(Re)Defining a Literary Genre: How Italo Calvino's Postmodern (Hyper)Novels became "Philosophical Allegories" in the USSR

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In the Soviet era the institution of literary criticism occupied a prominent place within the complex state management of cultural production. Criticism recognized or denied the artistic value of all literary production, subjecting it to censure or ideological homologation. Thus, criticism itself was an active agent in the creation of the meaning of literary works, legitimizing through an exercise of power their aesthetic value and playing a determinant role in shaping their reception by the Soviet reader.[1] The strategies used to intervene in defense of Soviet art were essentially of two kinds: first, disparaging or promoting authors; and, second, molding the content of the works according to the dictates of Socialist Realism. Both functions were exercised through reviews in the official press and critical introductions in the books edited by state publishers.[2]

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[1] Cf. Maria Zalambani, *Censura, istituzioni e politica letteraria in URSS. 1964–1985* (Firenze: Firenze UP, 2009), 107–108.

[2] For a more detailed discussion on the topic, see: E. Dobrenko, I. Kalinin "Literaturnaia kritika i ideologicheskoe razmezhevanie epokhi ottepeli: 1953–1970," in E. Dobrenko, G. Tikhanova, eds., *Istoriia russkoi literaturnoi kritiki* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011), 417–76.

The Soviet Reception of Italo Calvino's Postmodern Narratives as a Case Study

To demonstrate how these domesticating strategies were implemented, we will examine the critical reception in the USSR of Italo Calvino's postmodern works *Le cosmicomiche* (*Cosmicomics*, 1965); *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (*The Castle of Crossed Destinies,* 1969–73); *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities,* 1972); and *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler,* 1979) because together they represent an interesting case of ideological manipulation for many reasons. First, Calvino enjoyed some popularity in the land of the Soviets, largely due to his leftist political reputation. A partisan, anti-fascist and member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Calvino was the prototype of the foreign writer published in the Soviet Union. His loyalty to the ideals of communism and his solid Marxist training were consolidated over his years of collaboration with major press organs of the PCI (*Rinascita*, *l'Unità*), on whose pages he published his first short stories (1948–52). It is no coincidence that the short stories that appeared in these newspapers were the first to be translated and published in Russian. His good political reputation was consolidated by his participation in a conference organized by the Union of Soviet Writers and held in Moscow in 1951.[3] The speech that Calvino gave on that occasion was published on the front page of *Literaturnaia gazeta* (15 November 1951) with the title "The Destinies of History are in the Hands of the Peoples" (*Sud'by istorii v rukakh narodov*) and consecrated him a "progressive writer" (*progressivnyi pisatel'*). In 1954, he was invited to the Second Congress of Soviet Writers as a member of the Italian delegation. Unfortunately, Calvino was unable to attend the meeting as the Italian delegation had been denied visas to enter the USSR.[4] Notwithstanding this diplomatic incident, the invitation clearly demonstrates that Calvino had been widely credited in the USSR since the 1950s. As a consequence, his works were published with some continuity from 1948 to 1986. This allows us to reconstruct the microhistory of the reception of Calvino's hyper-novels in the USSR with

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[3] From his stay in the USSR (October–November, 1951) Calvino drew inspiration for a series of articles published on the pages of the newspaper *l'Unità* (February–March, 1952) in the form of travel correspondence, earning him the Saint Vincent Prize (1952). The entire report was published under the title *Taccuino di viaggio in Unione Sovietica* (*Travel diary of a journey in the Soviet Union*), in *Italo Calvino. Saggi 1945–1985* (Milano: Mondadori. I Meridiani, 1995). Despite the fact that the volume represented the Soviet Union in an extremely positive and idyllic light (which was often harshly criticized), it was not published in the USSR and is still unpublished in Russian.

[4] "Pis'mo redaktora progressivnogo ital'ianskogo zhurnala Kontemporaneo Karlo Salinari," in *V toroi vsesoyuznyi s''ezd sovetskikh pisatelei. 15–26 dekabria 1954 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1956), 563.

an ultimate aim of understanding the broader phenomenon of the reception of Western postmodern literature in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.[5]

Calvino's case represents an anomaly, because his *Cosmicomics* was among the first Western postmodern narratives to be published in the USSR (together with Kurt Vonnegut's novels, which were widespread in Soviet times). It came out long before *glasnost* and *perestroika* opened the way for the publication of Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Vladimir Nabokov, and Umberto Eco (1986–89). Nevertheless, as with the works of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon and Georges Perec (to name but a few), Calvino's hyper-novels were published in Russia only with significant delay.[6] Thus, his case allows us to systematize the study of the reception of Western postmodern works in (post)Soviet Russia. Furthermore, as noted by Barth, Calvino is a "true postmodernist."[7] As his hyper-novels summarize several of the trends of the Western postmodern canon (self-reflexivity, metanarrative, second-person narrative, hypertextuality, multiperspectivity, unreliability and so on), we can consider them as representative of the postmodern literary trend more broadly.

The Soviet Reception: Calvino-the-Realist and Calvino-the-Fabulist

Thinking about Calvino's literary production translated and published in Russia, it is possible to roughly distinguish two distinct periods:

1) The Soviet period (1948–85) – characterized by the publication of Calvino's neorealist works *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, 1947 (*Tropa*

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[5] The concept of microhistory was proposed by Carlo Ginzburg, as the historical reconstruction of a small portion of events and phenomena, which allows detailed and historically circumstantial analysis of the past. Cf. Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory. Two or Three Things That I Know About It," in *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive,* (University of California Press, 2012), 193–214. See also Carlo Ginzburg, "Witches and Shamans," in *Threads and Traces,* 215–27.

