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Metaphors We Live, Worlds We Read

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At stake in the study of metaphor is the status of truth in linguistic communication. To what extent do metaphorical statements reflect an interpretative accuracy about the world, even when factual accuracy is precluded? Should we assume, as Donald Davidson has argued, that with metaphor ‘ordinary meaning in the context of use is odd enough to prompt us to disregard the question of literal truth’?¹

These same questions lie at the heart of fictionality. In the words of Jerome Bruner, ‘The sequence of [a story’s] sentences, rather than the truth or falsity of any of those sentences, is what determines its overall configuration or plot’. Narratives, once again according to Bruner, ‘resist logical procedures for establishing what they *mean* ... They must, as we say, be *interpreted*’.²

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Which is why both metaphor and fiction have been said to pose the same basic threat. From Plato's condemnation of poets to many a moralist's warnings about a novel's charms, part of what has made fiction relevant to culture has always been the danger it poses to its culture.³ Metaphor, meanwhile, has gone from an accoutrement of poetic discourse to an organizational principle of cognition. As a result, specialists have begun to caution against undue metaphorical language, particularly in the behavioral and cognitive sciences, where scholars often rely on predicates of human agency to describe biological mechanisms. As has been argued, metaphorical language often hints at a host of inaccurate and unintended implications.⁴

The threat then, posed as much by fiction as by metaphor, is one of influence. Since an analogy's juxtapositions may disregard norms of linguistic use and a made-up story's plot often disregards norms of behavior, it does seem that metaphor and fiction construct their own versions of truth. Each only nominally takes reality into account. Does either, though, succeed at reframing our view of the world?

I propose to address this question via a single metaphorical concept within one particular context: the metaphor of THE MIND INTERACTING WITH THE WORLD as A PERSON READING FICTION, as present in Italo Calvino's 1979 novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Why this example?—because metaphors for cognition are regularly criticized for misrepresenting the workings of the brain and misleading us in our interpretations regarding the basic biological starting point of human experience. Why Calvino's novel?—because it is structured around this single overarching metaphorical concept. *If on a winter's night a traveler* presents cognition as a metaphor for reading and reading as the precondition for plot, i.e., as the process by which a character affects the world and is affected by the world enough for events to acquire relevance.

Nothing happens in this novel until someone starts to read. Everything happens because this someone continues to read. A protagonist—known only as the 'Reader'—purchases a book. A printing error sends this Reader back to the bookstore and, eventually, into the midst of an international adventure involving counterfeit publishers and secret police, jaded editors and disgruntled academics. As the adventure develops, the

Reader encounters the novels he believes he has been searching for. *If on a winter's night a traveler* alternates between numbered chapters detailing its protagonist's escapades and the *incipits* of the novels the Reader has pinned his hopes on. We get to read what Calvino's Reader reads. As this Reader wends his way through one text after another he comes to realize that the experiences of these fictional stories have begun to resemble the real story he has suddenly become a protagonist in: 'The novel to be read is [being] superimposed by a possible novel to be lived'.⁵

But the Reader does not merely realize his adventures have begun to resemble an adventure story. His adventures begin as a reader reading this very adventure story—'You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*'. So runs the novel's famous opening line. The text's direct address—the 'You' simultaneously referring to the fictional Reader and the book's real reader—blurs the distinction between character and audience, and thus, between real reading (the real reader reading this book) and fictionalized reading (the fictional Reader reading the *incipits* of fictional books).

What the Reader reads, though, is manifold, not merely the first pages of ten separate novels. The 'world's intentions', a man's 'private thought', and a lover's body are all 'read' by Calvino's protagonist.⁶ Calvino's real life audiences, therefore, are reading about someone who is reading both literally (the fictionalized Reader reading fictional books) and metaphorically (the protagonist's 'readings' of other characters's thoughts and bodies). As a result, the text's direct address blurs the distinction between literal and metaphorical reading, as much as it does between real-world and fictional reading.

In other words, the very premise of Calvino's novel—its metafictional structure, a plot line interspersed with the *incipits* of other novels—blurs the boundaries that circumscribe conventional reading practices. And this is surprising. Because for all its experimentalism, for all its toying with the clichés of how we consume fiction, *If on a winter's night a traveler* can also seem quite black-and-white. We see this in the way Calvino will juxtapose two ways of reading which could not be more stereotypically antagonistic to each other—*informational* and *immersive* reading. The former is a data-gathering affair that seeks to extract facts, tease out

a message, or produce a definitive interpretation. The latter is imaginative reading, immersion within a possible world. In Calvino's novel, each mode of textual consumption has its avatar.

