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If on a Winter's Night, Wandering Through a Landscape Painted with Tea.... Milorad Pavić, Italo Calvino, and the Construction of the Reader

[A] writer always suffers from the same disease, the disease of crisscrossing words, of building, from one tongue in his mouth, two. What is a book, really, other than a collection of words well crossed? (Pavić, *Landscape* 185)¹

Lack – or apparent lack – of causal development in the narration, intertextual suggestions, chronological disruption of the events narrated, slippages between different literary genres, propensity towards what Umberto Eco defined as *opera aperta*:² all these elements, present in both novels I will discuss here, are common features to be found in a number of other contemporary narratives. But what Milorad Pavić's *Landscape Painted with Tea* and Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* share, and what ultimately concerns me here, is the awareness of the need for a reader able to become an "accomplice," a "traveling companion"³ of the writer; a necessity embodied in the explicit purpose both texts contain to mold and manipulate their reader through the structure of the narration and the use of self-reflexive

1 "A pisac uvek boluje od iste bolesti, od bolesti da ukršta reči. Da od jednog jezika u svojim ustima gradi dva. Šta je u stvari jedna knjiga, do zbirka dobro ukrštenih reči?" Pavić, *Predeo slikan čajem* 215).

2 "Si ha un testo 'aperto' quando l'autore [...] [decide] fino a che punto deve controllare la cooperazione del lettore, e dove essa va suscitata, dove va diretta, dove deve trasformarsi in libera avventura interpretativa" (Eco, *Lector* 58). "We have a 'open' text when the author [...] [decides] to what extent he should control his reader's cooperation, where it should be stimulated, where it should be directed to, where it should become a free interpretative adventure."

3 In Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, the writer Morelli imagines "a text that would not clutch the reader but which would oblige him to become an accomplice as it whispers to him underneath the conventional exposition other more esoteric directions" (396).

metafictional devices. My focus here therefore is on how both texts attempt to create a reader who actively accepts the challenges posed by the multilayered narratives and who participates in the (re)creation of each novel.

"Writing always means hiding something in such a way that it then is discovered" (188).⁴ notes one of the multiple narrators in Calvino's novel – himself a writer – directly suggesting the dimension of both game and investigation that the reader attempting to decode the text will have to undertake. Hiding something that the reader will be challenged to find in the entwining stories embedded in the text, in the changing order of the pages, and in a number of intertextual references is precisely what both Calvino and Pavić do in their two novels. The implied assumption of both works is that if successful – that is, if he or she will have been able to actively engage in the dialogue with which both authors attempt to capture their audience – the reader will have also proven him or herself to be an attentive, or, as Pavić has it, a "gifted" reader, deserving to be rewarded. That the final reward will in both cases be noticeably different from the one initially promised is in itself another expression of the game in which the reader will get entangled in both texts, as we will see later.

If Pavić's novels all rest at the crossroads between innovative narrative forms, endeavors towards an interactive reader's participation in what he calls the "denouement of the plot,"⁵ and his urge, as a storyteller, to enhance his narratives with a proliferation of additional tales and subplots, Calvino also, especially in his last novels, challenges the reader to actively engage in the reconstruction of a fragmented narration crowded with both parallel and divergent stories. Both *Landscape Painted with Tea* and *If on a winter's night a traveler* have positioned the act of reading itself as one of their focuses, to which they constantly and explicitly draw our attention, aiming all the while to make us aware of our own reading process. Both authors, moreover, while entangling their reader in a game of cat-and-mouse, end up undermining the narrative form of the novel, by trespassing also cultural and literary boundaries and creating works that can well be categorized as *pastiches*.

The idea of manipulating and explicitly exhorting the reader toward involvement in the creative process of the text is of course not new, and

4 "[P]erchéscrivere è sempre nascondere qualcosa in modo che venga poi scoperto" (193).

5 The issue of reading and the position of the reader in the text is already crucial in *Dictionary of the Khazars*, where it is lamented that "the reader capable of deciphering the hidden meaning of a book from the order of its entries has long since vanished from the face of the earth, for today's reading audience believes that the matter of imagination lies exclusively within the realm of the writer and does not concern them in the least [...] This type of reader [...] never changes his manner of reading in any case" (11).

indeed, to be fair, one should notice that it has traveled in literature for centuries (we only need to think of Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinion of Tristram Shandy* in this respect). Nonetheless, such an idea, gaining more and more prominence, has been flourishing in the past three decades, and can be found in authors belonging to different literary traditions, such as Georges Perec, John Fowles, or Julio Cortázar, just to name a few.

In an interesting essay on writing from 1967, Calvino himself noted how a writer always writes "for people who have read certain other novels, certain other poems. [...] [T]he writer should not aim only to fulfill the reader's desires [...] but should imagine either a reader who does not exist yet, or a way to change the reader existing today" (Calvino, "Per chi si scrive?" 199).⁶ These words of course closely call to mind theories of the "ideal" or "model" reader, as expressed over the years by critics like Wolfgang Iser and especially by Umberto Eco, who noted how "The author has [...] to foresee [a Model Reader] supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them. [...] Many texts make evident their Model Readers by implicitly presupposing a specific encyclopedic competence" (Eco, *Role* 7).⁷ Similar, and even more programmatic in this sense, are Pavić's words:

I tried to change the way of reading increasing the role and responsibility of the reader in the process of creating a novel. [...] I have left to them [...] the readers – [...] the decision about the choice of the plot and the development of the situations in the novel: where the reading will begin, and where it will end; [as well as] the decision about the destiny of the main characters. (Pavić, "The Beginning and the End" 145)⁸

Not surprisingly, then, when facing works like *Landscape on a winter's night*, the reader is confronted not only with a dramatic increase in metafictional elements attempting to break the flux of the reading experience and to call into question the very basis of the narrative fabrication, but also

6 "[p]er persone che hanno letto certi altri romanzi, certe altre poesie. [...] [L]o scrittore non può proporsi soltanto la soddisfazione del lettore [...] ma deve presupporre un lettore che ancora non esiste, o un cambiamento nel lettore qual è oggi." Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Italian are mine.