[6] *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) was published for first time in Russia in 1994, while *Invisible Cities* (1972) and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969-73) were published for first time in Russian in 1997. To demonstrate that this chronological gap is a constant in Russian reception of the most significant works of Western postmodernism, suffice it to mention the publication of the Barth's story colletion *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) with 33 years of delay (*Zabludivshis' v komnate smekha*, 2001); that of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) with 40 years of delay (*Raduga tiagoteniia*, 2012), or of Perec's hyper-novel *Life, a User's Manual* (1978) with a delay of 31 years (*Zhizn' sposob upotrebleniia*, 2009).

[7] John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment," in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The John Hopkins UP, 1984), 204.

pauch'ikh gnezd, 1977),[8] and *Ultimo viene il corvo*, 1949 (*Poslednim priletaet voron*, 1959);[9] his short novel with social content *La nuvola di smog*, 1958 (*Oblako smoga*, 1964);[10] his allegorical novels belonging to the trilogy of *I nostri antenati, Il visconte dimezzato*, 1952 (*Razdvoennyi vikont*, 1984); *Il barone rampante*, 1957 (*Baron na dereve*, 1965); *Il cavaliere inesistente*, 1959 (*Nesushchestvuyushchii rytsar'*, 1984);[11] and his collection of Italian folktales *Fiabe italiane*[12], 1956 (*Ital'ianskie skazki*, 1959)

2) The post-Soviet period (1994–2001) – characterized by the publication of Calvino's postmodern literary production, *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, 1969–73 (*Zamok skreshchennykh sudeb*, 1997; *Zamok skrestivshikhsia sudeb*, 2001);[13] *Le città invisibili*, 1972 (*Nezrimye goroda*, 1997; *Nevidimye goroda*, 2001);[14] *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979 (*Esli odnazhdy zimnei noch'yu putnik*, 1994);[15] *Palomar*, 1983 (*Palomar*, 1994).[16]

The only exception to this division is *Cosmicomics*, which, as mentioned above, was Calvino's only postmodernist work published during the Soviet era (1968).[17]

Before analyzing the dynamics that influenced and made possible the Soviet edition of *Cosmicomics*, let us outline the historical framework of the reception of Calvino's works in order to understand how his previous literary and political reputation affected (but also promoted) this publication.

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[8] Eng. trans. A. Colquhoun: *The Path to the Net of Spiders*, 1957; and M. McLaughlin: *The Path to the Spider's Nest,* 1998.

[9] The short stories of this volume were published in various Russian journals beginning in 1959. It has not been translated into English, but a selection of its short stories was included in the book *Adam, One Afternoon and Other Stories*, 1957 (trans. A. Colquhoun and P. Wright).

[10] Eng: *Smog,* 1971 (trans. W. Weaver).

[11] The trilogy *Our Ancestors* was translated into English by A. Colquhoun: *The Cloven Viscount,* 1962; *The Baron in the Trees,* 1959; *The Nonexistent Knight,* 1962.

[12] Like A. N. Afanasyev, the Brothers Grimm and H. C. Andersen, Calvino also collected Italian folktales, often translating them into Italian from different dialects. However, although we cannot consider *Italian Folktales* as a work of his own invention, this philological and creative work earned him a kind of paternity over them. In English there are different editions of the work: *Italian Fables,* 1961 (trans. L. Brigante); *Italian Folk Tales,* 1975 (trans. S. Mulcahy); *Italian Folktales*, 1980 (trans. G. Martin).

[13] Eng: *The Castle of Crossed Destinies,* 1977 (trans. W. Weaver).

[14] Eng: *Invisible Cities,* 1974 (trans. W. Weaver).

[15] Eng: *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler,* 1981 (trans. W. Weaver).

[16] Eng: *Mr. Palomar,* 1985 (trans. W. Weaver).

[17] Eng: *Cosmicomics*, 1968 (trans. W. Weaver).

Calvino's work first appeared in the Soviet Union in 1948, when the magazine *Ogonëk* published his first novel, *Son sud'i* (*The Judge's Dream*). Between 1957 and 1971, seventeen short stories belonging to the so-called "neorealist period" were published. The short stories of the collection *The Crow Comes Last* and *Marcovaldo* found space on the pages of some of the most prestigious and popular Soviet publications such as *Zvezda*, *Inostrannaia literatura* and *Znamia* in part because their subject matter—the partisan struggle, the crisis of contemporary man in capitalist societies, and political activism as an antidote to alienation—perfectly suited Soviet ideology. The poetics of Calvino's neorealist works largely conformed to the literary canon of Socialist Realism and, therefore, it is not surprising that Calvino's short stories were repeatedly reprinted in the Soviet Union, consolidating his image as a "partisan fighter" (*voin-garibal'diets*), "anti-fascist writer and a democrat" (*pisatel'-antifashist i demokrat*).[18] Many anthologies devoted to the literature of the Resistance printed his short stories.[19] From the end of 1950s to the late 1980s, his literary fortune remained tied to the Resistance and neorealist literature, which was so widespread in the USSR that it had become synonymous with contemporary Italian literature even after neorealism in Italy had already faded and the positions of some of its exponents had changed.[20] In 1957, following the events in Hungary in 1956 and the crisis of the Italian left, Calvino left the PCI along with many other Italian intellectuals. He announced his departure in an open letter published in the communist newspaper *l'Unità*, in which he claimed that, despite his opposition to the path followed by the PCI and his difficult decision to resign from the party, he would continue to be a comrade of "the better part of the Italian people."[21] Although the news was well known to Soviet authorities, it was barely disclosed to the Soviet public and did not affect Calvino's political reputation or his literary fortunes in the country. Indeed, his political commitment and loyalty to communist ideals were

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[18] Valentina Torpakova, "Italo Kal'vino v poiskakh garmonii," introduction to *Italo Kal'vino. Sbornik rasskazov,* ed. Valentina Torpakova (Moskva: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1979), 14; Ruf Khlodovsky, *Ob Italo Kal'vino, ego predkakh, istorii i o nashikh sovremennikakh*, introduction to *Italo Kal'vino,* ed. Ruf Khlodovsky (Moskva: Raduga, 1984), 11.