Lotaria is the incarnation of *informational reading*. She 'wants to know the author's position with regards to Trends of Contemporary Thought and Problems That Demand a Solution'.⁷ Lotaria's way of engaging with texts is the jaded byproduct of a society that has turned storytelling into a business and the business of storytelling into an object of scholarship. Lotaria's sister Ludmila represents *immersive reading*. She asks stories to carry her away to another world. If her form of reading produces interpretations, they are interpretations predicated on the ability and willingness to get lost in a fictional universe. Whereas for Lotaria arriving at a judgment is the only reason to read the book in the first place, for Ludmila any interpretations are of secondary importance.

Referred to intermittently as 'the Other Reader' and the female Reader ('Lettrice'), Ludmila is the story's ideal. As the protagonist's love interest, she becomes the reason why the Reader attempts to get to the bottom of the counterfeit translations and mis-bound volumes, an ideal 'Other Reader' for the novel he has begun to live. Meanwhile, the shady figures of the novel's conspiracy story look upon Ludmila's reading habits as an ideal of lost innocence. 'How many years has it been since I could abandon myself to a book written by another', asks Silas Flannery, the frustrated writer at the center of the conspiracy, as he spies on Ludmila from his balcony.⁸ Unlike her sister, Ludmila 'like[s] to read, really to read'. It is 'her way of living in the world, filled with interest in what the world can give her'.⁹ In other words, an ideal mode of engaging with a story becomes a metaphor for an ideal mode of interacting with the world.

On the surface then, Ludmila's and Lotaria's opposing forms of reading correspond to the two modes of interpretation the novel's metafictional elements blur. *Informational* reading and *literal* interpretation emphasize a text's referential capacity, its ability to relate to the outside world. *Immersive* reading and *metaphorical* interpretation emphasize a text's constitutive capacity, its ability to immerse audiences within a world that resembles their own. What we have then is a novel about the *desire* to read novels, whose protagonist is driven to know a woman because of

how she reads novels, within a story structured by two opposing poles of how one *should* read novels.

If Ludmila represents one ideal and Lotaria its counter, the Reader is the mean. His reading teeters between a need to extract information from a book—à la Lotaria—and the desire to envelope himself within a book's storyworld—the way Ludmila does. Most of the reading depicted in Calvino's novel is the Reader's; most of the metaphorical implications of reading come through via his experiences as an audience for literary fiction. We read the books the Reader is reading as we read descriptions of the experience his reading should elicit. It is an embodied, sensory, and inference-producing experience—i.e., a very mind-like procedure.

'This bar ... *could* seem dim and misty', runs the narrator of the first novel the Reader cracks open, 'whereas it *could* also be steeped in light'.¹⁰ Calvino narrates the experience of the Reader's reading by bringing together the words being read with a description of the ways those words could be interpreted. Calvino's descriptions balance the potential for a single story to produce diametrically different impressions with the way one's individual and cultural expectations influence this potential—'steeped in light' as much as 'dim and misty'. After all, this place which could be dim or well lit happens to be a train station bar, and one cannot read about train station bars without activating what one already associates with train station bars. Just a page earlier Calvino's description evokes an 'odor of smoke'—if for no other reason than because there are certain things 'a novel that talks about trains and stations cannot help conveying'.¹¹

Reading is depicted as an inference-making process which elicits a circumscribed set of potential interpretations. Calvino's protagonist takes information given and compares it to information retrieved in order to reach conclusions based on a partial tableau. As the second of the Reader's novels says, 'characters take on form gradually in the accumulation of minute details and precise movements, but also of remarks, shreds of conversation'.¹² Characters take on form in this way, in fiction as in real life. Or at least this is what *If on a winter's night a traveler* implies, particularly with its love story. The Reader falls for the Other Reader soon into the plot, even if he has barely interacted with her. In order to form a fuller picture of this mysterious person, the Reader must glean

shreds of information from indirect interactions: He visits Ludmila's house; he peruses her things. 'What can they reveal to you about what she is really like?' asks the narrator.¹³ Perhaps not much: 'We live in a uniform civilization, within well-defined cultural models ... [the items in Ludmila's home] have been chosen among a certain number of given possibilities'.¹⁴ Nonetheless, our hero cannot help snooping around, in Ludmila's library, in her kitchen. Eventually 'the objects no longer seem to be there by chance, they assume meaning as elements of a discourse, like a memory composed of signals and emblems'.¹⁵

This is how Calvino elaborates his metaphor, by describing reading as a contingent, full-bodied experience and human interaction as an elaborate form of reading. 'Ludmila, now you are being read', runs the opening of the consummation scene:

Your body is being subjected to a systematic reading, through channels of tactile information, visual, olfactory, and not without some intervention of the taste buds ... all the poor alphabets by which one human being believes at certain moments that he is reading another human being.¹⁶

The effect of this extended metaphor is not to limit cognition and perception by coercing them into our more limited associations for consuming stories. In this novel, the World-as-a-Book/Mind-as-a-Reader metaphor does not limit cognition so much as explode reading.