7 "[L'autore] provvederà un Lettore Modello capace di cooperare all'attualizzazione testuale come egli, l'autore, pensava, e di muoversi interpretativamente così come egli si è mosso generativamente. [...] Molti testi rendono evidente il loro Lettore Modello presupponendo [...] una specifica competenza enciclopedica" (Eco, *Lector* 55).

8 "The Beginning and the End of Reading – The Beginning and the End of the Novel" had been previously published online as "Beginning and the End of the Novel": <<http://www.khazars.com/end-of-novel.html>>.

with a narration often structured like a jigsaw puzzle asking to be solved, or like an intricate labyrinth from which the reader should find a way out. The awareness of the necessity for an "accomplice" reader who could interpret, re-create and bring to life the – till then – mute text on the page, was thus described by Jean Paul Sartre:

the operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents. It is the conjoint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others. (Sartre 43)

An opinion later echoed and re-enforced by Linda Hutcheon's observation that "[t]exts do not generate anything until they are perceived and interpreted. [...] Without the implied existence of a reader, written texts remain collections of black marks on white pages" (Hutcheon 23).

As a consequence, the reader of contemporary fiction is oftentimes implicitly and explicitly called into action and asked to disentangle the intricacies of the text. Direct addresses to the reader prompting him or her to contribute to the narrative by deciphering it, (re)ordering it, or choosing its conclusion are common. Only apparently similar to the "Dear reader" of many Victorian novels, directly addressing the reader in works like Pavić's or Calvino's has a different function altogether. *Jane Eyre's* famous: "Reader, I married him" (Brontë 541) does not seek the approval or the disapproval of the reader, nor does it put the reader into the position of having to make a decision, but merely highlights the intimate tone of the narration between main character (and narrator) and reader.

Very different is the scope and meaning of direct addresses to the reader when he or she is personally and openly challenged to co-create the narrative pattern of the novel, as is seen in works like *Landscape*, where we are told more than once that some of the stories included in the text have already managed to escape from it, while new ones have taken their place, and above all that it is the reader's responsibility to look for them and to identify them among the numerous other stories comprising the novel:

Among these tales are some that have nothing to do with this Testimonial, or this crossword, or this love story. These sections and stories, mixed in among all the others, will have to be discovered by the reader himself, without anybody's help. (192)⁹

9 "Među tim povestima ima i takvih koje se ovom *Spomenicom*, ili sa ovim ukrštenim rečima, ili sa ovim ljubavnim romanom nemaju nikakve veze. Takva mesta i takve priče pomešane među ostala kazivanja, čitalac treba sam da otkrije bez čije pomoći" (223).

One could put together a story that boggles the mind, with sentences pulled out of various chapters of a book.... In other words, not only do stories keep disappearing out of a book, but ever-new tales keep appearing in it. This is a matter of the reading, not the writing – a matter of the eye, not the pen. (322)¹⁰

The fictional fabric of *Landscape* is thus presented as being in continuous movement, transition, and development, embroidered with narrative strands that become loose at some point, while others are woven in their place, only to be themselves unstitched later on. None of this knitting and unknitting of narrative yarns into a whole resembling the eternal incompleteness of Penelope's shroud is ascribed to the narrator, but rather to the reader: after all, as we are told, it's "a matter of the eye, not the pen." The narrative threads in Calvino's novel lack this dynamic development, and from the beginning we are shown how they are all, sooner or later, interrupted. But if in *If on a winter's night stories* do not physically "escape" from its pages, their conclusions do, and we are once again faced with a lack of closure that persists till the end, when, in compliance with the conventional conclusions inherited from past literary traditions, as we are reminded ("In ancient times a story could end only in two ways: having passed all tests, the hero and the heroine married, or else they die" 253),¹¹ we are given a stitched-up happy end in which *Reader* and Ludmilla marry, but where we do not find any of the answers to the problematics of reading and writing raised in the novel.

If the contemporary narrative text cannot be presented as a concluded and contained whole immune to haphazard variations, we should then not be surprised to be told that our existence as readers is foreshadowed by the very book we are reading, as happens when Vitacha, the heroine of *Landscape*, falls in love with "us." After all, as the narrator subtly hypothesizes earlier in the novel, the characters of a novel "must be tired of always seeing readers in the same formation, like a flock of geese flying south or trotters in a horse race" and "[p]erhaps these heroes in the book would like to pick a reader out of this gray procession, if for no other reason than to bet on one of us now and then" (186).¹² Thus Vitacha, in a Pirandellian fashion, falls in love with

10 "Od retenica istrgnutih iz raznih poglavlja jedne knjige može se naciniti takva priča da padneš u nesvest... Dakle, ne samo da iz jedne knjige stalno išezavaju priče, nego se u njoj stalno nastanjuju sve nove i nove povesti. To je stvar čitanja a ne pisanja, stvar oka, ne pera" (371).

11 "Anticamente un racconto aveva solo due modi per finire: passate tutte le prove, l'eroe e l'eroina si sposavano oppure morivano" (261).