[19] See, for instance, *Deti Italii* (Moscow: Detgiz, 1962), *Dolgii put' vozvrashcheniia* (Moscow: Progress, 1965), and *Soprotivlenie zhivet* (Moscow: Progress, 1977).

[20] In this regard, see Zlata Potapova, *Neorealizm v ital'ianskoi literature* (Moskva: Iz. Akademii nauk SSSR, 1961); Tsetsiliia Kin, *Mif, real'nost', literatura* (Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1968).

[21] Italo Calvino, "Letter to the Editorial Board of L'Unità (1 August 1957)", in *Italo Calvino. Letters: 1941–1985,* ed. Michael Wood, trans. Martin McLaughlin (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013), 181.

frequently emphasized to underline the distinction between him and other Italian intellectuals who abandoned leftist politics in the 1950s.[22]

When Calvino's Italian folktales where published in the USSR in 1959, Soviet criticism began to give much importance to another aspect of Calvino's poetics, namely *skazochnost'* (the fantastic). By the mid-1960s, *skazochnost'* became the defining feature of Calvino's poetics for Soviet critics even when referring to his most experimental works. The critic Ruf Khlodovsky, for example, emphasized the continuity between Calvino's neorealistic and fantastical production, claiming that the two were not antithetical, but complementary. Calvino's newfound *skazochnost'*, Khlodovsky wrote, recalls "Calvino's neorealistic stories, and at the same time it is completely different."[23] Khlodovsky also emphasized that the author's change in style should not be understood as an abandonment of social commitment or of his role as *engagé* writer:

> It mustn't be supposed that Italo Calvino fled into the world of fairytales from his contemporary reality or from those difficult problems which set new forms of life in front of progressive Italian literature. […] The logic of folk tales is, according to Calvino, the logic of the very people – the logic of the simplest people and at the same time of the most natural relationship between man and man, between man and nature, between man and society.[24]

In this way, the Soviet reception of Calvino's works took place under the aegis of neorealism and fantasy, bringing the two together under an image of the anti-fascist and progressive writer who fought for democracy and in defense of communist ideals.

In his 1967 preface to a science fiction anthology, *The Moon of Twenty Arms* (*Luna dvadtsati ruk*), the critic Sergei Osherov codified this dual reception of Calvino's work by drawing a distinction between "Calvino-the-realist" (*Kal'vino-realist*) and "Calvino-the-fabulist" (*Kal'vino-skazochnik*): the first expression is used to refer to the author of neorealist works, while the second is used in reference to Calvino's fantastic production,

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[22] For more details, see: Ts. Kin, "Ot kakoi politiki ustali ital'ianskie pisateli?", *Voprosy literatury* 9 (1973), 101–40; Ruf Khlodovsky, *Ob Italo Kal'vino,* 5–17.

[23] Ruf Khlodovsky, "O "Barone na dereve" i drugikh romanakh Italo Kal'vino," introduction to Italo Kal'vino, *Baron na dereve* (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), 9–10. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

[24] Ibid., 14.

which includes the trilogy of *Our Ancestors* and the *Italian Folktales*.[25] Calvino's first experimental work to be published in the USSR, *Cosmicomics*, occupies an intermediary position in this framework. Inspired by an interest in the *ars combinatoria*, structuralism and semiotics, *Cosmicomics* created a fabulous cosmogony, but one in which the social content inspired by the "truth of humankind's problems" ("*pravda problem obshchechelovecheskikh*") reflects Calvino's neorealist poetics.[26] Below we will analyze how even a postmodern work such as *Cosmicomics* was confined within the boundaries of Soviet poetic ideals*,* illustrating the strategies employed by critics in order to adapt it to the Soviet literary and cultural system.

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The "Cosmicomic" Adventures of Qfwfq in the USSR

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In 1957, with the launch of Sputnik, the space race began, intensifying after Yuri Gagarin's space flight in 1961 and leading to an increased interest in science fiction set in outer space. In the wake of this enthusiasm Calvino wrote *Cosmicomics*, a collection of short stories in which the protean protagonist with the unpronounceable palindromic name "Qfwfq" traces the history of the universe through geological eras and the space-time continuum, from the birth of the planets to the extinction of dinosaurs. Starting from several scientific assumptions, Calvino explores new narrative worlds by experimenting with forms of composition inspired by both structuralist criticism and semiotics. When *Kosmikomicheskie istorii* was published in the USSR in 1968, the volume was given a place of honor in the science fiction genre.[27] As Osherov explained in the introduction to *The Moon of Twenty Arms*, the stories represented an exception to the science fiction to which Soviet readers were accustomed.[28] The peculiar stylistic trait which made *Cosmicomics* "a fantastic and rational cosmogony" resided in that mixture of fantasy and

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[25] Sergei Osherov, preface to *Luna dvadtsati ruk,* ed. Lev Vershinin (Moskva: Mir, 1967), 18.

[26] Sergei Osherov, "Pis'mo geroia chitateliu," introduction to Italo Kal'vino, *Kosmikomicheskie istorii* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1968), 5.

[27] When considering the typological redefinition of the genre to which *Cosmicomics* was subjected in the USSR it is important to take into account that the same situation occurred in the USA. For the sake of the market—and, therefore, also in accordance with political ideals, those of capitalism—between the years 1970 and 1980, the work was labeled as science fiction rather than general fiction and sold very well. For a more detailed discussion, see: Peter Bondanella, "Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco: Postmodern Masters," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 176.