Calvino's novel depicts his Reader's interactions with the novels he is reading, not as the cerebral perception of a representation of the world, but as an embodied interaction with the physicality of the world: 'An odor of frying wafts at the opening of the page'; 'a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph'.¹⁷ An immaterial story does more than represent material life. In these lines which describe the Reader's experience reading two of the novels he has retrieved, the physical medium of storytelling—the pages and paragraphs of a book—is physically affected by that immaterial story—lines obscured by odors and smoke. 'The novel you are reading wants to present to you a corporeal world', says Calvino's narrator, 'thick, detailed'.¹⁸

Conventionally, stories depict the corporeal nature of processing stories by giving us characters who laugh and cry at other stories; i.e.,

who respond to immaterial plots with full-bodied emotional reactions. In Calvino's fictional universe, things are different. Here, the disembodied story effects change, not just in another human being (a character), but in itself (the book in which it is printed). The book takes on the responsiveness of the world, communicating *to* an individual, simultaneously affected *by* that individual. The Reader is not a passive receiver of information from a textual world that remains immune to his influence; he is a participant within an interactive process.

Notice that we are not talking about readers constructing meanings through their interpretations. Calvino's metaphor is not focused on conclusions so much as on processes. Hence why *If on a winter's night a traveler* consistently references the limits imposed upon a reader's inference-making abilities, instead of stressing the conclusions reached by those abilities. A train station could seem dim or well lit, but it must still seem like a train station. A lover's body may only be a 'poor alphabet' but there is a 'physical objectivity' to it which cannot be denied.¹⁹ The information we retrieve from texts is restricted by what can be corroborated by other readers. In a similar way, the experiences we create by projecting, metaphorically, the implications of a fictional world onto the real one, are restricted by the literal statements with which a text circumscribes our immersion into stories. The interactive nature of the reading process precludes total liberty; in Calvino's universe, reading is as accountable to the world as the world is to reading.

If on a winter's night a traveler sets up two poles of interpretation and reading—literal and figurative, informational and immersive. It gives us two characters who represent these two extremes of understanding text. And it implicates these extremes in our understanding, not just of text, but of the world more broadly. It does all this by connecting its audience's reading to its protagonist's, and by connecting its protagonist's reading of text to his means of interacting with the world. And in the process of doing this, it cannot help muddying the distinctions that have guided us through its plot and its protagonist through his adventures.

Because in the end, the two extremes of interpreting text and making sense of the world, which Lotaria and Ludmila represent, fail to capture the reality of how the Reader interprets his own texts. What these two modes of reading succeed at doing, and remarkably well in fact, is leading

on Calvino's protagonist. Ludmila's ideals immerse the Reader within a world of adventure and romance. She is the reason he involves himself in the adventure. Who she is, which the novel defines primarily by her mode of reading, makes the adventures worthwhile.

At the same time, the Reader would not have arrived at the doorstep of this world had he not taken up some of the investigative procedures that define Lotaria's mode of reading. Lotaria invites our Reader to the university seminar where a book is physically torn apart, sections of it distributed to various working groups which use its dismembered pages to prove independent points. Meanwhile, the protagonist is reading through the opening bits of ten separate novels *in order* to find his way to a woman he desires. Soon into *If on a winter's night a traveler*, it becomes clear that the Reader is reading for clues. He seeks to immerse himself within a story, sure, but no longer in a fictional one. He is seeking to take part in Ludmila's story, which in the end is what implicates him in the 'real' story of the novel's plot.

In being accountable to the world as much as the world is to it, no extreme form of reading can be sustained. As a metaphor for how we make sense of the world, reading takes on the status of a liminal process—neither irretrievably immersive nor detachedly analytical, always a bit of both. Lotaria's and Ludmila's modes of reading function like two poles between which Calvino's protagonist is constantly sliding back and forth. As ideals worth striving for and threats worth defending against, Ludmila's and Lotaria's modes of interpreting texts become representative of more than individual preference. It is not just that Ludmila's reading habits represent her personality and Lotaria's habits her own. Each set of habits inscribes a broader tendency among all readers to believe that there are ways one *should* interpret fiction (not to mention life). Lotaria's and Ludmila's modes of reading become representative of the ways our theories influence our habits, and our habits inform our theories.