12 "[Junacima i junakinjama knjige] sigurno im je dosadilo da čitaoce uvek vide u istom nizu ko jato gusaka što leti na jug ili ko kasace na konjskim trkama. Možda bi ti junaci iz knjige hteli da ponekog od čitalaca izdvoje iz te sive povorke, ako ni zbog čega drugog, a ono da se ponekad opklade na nekog od nas" (216).

the reader and, while pleading to be taken out of her book into the reader's life, she acknowledges not only the fictional nature of her existence, but also that the reader is the only one who can understand her world – "this terrible novel" 309 ("ovu strašnu knjigu" 356) – by turning it inside out, something she cannot possibly do, being entrapped in the text:

Have you never been enraptured by the heroines in *Crime and Punishment* even if they are wiser and better than you, my only one? Why shouldn't it be the other way around? Why do you think that only you have a right to the book, but the book has no right to you? Why are you so convinced that you are not a figment of somebody's imagination? Are you sure your life isn't a mere invention? [...] Don't you know that all readers in the world are inscribed in all books, as in the registries of death, birth and marriage? (309)¹³

Pavić's novels, from *Dictionary of the Khazars* to the most recent *Last Love in Constantinople*, exemplify the constant attempt to tease and challenge their reader to act, to choose, to take a stand and proceed in the reading following his or her own autonomous decisions, instead of simply turning one page after the next. All this echoes in part the non-linearity of Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, where the reader is immediately invited to choose from "many" possible stories contained in the text. But in Cortázar's novel, while in theory we initially have the illusion of being able to choose our own reading pattern, we eventually discover that the options proposed are two versions of the same story (one more spurious, the other more entangled and complex¹⁴ and that in reality we have very little autonomy in choosing the sequence of the chapters to read. This does not initially seem to happen with Pavić's works, however, where we are confronted with a number of real selectable and different paths of reading.

13 "Zar te nikada nisu zanele junakinje *Zločina i kazne* iako su mudrije i bolje od tebe, jedini moj? Zašto ne bi moglo biti i obrnuto? Zar misliš da samo Ti imaš pravo na knjigu, a knjiga nema pravo na tebe? Zašto si tako ubeđen da nisi nečija mašta? Jesi li siguran da tvoj život nije obična izmišljotina? [...] Zar ne znaš da su svi čitaoci na svetu upisani u sve knjige kao u protokole umrlih, rođenih i venčanih?" (355).

14 The "Table of Instructions" opening Cortázar's novel dutifully informs us that "[i]n its own way, this book consists of many books, but two books above all. The first can be read in a normal fashion and it ends with Chapter 56 [...] Consequently, the reader may ignore what follows with a clean conscience.

The second should be read by beginning with Chapter 73 and then following the sequence indicated at the end of each chapter." Of course, this second reading, including all the 155 chapters contained in the text (also those left out in the first reading) does present a more "complete" and "problematic" version of the same story; but neither the sequence of the events narrated, nor the causes producing certain effects change from one version to the other.

Thus, *Dictionary of the Khazars* (of which both a "male" and a "female" version exist) consists of three different alphabetical lexicons ordered through a number of separate entries. The novel not only offers the possibility to begin and stop reading at practically any page of the text, but necessarily both begins and ends differently according to the language it is read in.¹⁵ If *The Inner Side of the Wind* – a "Clepsydra-Novel" (Pavić, "The Beginning and the End" 144) – can be begun at both ends and has to be read one and a half times, since its ending is to be found in the middle, in *Last Love in Constantinople* the reader is invited to use a deck of tarot cards to create and choose (or to leave to chance and fate, if so desired) his or her unique path of reading: only once the cards are dealt will the reader have a "table of contents" ordering the chapter sequence to follow while reading.¹⁶

Landscape Painted with Tea, on the other hand, openly asks the reader to solve a crossword puzzle (Figure 1, next page) – or actually to choose between two different crossword puzzles to solve, the first providing only horizontal definitions to solve the puzzle "across," the second containing only vertical ones – in order to arrive at the novel's outcome.

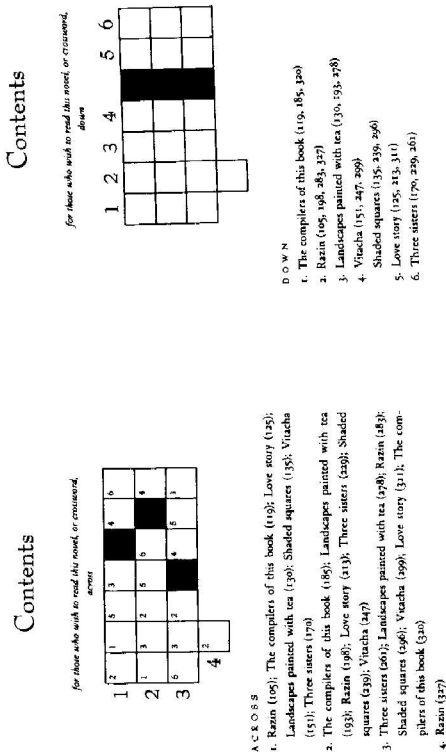
A traditional, or horizontal, linear reading is still possible in *Landscape*, though not necessarily encouraged. Whoever chooses it is in fact soon rebuked for being a "reader who opts for the old way of reading, for the one-way street, [a] reader who is determined to slide toward death by the shortest route, without putting up a fight," (188)¹⁷ versus a more active reader who chooses instead to read the novel "vertically," retracing the fates of the individual characters and thus jumping from chapter to chapter, rather than following the narration given page after page. This second kind of reader is also informed that as a reward for choosing to go against the grain of a passive and sequential reading, he or she will be offered the tools to arrive at the

15 As one of the narrators in *Landscape* says: "the end of a story told in a strange language is like the end not of that story but of some other" (57). "Jer kraj jedne priče isprican na tudem jeziku kao da i nije kraj te, nego neke druge priče" (67).

16 Of course, the mention of tarot cards immediately reminds one of Calvino's own *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1969) and the later *La taverna dei destini incrociati* (1973), in which tarots are used as prompts for the different stories illustrated by the multiple narrators of the novel. The differences with Pavić's novel are however crucial. In Calvino's case, following the tenets of the Oulipo (of which the author was a member), the tarots dealt on the table served as a constriction for the writer to construct his stories according to the suggestions given by the sequence of the cards. On the contrary, in *Last Love in Constantinople*, the tarots are meant as a tool for the reader to pick a specific pattern when reading the various episodes comprising the novel.

17 "Onaj čitalac koji se opredeli za stari način čitanja, za jednosmernu ulicu, čitalac koji je rešen da otklizi do smrti najkraćim putem i ne odupirući se" (219).

