Poetic Realism and Beyond

When I began this research, now over three years ago, I was not immediately drawn to the work of poetic realism per se. Instead, this is a project whose process of germination began nearly fourteen years ago, with an undergraduate honors seminar at Rutgers University called *The Puzzle Novel*, which provided my initial exposure to the work of the Italian postmodernist Italo Calvino. It began, more specifically, with a promise, one I am still not sure Calvino every made good on. It was the first time, I might add, that an author had expected my presence: I was told that I was (“You are”) “about to begin reading” (3) a book that, in the end, never once began despite the two hundred and seventy fives pages of words that had been situated between the front and back covers of an object that quite looked like a book.1 It was, after all, “a metafictional anti-novel made up entirely of first chapters.”

Calvino’s 1979 novel *If on a winter’s night a traveler* begins by positioning itself not within the confines of any readily discernible literary tradition, but instead as a sort of how-to manual on the art of reading. Calvino speaks to “you” directly, calling on “you” to “Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room…Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat…Adjust the light so you won’t strain your eyes. Do it now, because once you’re absorbed in reading there will be no budging you” (3-4). It is a text, moreover, into which the reader has already been inscribed in advance, and in which we, as readers, will be called on to play an active role in the construction of meaning. “Your” adventures will constitute the main plot of the frame narrative that follows: “you” begin Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, only to come to the frustrating realization that this particular copy of the book is

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1 Calvino, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*.
2 Jonathan Lethem (speaking of Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*), “Italo for Beginners.”
“defective,” that “What you thought was a stylistic subtlety on the author’s part is simply a printer’s mistake: they have inserted the same pages twice” (25). The search for the missing pages of the novel leads “you” to read the beginnings of nine additional novels, each of which gets cut off for a variety of increasingly ludicrous reasons, and always at the moment of heightening climactic intensity.

Looking back, I believe that there was something in the work of Theodor Storm that later reminded me (and invariably still reminds me) of Calvino, a resonance that becomes particularly apparent when one reflects on the authors’ respective uses of the frame. Instances of both visual and temporal recursion abound within Calvino’s novel, allowing this level-crossing, boundary-blurring frame narrative to whimsically and mischievously engage with the border (or rather, the lack thereof) between “fiction” and “reality.” Indeed, the novel not only plays with this border; it itself is part of this nebulous threshold space. The book alternates between an overarching frame narrative and ten stories that are nested within it. But the distinction between “frame” and “framed” begins to disintegrate as the novel progresses: nesting and nested structures repeatedly collapse into “tangled hierarchies” that defy the logic of the traditional reality/fiction binary.3 And while Calvino’s novel might be seen by some as passé, a postmodern cliché that no longer

3 I have borrowed the terminology “tangled hierarchy” from Douglas Hofstadter, who uses it to articulate his concept of the “strange loop.” See Hofstadter, Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid. Citing M. C. Escher’s famous lithograph Drawing Hands as a visual example of a “strange loop” or “tangled hierarchy,” Hofstadter provides a definition of a “strange loop” as that which occurs when “levels which ordinarily are seen as hierarchical…turn back on each other” (689). In the case of Escher’s Drawing Hands, the strange loop results from the tangled hierarchy created between “that which draws, and that which is drawn” (689). That is, Escher presents viewers not with a picture of one hand that draws another, but rather with an image in which each hand is both drawing and being drawn by the other hand. Calvino’s novel takes part in this same tradition, with its presentation of recursive structures of both a visual and temporal nature, as well as though its ultimate disintegration of such structures into “tangled hierarchies.”
induces the same wonderment as it once did, now nearly forty years after its publication, I cannot help but love it nonetheless.⁴

Like Calvino, Keller, Stifter, and Storm all seem to acknowledge the inherent potential of the frame to communicate meaning. In each work, the frame transcends its conventional status as a regulatory structure for the artwork, providing a crucial means for contemplating the nature of certain aesthetic and extra-aesthetic issues. In Keller’s *Der grüne Heinrich*, the frame presents itself as a symbol of moderation, one which seeks to reconcile certain extremes relating to discourses that are only apparently at variance with one another: aesthetics, economics, and gender. In *Nachkommenschaften*, Stifter harnesses the frame’s ability to represent absence in order to shed light on certain “invisible” realities that not only order our lives, but also provide them with immanent meaning.

