

If On A Winter's Night An Essay

Critical Analysis Essay by Dan Berget

Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is a book about reading. It is also a book about focus, and the philosophy that ties these two concepts together in relation to man and our place in the universe. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is a very sobering novel, as the nameless protagonist has several waking encounters that force them to understand what it means not only to focus on the face of one's true desire (reading a book, in this case) but to also face what life holds beyond that desire. It is about focus and concentration and letting go into a different world. From the opening line and throughout the rest of the text, the reader of the novel must listen to and explore not only several ways to read, but the distractions that block that reading. The reader unites and empathizes with the protagonist and the struggles to perform the simple task of reading. It also entraps the reader in a mystery that goes nowhere. That is, as the protagonist is entrenched deeper and deeper into the mystery surrounding the authors and the increasingly cryptic texts, so too is the reader pulled into a mystery that gets increasingly complex yet ultimately goes nowhere. The novel itself is broken up into fourteen separate fragments of novels that the protagonist slowly becomes frustrated, yet intrigued by, as the protagonist is further pulled down into the hole that used to be the simple act of reading but is now seemingly impossible. Before, it is implied, the protagonist could easily read without distraction, without losing focus. Now they cannot, no matter how hard they try. Just as the protagonist main character cannot focus and read, neither can the actual reader themselves as they struggle to read Calvino's novel. It can be said that the reader of the novel is in fact a character just as much as the protagonist. Both figures must learn what it means to focus and read successfully despite numerous external and internal factors.

Before delving into the first fragment of novel, the opening chapter describes the ideal way to read. In fact, there are so many ways, one could believe that there is no particularly ideal way. Included are the ideas of comfort, lighting, worldly distractions (external factors) such as noise, and internal factors such as vices (withdrawals from nicotine, alcohol relaxing the senses). In a sense, this multitude of ways to read is just as confusing and makes the reader lost before they read as the novel does when they do start reading. As noted on the third page, "...the ideal position for reading is something you can never find." (Calvino, 3). In exploring the action of reading, Italo Calvino intentionally places the protagonist in less than ideal situations; not just ones related to the physical and comfort, but also to the mental, as mentioned above through the multitude of worldly distractions. A paradox can be derived from the lack of distraction. The moment the world silences, the protagonist finds the perfect place to read, and they are presented with two paths: 1) the reader finds that they are now alone with their thoughts. Their self, their inherent being, is pushing through and preventing reading. The effect of the world throughout the history of the individual's life is an occurrence unique to the self yet also shared by every individual. The other path, 2), is that the world will create an external factor to distract the reader, in a form of Murphy's Law. Once the ideal is achieved, it immediately becomes unideal. A bird will call, a truck will honk its horn, the wind will pick up just slightly too strong. External factors and internal factors alike present the unideal, the inability to focus and, in this context, the inability to be immersed in reading. A study by Mehdi Zarghami looked at twenty undergraduate male discus throwers and tested whether or not internal or external focus enhanced performance. After several trials it was determined that performance by the athletes was significantly increased when focused externally, rather than internally. Just with the act of

sports, reading successfully (in terms of remembering and understanding what was read) also requires a focus of external factors and a silence of any external distractions.

The mystery portion of the novel starts with a simple external factor for the first fragment - missing pages of the book. This common occurrence begins the journey for the protagonist and the reader. "What you thought was a stylistic subtlety on the author's part is simply a printers' mistake: they have inserted the same pages twice." (Calvino, 25). A printer's mistake is simple and easy to understand and relate to. Any book can have a printer's mistake in it. It can happen to anyone. It is reminiscent of the opening steps of the hero's journey: the call to action. As the protagonist meets this first obstacle on his quest to read, the hero within starts the journey, and at the same time the reader recognizes the beginning of this process, that this is the jumping off point that starts the plot.