[28] Osherov, preface to *Luna*, 16.

science that Calvino himself carefully avoided calling science fiction.[29] "I'll go ahead with this series of short stories," Calvino wrote to a friend, "which have nothing to do with science fiction but are an entirely new genre."[30] Osherov described Calvino's new genre as follows:

> Science and science fiction are merged inextricably in Calvino's new works, but in a wholly new way. *Cosmicomics* does not at all fit the traditional definition of science fiction, and yet any alternative to science fiction is equally impossible. In any case, these are not stories, but fairytales. And not just because in them the imagination of the writer goes beyond the limits of the possible, or even of the scientifically acceptable, but because the human character does not appear in the form of specific themes, as is common among other Italian and non-Italian science fiction writers, but in the form of the broadest categories: good and evil, loyalty and betrayal, love and hatred. […] It is precisely this generalization that allows Calvino to formulate and solve common issues of human existence, such as the problem of individuality. In this way, the science fiction tale turns into a philosophical tale.[31]

Thus, the *Cosmicomics* short stories were included in the production of Calvino-the-fabulist (*Kal'vino-skazochnik*). However, their philosophical nature prompted Soviet critics to attribute to them a moral and didactic intent, which aligned with the needs of Soviet literature, but which was quite far from the intentions of the author. In a letter to his friend Giancarlo Ferretti in 1965, Calvino wrote: "In a couple of months my book of short stories will come out, in which finding any ideology will be a problem."[32] Apparently, however, it was a problem easily solved. In Italy the collection was received rather poorly by leftist critics, who deplored Calvino's shift to the non-aligned front since *The Baron in the Trees*, and his move away from neorealism and *engagé* literature. The philosophical generalization realized by Soviet critics also attempted to justify the complexity of the stories, while at the same time avoiding taboo subjects such as semiotics and structuralism, which represented the generative core of the "philosophical" speculations of many of the

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[29] Alberto Asor Rosa, *Stile Calvino* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001), 118.
[30] Italo Calvino, *Lettere 1940–1985*, ed. Luca Baranelli (Milano: I Meridiani, Mondadori, 2000), 837.
[31] Osherov, preface to *Luna*, 18.
[32] Calvino, *Lettere*, 885. "Tra un paio di mesi uscirà un mio libro di racconti, dove pescare l'ideologia sarà un problema."

stories. In fact, the story that is the most loaded with references to semiotics and structuralism is undoubtedly "A Sign in Space" ("*Un segno nello spazio*"), in which Qfwfq describes the birth of the first sign, "the only name available for everything that required a name."[33] In the story, Calvino reflects not only on relations between the signifier and the signified, but also on the relationships that connect the first sign to those created after it, anticipating the rhizomatic network of relations between signs which would form the core of the combinatorial experimentation of his hyper-novels (from *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* to *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*). And it is no coincidence that precisely this short story was excluded from the Soviet edition of *Cosmicomics*.[34]

Indeed, the publication of *Kosmikomicheskie istorii* in the USSR was possible only thanks to a clever critical (and structural) "reassessment" that placed the work within the ideological limits of the Soviet literary system. In his preface, Osherov described the work as a mixture of genres where "fantasy" (*skazochnost'*), "science fiction" (*nauchnaia fantastika*) and realism inspired by the "truth of the problems of humanity" ("*pravda problem obshechelovecheskikh*") coexisted in harmony.[35] However, even if the classification of this work followed the logic employed in the foreword of 1965, the interesting and innovative aspect of this introduction resided in the form Osherov used to present the work. In line with the "postmodern" spirit, he titled his introduction "A Letter from the Hero to the Reader" (*Pis'mo geroia chitateliu*) signing it with the name of the protagonist of the stories, Qfwfq. The introduction was thereby turned into a meta-narrative, which offered the Soviet reader a Marxist interpretive key as if in the voice of Calvino's hero: "The history of the universe gives him [Calvino] enough opportunities to try again to solve the task that, according to him, stands before literature: 'to find the right connection between the individual consciousness and the course of history'."[36] In this regard, it is useful to note that in a later anthology called *Lunarium* (1975) Osherov's introduction was included alongside Calvino's short story "The Distance from the Moon" without mentioning Osherov by name. Only a footnote informed the reader that the excerpts were reproduced from the 1968 edition of *Cosmicomics*.[37] The failure to report Osherov's name as the author of the meta-introduction

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[33] Italo Calvino, "A Sign in Space," trans. W. Weaver, in *The Complete Cosmicomics* (London: Penguin, 2010), 60.

[34] The 1968 edition excluded two short stories ("A Sign in Space" and "The Form of Space"), and added a story from the book *t zero* (1967), "The Crystals."

[35] Osherov, "Pis'mo geroia," 5–6.

[36] Ibid., 6.

[37] E. Parnov and L. Samsonenko, eds., *Lunarium* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1975), 186.

misled the reader, perhaps intentionally, suggesting that the introduction was also by Calvino. Thus, the interpretation of the work in a Marxist key seemed to be the intention of the author himself, while in fact it was a trick of the editor. Moreover, Calvino's quotation in the introduction ("to find the right connection between the individual consciousness and the course of history") was given without citation, suggesting incorrectly that it referred to *Cosmicomics*. In fact, the quote in question was taken from Calvino's 1960 afterword to the trilogy *Our Ancestors*, a work that is poetically quite distinct from *Cosmicomics*. Such contingencies significantly altered the reception of *Cosmicomics*, which, far from being an example of socially *engagé* literature, constituted the author's first attempt to experiment with new narrative forms before his transition to the hyper-novel.