To my mind, Storm is the author whose work most closely aligns with that of Calvino. For Storm, as for Calvino, the frame no longer functions as a rigid partition between two seemingly disparate, insurmountable realms, i.e., between “reality” and “fiction”; rather, Storm’s work evinces a certain playfulness, one that results when the inherently problematic nature of this supposed partition is ultimately realized. In Storm’s *Viola tricolor*, as in his other works that I have discussed in the preceding chapter, the programmatic confusion of “fiction” and “reality” takes on an unmistakably gendered hue.

Holub has argued that “the fiction [that realist texts] perpetrate is that they are not fiction at all” (16), and the same might well be said about gender, if one views it as a story that seeks to conceal its essentially fictive nature.⁵ Modern theories have posited gender not as natural, but as a construction, an act whose genesis relies on the “tacit collective agreement to perform [it]”; it

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⁴ In this regard, see Mitchell, “Enter the maze.” As Mitchell would have it, “Describing our world’s unknowability in terms of labyrinths and mirrors no longer cuts the metaphysical mustard, somehow.”

⁵ Holub, *Reflections of Realism*. 
is, moreover, a binary distinction between “inner” and “outer,” “male” and “female,” “myself” and “other” “that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject.” Gender is not a fact, but a veritable fiction, one that is reinforced through the imposition of binary categories of understanding. Time and again, this idea seems to be anticipated in Storm’s body of work – “woman” as narrativized product of a particular set of masculine, patriarchal, and heteronormative ideologies that seek to control her, and thereby to impose order on an inherently disordered process of identity formation.

Yet to understand Storm’s texts as conscientious attempts to maintain the impression of reality through a concealment of their fictiveness seems to miss the point, precisely because the “fiction” that these texts purportedly seek to conceal is, in the end, what is most “real.” As Downing argues, the rupture points that manifest when realism reflects on itself are “actually conscious, inherent aspects of realism itself” (12). It is precisely not “an ideological space that the text itself seeks to repress” (18). Rather, it is a self-conscious and thus also subversive attempt to cover up the “reality” of gender with a particular fiction that characterizes Storm’s texts. That the frame is allowed to remain is crucial: in its various iterations, the figure provides compelling, residual evidence of the attempt to expunge certain realities from the narrative proper.

I do not believe it is a coincidence, moreover, that in the case of both Storm and Calvino, the frame – as the universally recognizable symbol of the divide between “reality” and “fiction” – is introduced so that it might be transgressed. It is this gesture in particular that reflects the undeniably postmodern element at work in Storm’s prose. In fact, Storm’s and Calvino’s respective uses of the frame seem intended to pose a similar set of questions: where does

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6 Butler, *Gender Trouble*.  
7 Downing, *Double Exposures*.  
8 Holub, *Reflections of Realism*.  

“fiction” begin and “reality” end? Does “reality” exist apart from “fiction,” or “fiction” apart from “reality”? Does “reality” exist a priori, or is “reality” always already conditioned by the (oftentimes intentional) perpetuation of certain “fictions” presented under the guise of “reality”?

In the end, it has been important to examine how the works of Gottfried Keller, Adalbert Stifter, and Theodor Storm frame the task of realist literature, as well as the ways in which each frames a reading of the others. Still, we should remember that the frame motif itself ultimately transgresses the historical limits of poetic realism, thereby opening up the possibility that Storm might also frame our understanding of Calvino, and vice versa. The precise nature of this connection remains to be discovered; suffice it to say that Calvino’s text ought to be understood as another in a long line of literary Nachkommenschaften.