Figure 1: (Pavić 100-101)



solution of the novel.¹⁸ The "horizontal" reader will still be able to find the solution in the appendix, but will of course have no merit in reaching it:

In short, [...] whoever chooses to read [this novel] crossways will basically follow the plot of the story but not the denouement, because the solution of a crossword never lies in the crossword itself; that, as is known, is given separately, 'in the next issue.' (187-88)¹⁹

What emerges here once again is how in Pavić's literary world the order of events as decided by the narrator seems to count less than the real choices the reader makes. Selecting a specific order in which to read the various chapters will of course change the unraveling of the plot, thus undermining

18 Similarly, also in *Dictionary of the Khazars*, despite the freedom left to the reader, the narrator immediately informs his reader that there is a right (or "proper") way to read the book and a wrong one. Also in this novel, the reader choosing the "proper" way will be rewarded: "only someone who can read through the sections of this book in their proper order can create the world anew. [...] [since this] is an open book, and when it is shut it can be added to" (11).

19 "Ukratko, onaj ko čita ovaj roman uspravno, slediće sudbine junaka, a onaj ko se opredeli za vodoravne nizove, pratiće prvenstveno zaplet priče. Ali ne i rasplet, jer rešenja ukrštenih reči ne leže nikad u ukrštenim rečima, nego se, kao što je poznato, daju zasebno i naknadno u idućem broju." (218).

and disrupting the foundations of the traditional narrative structure of the novel. Not accidentally, *Landscape* equally invests reader and narrator with the role of "the compilers of this book" ("sastavljači ove knjige"), to whom, notably, three whole chapters are dedicated: chapters containing vague clues about the identity of the narrator and the supposed purpose of the narration, but, above all, instructions to the reader on how to read the novel. Interestingly, it is in the last of these three chapters that we are abruptly informed that the novel we have been reading does not in fact lead to a straightforward conclusion and that

[t]he reader who does not believe that there are novels with double endings, novels that end happily and unhappily at the same time, that have a happy ending and a tragic ending, the reader who wants to know whether the heroine of this novel, Vitacha Milut, was or was not killed [...] need only look in the index at the back of this book. Because the denouement of this novel is to be found in the index. (324)²⁰

Challenges to the reader can be also more veiled and less explicit, but not for this reason less forceful. Such is the case with Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* that, programmatically, in a by now famous incipit, begins by making the reader believe the text is directly talking to him or her:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. [...] Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach. In an easy chair, on the sofa, in the rocker, the deck chair, on the hassock. In the hammock, if you have a hammock. [...] Of course, the ideal position for reading is something you can never find. (3)²¹

Soon enough, however, we – the real readers – discover that the narrator's suggestions were directed not to us, but to the protagonist of the book, remarkably addressed through a second-person narration and called

20 "Čitalac koji ne veruje da postoje romani sa dvostrukim krajem, romani koji se u isti mah završavaju srećno i nesrećno, heptendom i tragičnim ishodom, dakle, čitalac koji hoće da sazna da li je junakinja ovog romana Vitacha Milut ubijena ili nije ubijena, neka ne teška rešenje u idućem broju kao ostali odgonetaki ukrštenih reči, nego neka ga potrazi u registru na kraju knjige. Jer, rasplet ovog romana se nalazi u registru" (373).

21 "Stai per cominciare a leggere il nuovo romanzo *Se una notte un viaggiatore* di Italo Calvino. Rilassati. Raccogli ti. Allontana da te ogni altro pensiero. Lascia che il mondo che ti circonda sfumi nell'indistinto. [...] Prendi la posizione più comoda: seduto, sdraiato, raggomitolato, coricato. Coricato sulla schiena, su un fianco, sulla pancia. In poltrona, sul divano, sulla sedia a dondolo, sulla sedia a sdraio, sul pouf. Sull'amaca, se hai un'amaca. [...] Certo, la posizione ideale per leggere non si riesce a trovarla" (3).

Reader throughout the novel.²² That *Reader* is not a mirror image of who the narrator would want his ideal reader to be is immediately evident. *Reader* uses literature to escape reality; he is a passive reader who simply lets himself be transported by the flow of the narration, without questioning or analyzing it, a reader, finally, who underscores his own fondness for reading when he is soon relieved that the book he is about to begin "[i]s not too long, fortunately" (8) ("[n]on è troppo lungo, per fortuna"). He is such a superficial reader that we are not surprised when the text begins mistreating and mocking him. Even his compulsive obsession to locate the missing continuations of the series of incomplete novels he finds himself reading seems more an effect of the interest he has developed for the *Other Reader*,²³ Ludmilla, than a consequence of his genuine literary interest. It is precisely Ludmilla, only apparently *Reader's* double, who, on the other hand, seems at first to incarnate the ideal reader any author would want. Ludmilla's only desires appear to rotate almost exclusively around her next reading; she seems to exist only to be able to read, to immerse herself completely in any book she happens to have in her hands, while at the same time always craving for a new book, a new reading experience, always different from the previous one. Soon, however, it becomes clear that even she, although more inquisitive and committed to the task of reading than *Reader*, also simply lets herself be passively brought where the story wants to bring her and instead of being an active reader, ends up being simply "a parody of the hyperconsumer [...] [whose] whims change by the hour" (Watts 712) as Melissa Watts insightfully calls her.

