you ask her, hoping she has vented enough to talk. She has.

“I’ll tell you what I’ve stopped reading,” she answers, “this heap of ink by Andy Graff—talking about books like he’s fooling anyone.”

You motion for her to sit down with you, “What do you mean exactly?”

“His point is so unfounded, suggesting that a book’s meaning is dependent on a breathing reader. That is ridiculous and misleading.”

“I don’t know, Lotaria,” you say, “I think he has made some solid claims.”

“He certainly has not!” She’s excited and standing again, “A tree doesn’t need a squirrel to listen to it as it falls, and a book doesn’t need a reader to have a point. I would draw your attention to this word sequence.” She flattens the wrinkles out of the paper, not so she can read the text, but her own notes on its back, “I scanned his essay into my computer. Well, not the whole thing but at least up until I came into your office. But that is of little issue, look here.” You follow her finger across scribbled figures. “The word *reader* appears nine times whereas *writer* appears only five. The word *intent* appears only twice. And the word *meaning* appears four times. With this data, his bias becomes obvious!”

“What bias?” you ask.

She seems exasperated, “Consider the mathematics: *writer/intent* totals only 7 hits, whereas *reader/meaning* totals 13 hits. He implies that the meaning a reader finds is almost twice as important as the writer’s intent. This is so stereotypically typical of the symptomatic crowd—always making such a fuss about their feelings.”

“So you are for an intentional reading then?” you ask her, confusion spreading across your brow. Lotaria has a reputation for demonstrating in front of the campus library. She once caused quite a stir when she chained herself to the cargo-hatch of a truck delivering

a new civil war collection. “Agenda!” she had screamed, as security finally removed her, “Agenda mongers!”

“Of course I prefer an intentional reading,” she answers. “Look, I know what’s been said about me, but all I’m doing is accepting denotation for what it is. My conclusions are based on word frequencies devoid of all metaphorical baggage, revealing the author’s intent plain as day.”

“Lotaria, I do understand what you’re saying. However, regarding this piece, I think to say that he writes only to expand the symptomatic bias is unreasonable.”

“How so?” she demands.

You pause a moment to make sure she’s finished, “Look, he was discussing what the reader brings to the process of meaning, he never—”

“He said that the writer becomes powerless of the outcome, he represents only the symptomatic functions of a reader, how they fill in the blanks with expectations and clichés until the author’s meaning is completely obscured. Not a word of sympathy to the intentional response. Zero representation!”

“You barged into my office before he had a chance to finish; he may have had plenty to say about intentional reading if you hadn’t interrupted!”

“Doubtful,” she huffs.

“Well, without a thesis it is anyone’s guess where he’s going with this.”

Lotaria plants her hands on her hips, “I still say he would never have represented intentional reading. He’s biased!”

You stand up, “Well who do you think is writing your lines?” The room falls into uncomfortable silence.

“I have found it!” Uzzi-Tuzii appears at the door, beaming and holding his trophy in the air, “I’ve found the thesis.”

“What does it say?” Lotaria demands. “Does it suggest that an intentional reading is superior to a symptomatic, due to the ultimately detached and constantly changing disposition of unreliable readers?”

You lean out over your desk, “Does it suggest that the ultimate meaning of a text is dependent wholly on the reader’s response, that an intentional search for an author’s original intent is futile due to his own individuality?”

“Well, actually—” He only manages a word.

“Or, does he suggest that both a symptomatic and an intentional reading are best used in conjunction, with an intent/meaning ratio of 7 to 13?”

“More like 13 to 7!” screams Lotaria.

Uzzi rattles the page in his fingers, “Simple really. It suggests that the intent of an author is his own. That whether a reader seeks this original purpose intentionally, or finds his own meaning through a symptomatic reading, the interpretation belongs only to him. It implies, that the whole process of reading is—”

“Uzzi!” you both call out in unison.

He snaps to the text and reads the thesis, “Just as a master’s influence becomes unique in his pupil, a writer’s intent is unique to his reader. The vibrations felt depend only on the approach.”

*It is typical for a conclusion of a paper to revisit the introduction. In this case, it would be most appropriate to say something along the lines of, “It is similar to crossing railroads.” But I do not want to interrupt. You have almost finished reading A Paper on Italo Calvino.*