Although what is typically considered the definition of reading (the self reading, as outlined above) reading can (and has been, historically) an oral activity. Focus comes into play here as well. "When someone else is reading, it is difficult to make your attention coincide with the tempo of his reading: the voice goes either too fast or too slow." (Calvino, 68). Reading a text in one's own voice is wholly different than that of the oral tradition. In the oral tradition the author makes the work their own by introducing their own unique style. This is different than the mass printed text that everyone and anyone has access to. The oral tradition is only within. The text is only external. When hearing someone else read, one can infer faults in their voice, their pronunciation, their chosen style. It is subjective how the text is presented, which leads to internal distractions. As a printer's mistake halfway across the world can affect focus, so too can the internal preferences of one's unique mind. "Furthermore, Professor Uzzi-Tuzii had begun his oral translation as if he were not quite sure he could make the words hang together, going back

over every sentence to iron out the syntactical creases...” (Calvino, 68). Professor Uzzi-Tuzii is a unique individual with his own style that he lends to the reading. He is very careful, yet also unsure of himself. As the protagonist is unable to focus on the presentation because of their own internal preferences, so too does the professor struggle with focus due to the complexity of the work. Focus can be lost in a multitude of ways, many of which unexpected, like a smooth reading that becomes jumbled, stopped in traffic, at the struggle of a pronunciation of a word one has maybe only ever read and never said aloud.

What must be noted is the use of focus and attention span (or, the lack thereof) in other media, in order to understand the mystery behind *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*. The protagonist is not sent on a typical, linear hero's journey that ends with triumph and the conclusion of a formula. Instead, the book (and the protagonist) as if emerging from a haze of details and references, ends succinctly and yet also immediately, as if that very haze it is emerging from was artificially extending the length of the mystery. The mystery is actually quite short, when details and carefully placed distractions are ignored. It seems, almost, throughout the course of the novel, that the external distractions the protagonist encounters are almost scripted or predestined. The moment the protagonist leaves the airport in Ataguitania he/she is picked up by a military vehicle and carted away. Earlier in the mystery each external distraction seemed convenient, as if each location the protagonist went to needed to have a distraction in order to be legitimized as a necessary part of not only the novel, but also of the protagonist's life. We can find a similar situation in Thomas Pynchon's 2009 detective novel *Inherent Vice*. It is set in the 1970s and with that drug use, particularly marijuana, is high. The protagonist, Doc Sportello, becomes wrapped in an extensive mystery that requires him to voluntarily come out of this haze (both literal, from smoke, and figurative) and go to work. In this piece, the distracting factor is

the same both internally and externally. Because Doc Sportello is a heavy marijuana user, his memory lapses not only when he is smoking but because of all of his smoking his long-term memory is affected as well, making the mystery extra confusing. It is often that Doc temporarily gives up on the journey he signed up for and resigns to smoke and forget instead, only for the world, as if forcing him on that hero's journey, to find a way to call him back. A great similarity in *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* and *Inherent Vice* share is that the mystery, in the end, is not a mystery at all. By the end, there is seemingly nothing to solve. Or Doc has simply given in to the distraction (the opposite of the protagonist of *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*) and allowed himself to become content with not knowing.

In a different, yet no lesser extent, is Thomas Pynchon's novel *Bleeding Edge*, which takes place during the dot com boom of the late 1990s. The haze is present here as well, although it is more reminiscent of the teachings of Professor Uzzi-Tuzii or perhaps the publisher's building with its stacks and stacks of disorganized information. The novel delves deeply into internet, computer, and programming terminology, far too advanced and specific for the average reader, let alone the in-over-her-head detective, Maxine Tarnow. The role is swapped in such a way that the people she is interviewing, the start-up genius millennial kids, influence her reasoning far more than the average detective story. They can manipulate and shape the story however they please because they are "in" and she is "out." Like the drug-induced haze of *Inherent Vice* or the increasingly complex web of ownership and author fragments in *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*, the terminology becomes deeper and more confusing such that the mystery is soon impossible to solve unless the detective is a part of the mystery from the beginning. You can't solve what you don't understand and the same applies to the nameless protagonist. It seems, then, that the protagonist of *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* cannot

focus and cannot solve the mystery of the novel fragments because he/she is not an initial part of that mystery. The biggest and most important external factor lending itself through this lens, then, is the mystery itself – a force that controls the protagonist(s) even if they do not realize it. Like Maxine Tarnow, the forces beyond the protagonist's control (the authors, the publishers, the professors, etc.) all hold power over him/her. They dictate what happens because the protagonist is just a person who likes to read. He/she has no particular skills and only one hobby. They are the embodiment of average, of a shape that can be molded however the mystery writers please.