The case of *Cosmicomics* clearly shows the critic's effort to circumscribe the work within the limits of the politically committed literature that characterized the first phase of Calvino's literary production and that was more acceptable in the Soviet Union. There were several reasons for this cultural domestication. On the one hand, there was the need to assimilate the work to the Soviet literary system and make it accessible to Soviet readers; on the other, this adaptation increased the chances that the text would pass through the sieve of the various censoring authorities (the Central Committee's Ideological Commission, *Ideologicheskaia Komissiia TsK KPSS*, and the General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press, *Glavlit*) and be printed. Therefore, with the dual purpose of incorporating *Cosmicomics* into the Soviet literary system and neutralizing its experimental character, Osherov emphasized the continuity between Calvino's text and more familiar science fiction ("in our age [...] science fiction writers have taught you many things") and underlined the range of possibilities ("From science fiction writers you can expect everything…") including a work as complicated as Calvino's.[38] In the voice of Calvino's hero, Osherov continues:

> Take for instance the tall tales of my friend Ijon Tichy! I'll tell you a secret: he is a direct descendant of Baron Munchausen; but I trace my literary genealogy to other ancestors (soon I'll tell you who) and all the episodes of my long life, described in my own words by Italo Calvino, are the pure truth.[39]

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[38] Ibid., 5.

[39] Ibid.

Bringing to the reader's mind familiar characters, such as Stanisław Lem's fictional character Ijon Tichy and Rudolf Raspe's mythologized Baron Munchausen, Osherov redefined a new network of references, in other words, a new kind of intertextuality, based on the repertoire and interpretative competences of the target reader.[40]

Repositioning the novel within a literary framework different from that created by the novel itself affects the typology of literary genre to which the text belongs. The appeal to predecessors such as Munchausen and Tichy, fully placed the work in the genre of fantastic folk tales, creating a counterpoint to the science fiction aspect suggested by the references to science. A science fiction that was both serious and humorous, sacred and profane, cosmic but also comic was science fiction *à la* Calvino. However, the stronger adaptation operated by Osherov affected the meaning of the work. Staging an almost Pirandellian dispute between the hero and the author, the critic—appropriating the voice of Qfwfq—called into question Calvino's skepticism and fatalistic depiction of a chaotic and fragmented worldview which was senseless and unacceptable to the Soviet mass reader:

> I just wanted to tell him [Calvino] that it is much easier to comprehend the laws that govern the development of organic and inorganic nature […] than the laws governing human society and operating through all contingencies. But his account seems to show that there is no pattern to humanity's development […]. In reality, such skepticism is not justified today, when the laws of society's development are not only acknowledged, but also experienced, and aside from that, my author here is in conflict with himself: each of his stories talks about forward movement of the world and of man, but how can the sum of the consequent contingencies result in progressive development?[41]

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[40] Lem introduces *The Star Diaries* (*Dzienniki gwiazdowe*, 1957), where Ijon Tichy first appears, with a meta-foreword written in the voice of the fictional Professor Tarantoga, in which Tichy is presented as the heir of such fictional and half-fictional forebears as Karl Friedrich Hieronymus Münchhausen (the real-life model for Raspe's Baron), Pavel Masloboinikov (a character in Saltykov-Shchedrin's *The History of a Town*), Lemuel Gulliver and Alcofribas Nasier (the anagrammic pseudonym under which François Rabelais published the stories of Gargantua and Pantagruel). In Rudolf Raspe's meta-preface to *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvelous Travels and Campaigns in Russia*, the authenticity of the character's incredible adventures is claimed and undersigned by fictional characters such as Gulliver, Sinbad, and Aladdin.

[41] Osherov, "Pis'mo geroia," 11.

Calvino's answer to this rhetorical question can be found, perhaps by coincidence, in a short story criticized by Osherov, "Crystals": "Rationalize, that's the big task, rationalize if you don't want everything to come apart."[42] As we have seen, then, through the redefinition of literary genre and through the cultural domestication to which the text and co-text were subjected, the original work's ironic rewriting of scientific theories was no longer presented as postmodern narrative practice, but as a "philosophical fairytale" (*filosofskaia skazka*), that is, as a reflection in a fantasy key on the condition of contemporary man perfectly in line with the Soviet era's evergreen theme of social criticism.[43] This critical interpretation of the work would soon become canonical.

In the preface to an anthology of *The Italian Novella of Twentieth Century* (*Ital'ianskaia novella XX veka*, 1969), the Italianist Tsetsiliia Kin used *Cosmicomics* to illustrate how contemporary Italian short stories had broadened their boundaries by mingling with other genres. Taking into account also the short stories contained in the volume *T con zero* (*t zero*)[44] Kin defined them as "fantastic novella-parables" ("*fantasticheskie novelly-pritchi*").[45] She thereby tried to simplify and make accessible Calvino's experimental narrative world, suggesting that the author's allegorical use of science-fiction was an attempt to address the problems of contemporary humanity: "The writer uses scientific hypotheses and even the style of scientific prose to metaphorically answer the basic questions of human existence in the modern world: issues of freedom and 'alienation,' individual responsibility, adaptation, and so on."[46] Similarly, in 1977 Zlata Potapova used the formula "philosophical-fantastic parable" ("*filosofsko-fantasticheskaia pritcha*") to define *Cosmicomics* as a work in which the writer considered the place of humans in the world: "The writer reflects on man's place in the universe and its history, in time and space. [...] In the form of a philosophical-fantastic parable Calvino with

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[42] Italo Calvino, "Crystals," trans. W. Weaver, in *The Complete Cosmicomics* (London: Penguin, 2010), 184.

[43] Osherov, "Pis'mo geroia," 11.

[44] 1967 saw the publication of the second collection of the *Cosmicomics* short stories (*T con zero,* Einaudi). Alongside other stories of Qfwfq's cycle, the volume included several stories in which Calvino moved away from a purely logical-deductive process to explore possible narrative worlds (*T con zero, L'inseguimento, Il guidatore notturno, Il conte di Montecristo*). These last short stories show the turn of Calvino's poetics to postmodern narrative techniques.

[45] Tsetsiliia Kin, introduction to *Ital'ianskaia novella XX veka*, ed. Georgi Bogemskii (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1969), 28.