At length, we – real readers – feel compelled to participate in the game played by the text precisely by avoiding behaving like the fictional readers of

22 Later in the text, we will be informed that this device was precisely intended to make us – empirical readers – identify with *Reader*: "Questo libro è stato attento finora a lasciare aperta al Lettore che legge la possibilità d'identificarsi col Lettore che è letto: per questo non gli è stato dato un nome che l'avrebbe automaticamente equiparato a una Terza Persona, a un personaggio [...] e lo si è mantenuto nell'astratta condizione dei pronomi, disponibile per ogni attributo e azione" (142). "This book so far has been careful to leave open to the Reader who is reading the possibility of identifying himself with the Reader who is read: this is why he was not given a name, which would automatically have made him the equivalent of a Third Person, of a character [...] and so he has been kept a pronoun, in the abstract conditions of pronouns, suitable for any attribute and any action" (137). Interestingly, the only times when addresses to *Reader* coincide with those directed to the real reader, as Watts notes, are in the metanarrative remarks in some of the fragments, "since we are all presumably, reading the incipits" (Watts 712).

23 In Italian, "Leatrice" ("Female Reader") and not "Other Reader": the gendered quality of Italian nouns immediately engenders the way her character is presented, while there is no suggestion of any dependency of the female reader to the male one that is instead present in the English version by calling her "Other," as a contrast to the "first" reader, the male one.

the novel, all of them clearly guilty of misreading their texts. Instead of finding solutions to crossword puzzles, Calvino's novel offers us a variety of tasks we can choose from: we can, for instance, reconstruct the main thread of the fragmented tale of *Reader* as mirrored in the ten beginnings of the various novels *Reader* reads; or we can play an intertextual game, trying to identify the original works echoed and parodied in the ten beginnings without a conclusion contained in what ends up being a literary *pastiche*. We can also try to reconstruct what the novel does not say, since after all, as one of the characters not by chance, suggests: "the things that the novel does not say are necessarily more numerous than those it does say, and only a special halo around what is written can give the illusion that you are reading also what is unwritten" (198).²⁴ Above all, we are asked to acknowledge our own defects as readers, while at the same time making sure to heed the narrator's warning: "How long are you going to let yourself be dragged by the plot? [...] If you continue lending yourself to this game, it means that you, too, are an accomplice of the general mystification" (212-13).²⁵

Attempts like Pavić's or Calvino's might be, as in fact has occasionally happened, dismissed as elitist, cerebral and ultimately self-centered literary games, devoid of meaningful content and focused only on sensational tricks played at the expense of the reader's expectations.²⁶ Nevertheless, neither Pavić nor Calvino simply indulge in empty stylistic exercises of narrative experimentalism; on the contrary, their writing is both literarily rich and engaging, as the multilayered encyclopedic webs of cultural and intertextual references in both novels show. In *If on a winter's night*, where the main strand of narrative is disrupted by a number of unfinished stories²⁷ interspersed

24 "le cose che il romanzo non dice sono necessariamente più di quelle che dice, e solo un particolare riverbero di ciò che è scritto può dare l'illusione di stare leggendo anche il non scritto" (203).

25 "Fino a quando continuerai a lasciarti trascinare passivamente dalla vicenda? [...] Se continui a prestarti a questo gioco vuol dire che anche tu sei complice della mistificazione generale" (218-19).

26 If Andrew Wachel, talking about *Dictionary of the Khazars*, notes how "as it is all too frequently the case with such novels, on closer examination the structure of Pavić's work proves more a gimmick than a true innovation, because no matter what order you choose to read the work in, the story remains the same" (633), Calvino on the other hand has faced the disapproval Italian critics have had for his narrative "experimentalism." Thus, while Franco Fortini "denounces what he sees as a hedonistic involution in Calvino's last works" (Botta 81), other Italian critics often followed suit in their disapproval of the later Calvino's production. (See Anna Botta for a wider discussion on this issue).

within it, each fragment represents a parody of one of the literary genres and traditions Calvino said he would have never pursued otherwise: "I began [*Winter's night*] by imagining all the kinds of novels I would never write; then I tried to write them down, to summon in me the creative energy of ten different imaginary novelists" (Calvino, "Mondo scritto" 1874).²⁸ As a result, his novel ends up enveloping styles as different as magic realism, spy and mystery stories, Borgesian tales and Japanese erotic writing.

Landscape Painted with Tea, on the other hand, explicitly conceived as a crossword puzzle that the reader initially seems to be asked to solve by following a selectable pattern of reading, is at the same time a multilayered narration fragmented in a number of parallel and overlapping strands of narrative spanning from autobiographical accounts, myth, and letters, to self-reflexive narratives and legends.²⁹

Ultimately, Calvino and Pavić anticipate a reader who avoids falling prey to the "suspension of disbelief" mechanism, while actively participating in the re-construction of their fragmented and non-linear plots. By pushing the reader to engage in an active quest among the various tales, riddles, and intertextual references contained in their novels, both authors aim to change current habits of reading and to propose new ones. According to Pavić, in

27 The novel's assumption is that such stories are fragments of a much longer novel. However, I find myself in agreement with those critics who, like Cesare Segre, see them instead as short stories that are almost concluded in themselves, and to which little needs to be added. The only exceptions would maybe be the first two fragments – "If on a winter's night a traveler" and "Outside the Town of Malbork" – both hinting to more complex and intricate subsequent possible plots.

28 "[H]o cominciato [*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*] immaginandomi tutti i tipi di romanzo che non scriverò mai; poi ho tentato di scriverli, di evocare all'interno di me stesso l'energia creativa di dieci diversi romanzieri immaginari." While the parody in the ten novelistic incipits is very erudite, it should not be forgotten that there is another parodistic level to be found in the main narrative strand itself, where each chapter progressively becomes a more and more marked parody of different popular fiction genres, from science fiction to spy-stories, while the events narrated become more and more implausible.