Because of this, these internal and external factors can extend to nearly anything: questions within the text that must be debated and discussed (91), disregarding the point of the novel entirely; a disorganized collection of texts and papers (115); even a waiter at a restaurant calling one's name, interrupting the flow and entrancement of the words on the page (140). "...you cross a gap in space, you vanish into the void, you accept not being in any place for a duration that is itself a kind of void in time; ... How do you occupy this absence of yourself from the world and of the world from you? You read; ... beyond the page there is the void," (210). What is described here are two opposites: the nature of the distraction, various examples, and the void that is pure, ideal focus. It is not easily achieved and when it is achieved is difficult to maintain. The void is the place between worlds, a place that is pure distraction, pure lack of focus. When presented with this situation, the only option is to either be distracted or to read, to focus. A binary choice between focus and not focus. This ideal space, the opposite of the void, is presented as a library. "... all the authors and the titles you are looking for appear in the catalogue, duly recorded." (253). There is no fragment of stories. The distraction is gone. Nothing can stop the story from being completed now. Just as the void is the perfect home for these external and internal distractions, the library is the place of pure ideal. It is a reader's place

to read. It is smooth process, complete order. There is no chaos, only progress. A lack of noise (or, at least, noise that is found distracting and unideal) is here. It is the bliss the protagonist of the book has been looking for. It is one simple task: reading, and is not bound by the mortal factors that led to the protagonist losing focus throughout the rest of the book. To back this up, studies have shown that attention span and consciousness are affected by the world around us. In animals, it is said that they have a focus of attention that can become shifted. In studying fruit flies, Sebastian Koenig found, “A visual stimulus at a particular location of the visual field may elicit a behavior while at the same time equally salient stimuli in other parts do not.” (Koenig). External factors that pull someone away from what they are doing can distract them. Just as the protagonist is distracted from reading, the visual stimulus occurs and the attention is not only shifted but the span is reduced. The more this happens, the harder it becomes to focus, and as such the deeper the mystery goes and as the distractions pile up, the protagonist finds themselves increasingly frustrated and confused. There is too much stimuli to process and the protagonist begins to disassociate – a built-in mechanism in the brain that allows the person affected to reduce the harm from the stressful occurrence.

In another study, researchers Carlos Montemayor and Harry Haladjian looked into the relationship between consciousness and attention. “The cognitive mechanism of attention has often been compared to consciousness, because attention and consciousness appear to share similar qualities.” (Montemayor). What was discovered, however, was the opposite. They concluded that consciousness and attention are largely dissociated. “They argue that conscious attention, the focusing of attention on the contents of awareness, is constituted by overlapping but distinct processes of consciousness and attention.” (Montemayor). What we can also consider then is that distractions while doing something interrupts this cognitive process and the

conscious awareness of what is happening. The protagonist becomes less conscious and aware of what is happening, and the attention span is reduced.

Philosophical by nature, Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night A Traveler*, unites the ideas of concentration, focus, and learning with their antithesis: that of unfocused noise that seeks to only distract. It tackles what it means to perform the act of reading a book, rather than examining surface level details such as the content of the book. The content of the book is found to be unimportant. What is important is the act of reading it, the want to achieve a blissful, uninterrupted read by factors given to us by the world and the universe. It is a narrative that seeks to understand the mortal, human condition through the art of reading, only to show the reader what happens when the protagonist becomes immortal, blissful, in the library without any other factors intruding. The perfect read, the perfect ideal, requires this library, something a human cannot achieve. There will always be distraction – it's a part of life. It is also largely a book about achievement, about solving something, and about the conclusion of a perceived journey that does not actually have an end. Largely in dealing with the act of focusing and attention spans, the protagonist will want something solid for their achievements, something at the end of that journey, only to end with a haze and nothing to show for it. The constant shifting of the attention span leads to confusion and frustration and the added mystery only makes this worse. Catharsis must be achieved, and at the end of *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*, it is not. As such, like at the end of *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge*, life is not about understanding and controlling everything, but rather living despite not being able to do these things.

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