[46] Ibid.

gentle humor embodies his idea of indissoluble connection of all existing things."[47]

The fantastic aspect of *Cosmicomics* was underlined in 1979 by Valentina Torpakova who introduced the work of the "writer-philosopher" ("*pisatel'-filosof*"):

> In the sixties Calvino once again returns to the fairytale, but this time he enters "outer space" with a philosophical tale about the history of the universe (*Cosmicomics*). There he presents data from various sciences, scientific theories and hypotheses, often invented, but the focus of attention is always the human and here the writer-philosopher tries "to find the right connection between the individual consciousness and the course of history."[48]

The quotation recites the words used in Osherov's meta-introduction, in which, as mentioned above, Calvino's own words are quoted improperly to convey the idea that the work was characterized by a deeply Marxist philosophical outlook. This trend continued in 1990, on the precipice of the collapse of the USSR, when critics still underlined the Marxist spirit of the work, recognizing a relation of continuity between the poetics of previous novels and that of *Cosmicomics*:

> In "The Nonexistent Knight" Calvino ridicules the separation of "pure" ideas from life: only in unity with actual practice does the ideal becomes tangible and can the person, connecting "both halves," escape from alienation. *Cosmicomics* were written in the same vein […]. In the form of philosophical prose fiction Calvino embodies his faith in the future fate of the universe and of humanity.[49]

If on a Winter's Night a (Soviet) Reader

The redefinition of the genre and the cultural and ideological domestication of Calvino's work also affected the critical reception of other postmodern narratives by the author. Before examining this reception, it would be useful to provide a more exhaustive definition of the Soviet reader since, in the case of hyper-novels the reader becomes

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[47] Zlata Potapova, "Pritcha o cheloveke," in *Ital'ianskii roman segodnia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 61.

[48] Torpakova, "Italo Kal'vino v poiskakh garmonii," 13.

[49] Nina Volodina et al., *Istoriia ital'ianskoi literaturoi XIX–XX vekov* (Moscow: Vysshaia shkola, 1990), 254–55.

the co-author of the text. As Evgeny Dobrenko has noted (following Hans Günther), the Soviet era was characterized by the "State appropriation of the reader" ("*ogosudarstvlenie chitatelia*") and the interaction between the text and the reader was mediated by a "Third Member" – the authority.[50] Hence, "under Soviet conditions this process of interaction flowed in a strictly defined channel that was fully determined by the authority's strategies in relation to literature and reading."[51] From this perspective, the Soviet reader was not always considered an individual actor who was able to exercise his own individual interpretative agency (as Umberto Eco suggested was the case in the West), but a "mass reader."[52] To use the definition which Dobrenko borrowed from Vsevolov Kochetov, the reader acquired the status of "reader-people" (*chitatel'-narod*).[53] And because the shaping of Soviet readers was a part of a larger ideological process, namely "the shaping of the Soviet man," they were not considered as simple *recipients*, but as *addressees* of the ideological discourse which—through literature (and literary criticism)—was aimed at "reshaping society."[54] It is precisely in this frame that we must relocate the critical reception of Italo Calvino's hyper-novels in Soviet Union.[55]

Calvino's hyper-novel *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (*The Castle of Crossed Destinies*) was published in 1973 in Italy. The work was written under the influence of Structuralism, cybernetics and mathematical principles of composition (game theory) inspired by Oulipo's literary experiments.[56] The *Castle* is an example of constrained writing in which tarot cards are

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[50] Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, trans. M. Jesse Savage (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), vii.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milano: Bompiani, 1962); and Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula: la cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi* (Milano: Bompiani, 1979).

[53] Dobrenko, *Making of the State Reader*, 1.

[54] Ibid., 2.

[55] Calvino's hyper-novels were not published in Russian until after the fall of the USSR, and therefore I limit this analysis to their "critical reception," including reviews, critical articles and explanatory texts contained in works of literary history and encyclopedias. These were the only publicly available sources that discussed the existence of Calvino's hyper-novels within the USSR. In this analysis, I also consider unpublished texts (stored at the Russian state archive RGALI), such as notes and reports written by literary consultants for the internal use of institutions such as the Union of Soviet Writers and the editorial boards of state publishing houses.

[56] Oulipo, or the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (The Workshop of Potential Literature), was a loose grouping of primarily French writers who used mathematical formulas to produce structurally complex forms of "constrained writing." Calvino became a foreign member (*membre étranger*) of Oulipo in 1973. See Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, et al. *Oulipo Laboratory* (London: Atlas, 1995).

used to create "a narrative combinatorial machine" with the aim of "extracting stories from the mysterious figures of the tarot and interpreting the same figure in a different way each time."[57] The idea, which constitutes the generative core of the novel's structure, was also inspired by semiotics, which suggested to Calvino "that the meaning of each card depends on the place it has in the sequence of cards that precede and follow it."[58] The Soviet critical reception of this work, however, ignored the semiotic and structuralist basis for the work.[59] Instead, it was presented as a philosophical allegory, i.e. as a parable about the condition of contemporary humanity: "In this 'fairy-tale structure' Calvino presents a person, a 'moral personality' as hostile to nature, as one who gives in to a 'ruthless society,' which turns him into its toy."[60] At most, critics might refer obliquely to some of Calvino's structural sources, as Potapova did in reference to the *Castle* in 1977:

> Calvino wrote that the idea of using "tarots" as a narrative mechanism came to him after becoming acquainted with presentations at the International Seminar on the Structure of the Story, held in 1968, as well as with a number of papers analyzing the narrative function of playing cards.[61]

However, the combinatorial aspect was reduced to a mere "rational allegory" (*rassudochnaia allegoriia*) about the meaning of life in a chaotic modern world:

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[57] Italo Calvino, *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (Milano, Mondadori, 2011), vi; Italo Calvino, *Six memos for the next millennium*, trans. by William Weaver (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), 94.