29 In her article on Pavić, Dagmar Burkhart eloquently notes how his works span "through the lexicon, the crossword, disputation, dialogic narrative, parable and anecdote, to the historical novel, the crime thriller, and the love story or romantic novel" and embrace "a heterogeneity of reference texts, such as the Bible, ancient myths, Homer, Plato, Ovid, the Byzantine novel, apocrypha and holy legend, the *Vita Constantini*, the Talmud and the Koran, the traditions of the Kabbala, Balkan folklore and folk mythology, Ragusan baroque lyric and baroque epic, historiographical works, sermons of the Serbian baroque period [...]. texts of the German Enlightenment and German romantic periods, texts by Poe, Pushkin, Gogol, Kafka, Borges, Eco, and García Márquez, and narrative texts of contemporary Serbian authors such as Andrić, Crnjanski, Selimović, Kiš, Tršina, Nenadić, and others" (Burkhart 165).

fact, the outcome of such a process in the reading audience, if successful, would bring about a change in literature itself, that will thus turn into a non-linear art:

Some arts are reversible and enable the recipient to approach the work from various sides, or even to go around it and have a good look at it, changing the spot of the perspective, and the direction of his looking at it according to his own preference, as is the case with architecture, sculpture, or painting. Other, nonreversible arts, such as music and literature, look like one-way roads on which everything moves from the beginning to the end, from birth to death. I have always wished to make literature, which is a nonreversible art, a reversible one. Therefore, my novels have no end in the classical meaning of the word. (Pavić, "The Beginning and the End" 142-43)

To reach this objective, Pavić claims to have consciously changed his way of writing, a process he admits to have been difficult.³⁰ Not surprisingly, he also admits to be very intrigued by the possibilities given by computer technology in achieving a "reversible" literature; not only will some of his novels soon be transposed into CD-ROM format, but Pavić has himself experimented with hypertextual writing, as can be seen in "Damascene: A Tale for Computer and Compasses," published on-line.³¹

If for Calvino, "literature should presume to speak to an audience more learned than the writer; whether this audience exists or not, it does not matter" (Calvino, "Per chi si scrive?" 202),³² he later also notes how at the basis of his literary project is a novel structured as a web able to illustrate the "infinite potentialities" of literature and to capture "the essence of the novel" (Calvino, "Molteplicità" 131).

Both authors seem to ascribe to writing the task of changing their audience's attitude, thus molding and constructing its readers.³³ This is why we cannot wholly agree with Melissa Watts's otherwise correct observation on *If on a winter's night* that "[h]aving disarmed our reading defenses, written us into a well-specified position in the text, and explicitly instructed us in our

30 See D.J.R. Bruckner, "How to Kill Readers." *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 20 1988, 15.

31 "Damascene" can be found at <<http://www.ezone.org/damascene>>.

32 "la letteratura deve presupporre un pubblico più colto, più colto di quanto non sia lo scrittore; che questo pubblico esista o no non importa."

33 In *Dictionary* writers are in fact urged: "never forget the following: the reader is like a circus horse which has to be taught that it will be rewarded with a lump of sugar every time it acquits itself well. If that sugar is withheld, it will not perform" (Pavić 15).

reading of his novel, this author is clearly not dead, and the 'birth of the reader' grows dubious" (Watts 714). The preoccupation with the "birth of a reader" who could decode the text without either distorting it beyond recognition (like Calvino's Lotaria), or being passively sucked into it (like Ludmilla) is at the core of both *Landscape* and *If on a winter's night*, and indeed, Watts will later concede that "Calvino's novel may well be the initial step toward an authentic birth of the reader" (Watts 714).

According to Eco, "[a] text is meant to be an experience of transformation for its reader" (Eco, *Postscript* 53), and indeed both *Landscape* and *If on a winter's night* aim at this goal. To achieve it, both authors construct their narratives around one of the most ancient and traditional literary *topoi*: that of the journey to experience, the quest. While *Landscape* depicts the quest of Atanas Svilar/Razin first for his past (his father), and later for his own present and future destiny, *If on a winter's night* follows *Reader's* quest for the closure to the stories he has only dipped in, and eventually to his own story. But aside from the quest and its ordeals their characters will have to experience, both novels are moreover structured as series of trials the real reader has to overcome and to learn from while reading.

Thus in *Landscape*, before arriving at the "Novel for Crossword Fans," ("*Roman za ljubitelje ukrštenih reči*" 117) the reader has to go through Book One, entitled "A Little Night Novel," ("*Mali noćni roman*" 5) where he or she is "tested" on his or her capability to bring together the apparently loose threads of two separate and distinct narratives (one set in the past, the other in the present) that at first do not seem to have much in common. After the reader comes to the realization that these threads are in fact woven in the same narrative fabric – when, in a way, he or she has therefore passed the first interpretative ordeal posed by the novel – the reader is asked to step to the next level of the game, so to speak, and to select the kind of crosswords (and the kind of reading) he or she intends to follow in the second part of the book.

If on a winter's night contains as well a sort of "preparatory reading test." In this case, the successful reader will have learnt by the third chapter of the novel that not everything is what it seems, that the voice of the narrator is in fact deceiving and that also there are loose threads that need to be woven together. Furthermore, he or she will also have soon learnt how each new excerpt from the unfinished novels entwined in the main narrative will keep asking to be seen as a reflection of the other fragments, of writing and reading strategies, and of the main story of *Reader* and his companion.

In both works the reader thus goes through a process of learning at the beginning; only by successfully realizing the outcome of such a process, and by applying it to the rest of the text, will he or she be able to, as Pavić phrases it, "solve" the novel. A similar process is well summarized by Eco's description

of the strategy he used to build the readers of *The Name of the Rose*:

I insisted, if [a reader] wanted to enter the abbey and live there for seven days, he had to accept the abbey's own pace. If he could not, he would not manage to read the whole book. Therefore those first hundred pages are like a penance or an initiation, and if someone does not like them, so much the worse for him. He can stay at the foot of the hill. Entering a novel is like going on a climb in the mountains: you have to learn the rhythm of respiration, acquire the pace; otherwise you stop right away. (Eco, *Postscript* 41)

And later on:

What does it mean, to imagine a reader able to overcome the penitential obstacle of the first hundred pages? It means, precisely, writing one hundred pages for the purpose of constructing a reader suitable for what comes afterward. (Eco, *Postscript* 48)

Similarly, if in *Landscape* the reader must first climb up Mount Athos and learn how the different rules of the "idiorthymic" and of the "cenobite" monks could apply not only to the characters of the novel, but also to his or her reading and his or her life, in *If on a winter's night* the reader should soon both realize that he or she has never entered the book, but is still outside of it, and accept to be teased by it, so as not to be left "at the foot of the hill."