[58] Calvino, *Il castello,* vii; Calvino specifies his indebtedness to semiotic theory in a note published in the 1973 edition, where he refers to Paolo Fabbri's lecture "Il racconto della cartomanzia ed il linguaggio degli emblemi" ("Fortune-telling's Tale and the Language of Emblems," 1968); to M. I. Lekomtseva and B. A. Uspenskii's article "Gadanie na igral'nych kartakh kak semioticheskaia sistema" ("Fortune-telling with Playing Cards as a Semiotic System," 1962) and to B. F. Egorov's article "Prosteishie semioticheskie sistemy i tipologiia siuzhetov" ("The Simplest Semiotic Systems and the Typology of Plots," 1965). Calvino read these articles in the Italian translation published in 1969 (*I sistemi di segni e lo strutturalismo sovietico,* eds. Remo Faccani and Umberto Eco, Milano: Bompiani). For more detailed information about Calvino's reception of Soviet structuralism, see also his essay "Cibernetica e fantasmi," in *Saggi 1945-1985* (Milano: I Meridiani, Mondadori, 2003), 199–219.

[59] There are few exceptions to this trend, see for example: N. Kotrelev, "Italo Kal'vino. Esli odnazhdy zimnei noch'yu priezzhii," *Sovremennaia khudozhestvennaia literatura za rubezhem* 3 (1980): 60–63; and E. Kostioukovitch, "Italo Kal'vino. kamen' sverkhu", *Sovremennaia khudozhestvennaia literatura za rubezhem* 1 (1982): 105–10.

[60] Potapova, "Pritcha o cheloveke," 67.

[61] Ibid., 65.

> The main allegorical meaning of Calvino's work is that all the stories are told with the help of playing cards […], the same cards change their meaning, in other words, people experience the same events, which, however, can be interpreted in different ways and lead to completely different results. Human life is a combination of veiled factors and, in this sense, all destinies are interrelated and predetermined.[62]

Another critic offers a similar interpretation:

> The allegorical meaning of the story is that the cards, laid out in a different order, acquire other meanings […]. And here one notices in Calvino analogues with the present time – both in its problems, and in human nature, the development of which depends on the understanding of the truth or of the falsity of moral values.[63]

Invisible Cities inspired similar interpretations. Soviet critics framed the cities visited by Marco Polo and described to Kublai Khan in the novel as allegories for human desires, the human soul, and even for a social order:

> The cities allegorically represent the state of mind and the spiritual development of man, symbolize his desires and motivations. Some cities have courage and hope. Others talk about the diversity of living forms and about the variety of the soul. And then there are those which do not embody the human soul, but the "soul" of the social order.[64]

What is important to notice here is that, even if this allegorical reading is one of the possible interpretations of the book, confining the sense of the novel within these limits would be tantamount to misinterpreting it: as the novel's own Kublai Khan understands, the emblematic reduction of the world does not resolve its meaning.[65] This philosophical consideration is doubly true in the case of Calvino's hyper-novels, where the combinatory device is used in order to multiply not only the possibilities of reading, but also the meanings of each possible

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[62] Ibid., 62–64.

[63] Volodina et al., *Istoriia*, 272.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Cf. Pietro Citati, "Le città invisibili di Italo Calvino. Parabola morale e allegoria metafisica," *Il Giorno*, 6 December 1972, 10.

combination. Nevertheless, in this specific case, the above-mentioned simplification aimed to position the hyper-novels in the Soviet literary system where readers could not be trusted to derive their own meanings from the work's possible combinations. For exactly this reason, in a report to the editorial board of *Inostrannaia literatura* in 1973, Kin advises against the publication of *Invisible Cities*: "The book is beautiful but, unfortunately, it is difficult to recommend it for translation as the lack of plot would likely trouble our readers who are not accustomed to this genre and make it difficult for them to evaluate the literary merits of the work."[66] The same Kin, in a 1979 report on *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*—which she defined as "real literature"—underlined that, should the novel be published, it would be essential introduce it properly to elucidate its meaning to the reader: "It is clear, however, that such a thing can be printed only accompanied by articles of a major sociologist, a philosopher or an essayist because the novel needs an introduction in which the author's intention is explained to the readers."[67] Similarly, in her 1981 review of *If on a Winter's Night* in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Kin rejected meta-narration, emphasizing that the work was not "a novel on the novel" ("*roman o romane*") but a "novel of novels" ("*roman romanov*"), and suggested that the complex narrative structure of the plot was presented as nothing more than an *engagé* writer's attempt to represent the chaos of contemporary reality: "The writer lives in the frame of his own historical time. […] The rapid rhythms of the century require that the literature keep pace with times."[68] Once again, therefore, we note that the role of criticism was crucial not only in promoting the diffusion of literary works in the USSR, but also in shaping the reader's reception through the official formulation of the work's meaning.

<center>*Instead of a Conclusion: The (Double-edged) Arms of Criticism*</center>

When considering the role played by the institution of criticism within the Soviet system of cultural production, we should not underestimate the importance of what we have called its "redefinition of the genre": indeed, by means of cultural and ideological domestication criticism had the power to incorporate in (or exclude from) the system works that were alien to it both ideologically and culturally. As we have seen, in the case of the reception of Calvino's hyper-novels an even more incisive adaptation was realized in order to domesticate their cultural content and

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[66] RGALI, f. 1573, op. 4, ed. khr. 291, 7.
[67] RGALI, f. 1573, op. 4, ed. khr. 310, 67. Ibid., 68.
[68] Tsetsiliia Kin, "Volshebnaia palochka Italo Kal'vino," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, January 14, 1981, 15.

their complex narrative structure. Such methods of ideological adaptation are important for understanding how experimental texts worked within the Soviet literary system; however, we must not forget that in the hierarchical system of Soviet cultural production literary criticism had specific privileges as much as duties.