It might be argued that a way of writing that shifts the responsibility for the creation of the text to the reader implicitly subscribes to Barthes's idea of the "death of the author," that is, at least until we arrive at the conclusion of either text and discover that nothing is farther from the truth. Though Calvino's novel insists on images of writers who either lack inspiration, or copy and mystify texts by other authors, its author still has a strong voice. As noted by some critics, "[t]he fact that Calvino includes so many misreaders in his novel, characters with flaws, [and] obviously misdirected approaches to reading, clearly indicates that he does not confer an absolute authority on the reader" (Sorapure 705) while his narrative voice "[rather] than allowing for the inevitable distortion that accompanies reading, [...] provides instructions for the reader so as to insure the most favourable reading" (Green 101). And in fact, if while reading we have to find a way among the proliferation of collateral stories, subplots and mirrored interferences, we must do so by following the fragmentary path set up by the author and following his not so veiled instructions. Significant and programmatic in this sense are Calvino's own words in an interview about *If on a winter's night*: "I constantly play cat and mouse with the reader, letting the reader briefly enjoy he illusion that he's in control. And then I quickly take the rug out from under him; he realizes with a shock that he's not in

control, that it is always I, Calvino, who is in total control of the situation" (Du Plessix Gray 23); an assertion that could be shared by Pavić as well.

In *Landscape*, in fact, despite the freedom we might think we have in choosing our way to proceed through the intricacies of the novel, we discover at the end that, regardless of the path of reading we chose, we have been cheated. Whether we arrive at the "solution" of the novel through a vertical or through a horizontal reading, we realize that our capacity to cause a happy or a tragic ending, does indeed depend on who we are, but does not depend on our individual choices. Hence, knowing that the heroine will be killed if a male face appears in her divinatory bucket of water, and that she will live if a female face shows instead, when reading the "solution" of the puzzle we realize how more than anything it is meant as a joke played on the reader:

Then Vitacha Razin caught the full moon in the bucket and leaned over to see what face would appear in the water. And in the water she and her companion saw you, who are reading these lines and thinking as you sit at your desk or in your armchair that you are completely safe and out of the game; you, who are holding this book upside down and gripping your pencil as a mother does a spoon or a murderer a knife. (343)³⁴

The reader has entered the text, yes. He or she is responsible for Vitacha's life or death, and his or her presence *does* change the outcome of the novel, but such a responsibility clearly has nothing to do with the reader's individual choices, while his or her tentative steps in the fictional territory are firmly revealed as having been all along led by the author on a path from which no reader can truly deviate.

In *If on a winter's night* we realize soon after the first interrupted fragment that we have been deceived by the second person narration, but in *Landscape* it takes the reader much longer to perceive that he or she has been, if not cheated, at least made fun of by the narrator. Thus, while in Calvino's novel we continue our reading by distrusting the narrator's voice that we have soon learnt to consider unreliable, and by being more aware of the interpretative game presented by the text, in Pavić's work this does not happen, and when we discover that we have been deceived it is too late, since by then the novel is over.

In truth, the narrator in *Landscape*, as noted before, had forewarned the reader that the "denouement" of the novel's unanswered riddle was to be found in the index, but of course his words have been misleading. Moreover,

if the index does indeed offer the key to the solution of the novel, the same index also holds up once again a derisive mirror to the reader's naive pretense to influence the outcome of the story through his or her reading choices.

An alphabetically ordered list of all the words necessary to reconstruct the "solution" of the novel, the index contains as well the indications of the page numbers where these words appear in the text. By arranging the words in the index according to the order in which he or she encountered them while reading, the reader will obtain the text of the solution. Needless to say, such text will inevitably differ according to the pattern of reading – and order of chapters – previously chosen. Following the indications given by the narrator shortly before³⁵ the "horizontal reader" will only need to reassemble the words according to the sequential page numbers given in the index, while the "vertical" reader will have to work a little harder to reach his or her solution.

Remarkably, what results once the reader does try to solve the puzzle in this way, is that the "correct" solution given at the end of the book can be reached only by following the order of the chapters as they appear in a "horizontal" and sequential reading, not in a "vertical" one,³⁶ as had on the contrary been promised earlier in the novel. In other words, very little of what the narrator instructed the reader to do should have been taken literally, and the reader who has been naive and gullible enough to play according to the rules given in the book is cheated of his or her reward. Not surprisingly, the solution of the novel does not have much to do with the initial crossword puzzles the reader had to choose from, since after all the crosswords are not real puzzles that need not be solved, but only maps offered to the reader to select his or her own way to travel into the text. They do not offer a closure

35

"If the reader writes out the words of this index in their order of appearance in these crosswords or in this Testimonial (following the page numbers given next to them, rather than the alphabetical order), he will get a short, clear answer to his question, and the denouement of the novel will be there" (324).

"Ako čitalac ispiše reči tog registra onim redom kako se one javljaju u ovim ukrštenim rečima ili u ovoj *Spomenici* (sledeći brojke strana uz njih, a ne azbučni red) dobiće kratak i jasan odgovor na svoje pitanje i rasplet romana biće tu" (374).

36

Incidentally, it is here worth remarking how – probably due to a pagination error in assembling the novel – the English translation published by Knopf fails to offer an index with the correct page numbers. Thus it is impossible for any reader of such a version, whether horizontal or vertical, to arrive at the solution of the crossword puzzle, a solution, on the other hand, easily attainable in the original Serbo-Croatian version and in other translations of the novel. Ironically, then, the English speaking reader will not only find him or herself baffled while trying to "solve" the puzzle found in the index, but will also fail to realize he or she has been misled all along. Needless to say, this time the reader's bafflement will of course not be ascribable to the unreliability of the narrator.

³⁴ "Porom Vitacha Razin uhvati puni mesec u bunarsku kofu i naže se da vidi kakav lik će se ukazati u vodi. I tada ona i njen pratilac ugledaše u vodi tebe, što čitaš ove redove i misliš u svojoj skamiji ili naslonjaci da si u potpunosti bezbednosti i izvan igre; tebe, što držiš ovu knjigu naopake i stežeš svoju pisaliku kao mati kašiku ili ubica nož" (395).

themselves and therefore their blank squares will remain empty once the last page of the book is turned.

Finally, yet a last joke played by the novel will make the reader realize at the end that to arrive at the solution he or she did not need to take into consideration the content of the text read so far. Unlike detective stories, where clues, hidden meanings and references pile up to reach the solution of the initial enigma, in *Landscape* any potential clue leading to the solution that could be detected in the story has no relevance to its conclusion, since the solution does not come directly from the plot, but by the expectations built in by the narrator through metanarrative comments. Nevertheless, albeit cheated, the reader who manages to discover the traps set by the narrator could still have the satisfaction of having proved not to be passive, accepting the given solution in the appendix without having tried to unveil it him or herself. To paraphrase Barthes's words, such reader will have still earned his or her "pleasure" from the text by having left "abrasions" on "the fine surface" of its narrative (Barthes 11-12), and it is this kind of ideal reader that then both Pavić and Calvino seem to have envisioned for their works.

What both novels do is to unveil the scaffolding of writing behind their narrative, while forcing the reader to become aware of it, so that he or she could learn a new approach to reading. Thus in *Landscape* both kinds of reader ("vertical" and "horizontal") are fooled, the former with the false flattery of having chosen the active and creative way to read, the latter with the disappointment of having been labeled "passive." Ultimately, both the vertical reader's self-complacency and the horizontal reader's frustration will prove pointless, as we have seen, since the freedom of choice the novel gives its reader is illusory to begin with. Notably, the narrator had hinted at a trap hidden in the text. Despite his claims that a horizontal reading is passive and quiescent, while a vertical one is more creative,³⁷ he in fact never explicitly says which way of reading is the correct one: "Which of these two groups of crossword fans is right? In the right, of course, is the solid port of silence that one sails into after all crossings and after all solutions" (191).³⁸ If they do certainly contain a hint, the narrator's words are however once again

37 It is worth underlining how, on the contrary, a vertical reading is less complex and more linear than an horizontal one. Reading "down" means following a plot revolving around clusters of meaning, while reading "across" forces the reader to be more attentive and aware of the multiple links among the various chapters organized in a non-consequential order.

38 "Ko je u pravu od ove dve grupe ljubitelja ukrštenih reči? U pravu je, naravno, tvrdo pristanite čitanja u koje se uplovi posle svih ukrštenja i posle svih rešenja." (222). Similarly, also in *If on a winter's night* there is no univocal indication of what would be the "correct" way of reading. The several different kinds of readers presented throughout the novel have all their own shortcomings and no mode of reading is ever presented as privileged and flawless.

misleading.

Calvino's narratorial voice is not more reliable than Pavić's, but at least in his novel the mechanism of the game played by the author is uncovered earlier in the text; once reconciled with the deceiving features of the novel, once, in other words, that his or her disbelief ceases to be suspended, the reader can focus on how the text reveals itself as a parable on reading and writing. Not for this reason, however, are Calvino's readers less frustrated than Pavić's. At the source of their incessant frustration is the lack of closure both of the series of narrative fragments with which the author tantalizes his or her interest, and of the problematics of writing (and of reading) discussed throughout the text. Barthes noted how "[t]he pleasure of the text is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense. [...] the entire excitation takes refuge in the *hope* of [...] knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction)" (Barthes 10), and it is then precisely this pleasure that Calvino's novel forever and repetitively denies to its readers.

In discussing *If on a winter's night*, Cesare Segre remarked: "I am not sure whether among the criteria to assess a literary work, the writer's amusement has been ever considered much: certainly, based on such a criteria, Calvino's latest novel should score very high" (Segre 135).³⁹ Indeed, one cannot but agree with Segre and, at the same time, apply his comment to Pavić's novel as well. Although they lead their readers through a fictional wood (to use Eco's term) full of traps and deceptions, what Calvino and Pavić ultimately do in their novels at the same time also indirectly back up Iser's remark that

books only take on their full existence in the reader. It is true that they consist of ideas thought out by someone else, but in reading the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking. (66)

Although both texts show a strong authorial presence, neither suggests an univocal or straightforward answer to the interrogatives about reading they pose: they do not offer any climactic closure. Thus in *Landscape* the riddle and its "solution" offered at the end are far from solving anything. Similarly, the short conclusive chapter in *If on a winter's night*, while ironically attempting to make us believe one last time that we can after all identify with the Reader ("Turn off your light too. Aren't you tired of reading? And you say, 'Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a winter's night* a traveler by Italo Calvino' 254),⁴⁰ rather than a satisfactory conclusion, represents yet Calvino's last witty wink to his reader. In both cases the answers to the riddles will

³⁹ "Non so se tra i canoni per la valutazione di un'opera letteraria abbia avuto molto seguito quello basato sul divertimento dell'autore; non c'è dubbio che l'ultimo libro di Calvino, in base a questo canone, dovrebbe raggiungere una quotazione molto alta."

have to be found by the reader: it will be up to him or her to "do the thinking." Calvino's and Pavić's novels do not simply indicate the path to a new way of reading intertwined with that leading to a new way of writing, as Pavić phrased it, but they make us aware that on this path the author, far from being dead, nevertheless still needs a reader capable of engaging in the games the text confronts him or her with, a reader who could walk along that same path to prove that the novel is not dead either (see Pavić, "The Beginning and the End" 146).

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