In the USSR the creation of the ideal reader was not entrusted only to the work of politicized writers, but was also realized through censors, critics and, not least, librarians. Already in the 1930s the act of reading was recognized as a powerful tool in shaping citizens' consciousness and, with this aim, reading plans "directed towards the communist re-education of the masses" were created.[69] Even during Khrushchev's "thaw," this utilitarian view of reading and of the role of literature in socialist society remained largely unchanged. In 1958, a resolution of the Ideological Commission of the CPSU pointed out the danger of an "uncritical approach to printing foreign literature," which could have negative effects for the "ideological education" and "cultural growth" of Soviet citizens if publishers did not "help readers navigate complex literary phenomena."[70] The main concern of the Commission was the proper interpretation of foreign literary works, achieved through the skillful mediation of critics.[71] In this way the goal of directing the reading experience and suggesting "correct," i.e. ideologically irreproachable, interpretations was entrusted to the institution of criticism.[72] However, as we have already noted, often the very same critics had the power to help a work pass through censorship that otherwise might not have been published. The fortune of a novel and its reception in the USSR was often entrusted to their judgment and rhetorical abilities: if they could build a plausible case to justify the "anomalies" of a literary work in a credible way and in conformity with the demands of the system, then that work had a chance to reach the Soviet reader. The potentially arbitrary nature of the critics' power did not escape the attention of the Central Committee of the Party: "In practice, publishers and literary magazines are often influenced by the pressure of translators and reviewers which derive from subjective views, aesthetic tastes, and sometimes personal interest."[73]

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[69] Dobrenko, *Making of the State Reader*, 281.

[70] Postanovlenie Komissii TsK KPSS "O meropriiatiiakh po ustraneniiu nedostatkov v izdanii i kritike inostrannoi khudozhestvennoi literatury," in *Kul'tura i vlast' ot Stalina do Gorbacheva. Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPCC 1958–1964: Dokumenty* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2000), 36.

[71] Postanovlenie Komissii TsK KPSS "Ob ustranenii nedostatkov v izdanii i retsenzirovanii inostrannoi chudozhestvennoi literatury*, in *Kul'tura i vlast'*, 46.

[72] Dobrenko, *Making of the State Reader,* 15–17.

[73] Postanovlenie Komissii TsK KPSS "O meropriiatiiakh," 36.

The domestication of Calvino's works to fit the needs of the Soviet literary system has been the primary topic of my discussion here, but in conclusion I will consider an aspect of this process that can be read as a subtle form of resistance. In considering Osherov's introduction to *Cosmicomics*, written in the voice of the protagonist Qfwfq, one notes a particularly playful relationship to the reader. Typical of postmodern practice, this playful attitude can be read as adding a subversive and parodic character to the didactic and indoctrinating function for which the text was ostensibly intended. But could the Soviet reader have decoded this irony? Perhaps so. By 1968, when *Kosmikomicheskie istorii* was published, two parallel literary circuits had already begun to function in the USSR: one official, consecrated by state institutions, represented by the Writers Union, and devoted to propagating socialist realist works; and the other unofficial, persecuted by state institutions, consisting mainly of writers who had been expelled from, rejected by, or never admitted to the Writers Union and devoted to exploring alternatives to official literary practice.[74] In the 1960s, the rise of the dissident movement along with the proliferation of *samizdat* and *tamizdat* helped give birth to a new type of reader who developed new approaches to reading that differed from those of the ideal reader envisioned, desired, and molded by authoritative Soviet criticism.[75] This new "unofficial reader" was a careful reader with a sharp critical sense developed through his awareness of being the object of attention and ideological manipulation from the authorities.[76] He was able to read between the lines of the official discourse and often could discern an alternative narrative behind the one offered by state literary institutions.

The parodic irony in Osherov's meta-introduction was directed precisely to this reader, who could grasp the allusive and subversive qualities underneath the necessary panegyric to Marxism-Leninism. In "A Letter from the Hero to the Reader," the narrative device contrived by Osherov to disguise his authorial identity behind Qfwfq's name produces

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[74] For an in-depth analysis of the unofficial literary circuit and of its dynamics of culture's production and reception see: Olga Zaslavskaya, "Samizdat as social practice and alternative 'communication circuit'," in V. Parisi (ed.), *Samizdat. Between Practices and Representations. Lecture series at Open Society Archives, Budapest, February–June 2013*. IAS Publications No. 1 (Budapest: Central European University, Institute of Advanced Study, 2015), 87–100.

[75] For an exhaustive discussion on reading practices during the Thaw, see: D. Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir: Coming to Terms with the Stalinist Past* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013).

[76] The "unofficial reader" can be assimilated to the "exceeding reader" described by Valentina Parisi, see: *Il lettore eccedente: edizioni periodiche del samizdat sovietico 1956–1990* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013).

an effect of estrangement (*ostranenie*) and contributes to the unmasking of the real intentions of the critic. The criticism of Calvino's pessimism and the inevitable hosannas to socialism acquire a different meaning if we take into account Osherov-Qfwfq's insistence that his adventures, like those of Baron Munchausen and Ijon Tichy, are "the pure truth" (*chisteishaia pravda*). Pure truth, defined by the examples of such prevaricators par excellence, is anything but. Seen through this lens, the statements on the progress and stability of the Soviet system are entrusted to the voice of an *unreliable narrator*, thus the distortion of reality decreed by the Soviet authorities is turned against the same system through an ontological subversion. The unmasking of the narrator's unreliability presupposes and strengthens the relationship of complicity between the reader and the implied author or, to use Wayne Booth's formulation, the "secret communion of the author and reader behind the narrator's back."[77] Thus, behind the back of the positive hero into which Qfwfq was necessarily transformed, the reader and the critic exchange a look of understanding that restores the natural order of things, revealing the plot of another possible story, less rhetorical and certainly closer to Calvino's authorial intentions.

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[77] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 300.