Another way of putting this is that in Calvino's novel reading is both a *practice* and a *proclivity* (there is even a character who has trained himself *not* to read anymore).²⁰ Because it is also a proclivity, reading is not just something we do, and not just something we enjoy doing or do not enjoy doing; it is something we cannot help but do, and therefore, forget that

there are various ways to do it (that character who no longer reads had to train himself not to do so, and with much effort too).²¹ ‘This world’, says Calvino in his 1983 lecture, ‘The Written and the Unwritten World’,

presents itself to my eyes—at least for the most part—already conquered, colonized by words ... We live in a world where everything has already been read before we even begin to exist.²²

How we read something as inconsequential as a novel must therefore relate to how we interact with a world ‘colonized’ by the same set of words that form our fictions. ‘The habit of reading over the centuries has transformed *Homo sapiens* into *Homo legens*’, says Calvino, ‘but this *Homo legens* is not necessarily wiser than before’.²³

The threats and promises of Lotaria’s and Ludmila’s reading habits therefore apply to everyday interaction as much as to artistic spectatorship. Which is to say, how easily Calvino’s Reader succumbs to one way or another of experiencing novels implies how susceptible he is to one way or another of experiencing the world. This is the implication of the novel’s World-as-a-Book/Mind-as-a-Reader metaphor—that how we read our inconsequential fictions affects how we read our more consequential ones.

Notice how perfectly these questions relate to the study of metaphor?—to the threat metaphor poses of unduly influencing how we conceptualize something, all because a poetic turn-of-phrase has come to seem more natural than it should?—to the promise metaphor makes, of allowing us to make some sense of what makes so little sense? Notice how perfectly these questions relate to the particular metaphor that structures Calvino’s novel.

Conventionally, researchers assume that we apply agentive and spatial metaphors to the stuff of thought, because we do not understand the mind very well. The brain ‘predicts’; it ‘chunks’ *bodies* of information and ‘detects meaning in recursive sentences’.²⁴ Restating the mind’s mysteries with the language of better understood activities allows us to make these mysteries more intelligible. The World-as-a-Book/Mind-as-a-Reader metaphor perhaps seems more apropos today than ever before, considering how much of the current conception of cognition takes

for granted that the mind relies on metaphorical concepts and narrative structures.²⁵ There are negative and positive ways to take this. The positive one is that, in being so receptive to metaphorical meaning and in applying metaphorical concepts so effortlessly, our minds utilize metaphors to facilitate inference-production and interpersonal communication. The negative take assumes that a mind's proclivities can be as problematic as a Cartesian's bodily perception, masking the reality of the world and deluding us into assuming greater understanding than we should.

Both the positive and the negative interpretation of metaphor relate to fictionality, i.e., to the distinctions we attribute to our understanding of what separates the make-believe from the real. If a metaphor 'implies or suggests or introduces or calls to mind a (possible) game of make-believe', as Kendall L. Walton has argued, then metaphor, just like 'games of make-believe' may 'enable us to *go on* in new ways'—a means for exploring previously unconsidered ramifications.²⁶ However, make-believe can also trace too many ramifications, to speak of things as though there were more purpose behind them than an agent-less plot-less universe could ever boast.

In 'The Written and the Unwritten World', Calvino says that his goal for *Palomar*, the novel he published after *If on a winter's night a traveler*, was to write in such a way that 'description becomes story, all-the-while remaining description'.²⁷ I find this a useful way of thinking about his depiction of the reading experience in his earlier fiction too, as well as of thinking about the promises and perils of metaphor and fictionality more broadly.

When a scientist proclaims that the brain 'predicts', just as when a character like Macbeth declaims that tomorrow 'Creeps in this petty pace', we take both statements to be directly applicable to the context—we take one statement to say something 'true' about a scientist's arguments and the other statement to say something 'true' about Macbeth's fictional situation.²⁸ We contextualize each of these truths within the separate but interrelated worlds of the text's context and our own real life one. If we recognize either statement as metaphorical, we accept an element of hyperbole. This prompts us to project the statement's

significance to something more than itself, i.e., to consider this significance applicable to other contexts. In this way does metaphor approach the quality of a story while remaining a description (while remaining answerable to the truth criteria of the outside world).

What do I mean by this?

Like fiction, metaphor advertises its artifice. One does not read something metaphorically unless one recognizes it as being metaphorical—Davidson refers to this as a ‘built-in aesthetic feature’.²⁹ In projecting artifice, metaphor asks audiences to loosen their standards of reference—‘to disregard the question of literal truth’, to use Davidson’s words. Unlike with fiction, though, metaphorical truth is far less answerable to internal standards. Metaphor is not like a story in the way Bruner says. The organization of the metaphorical statement does not grant it truth or falsity to the extent that a fiction’s own aesthetics can make it seem true or false. Which is why, whether as a predicate in a scientist’s discourse (a brain ‘predicting’) or a recurring conceit in a larger story (as in Calvino’s novel), a metaphor’s truthfulness cannot help referencing the standards of a world outside of itself. It ‘describes’ even as it proclaims itself to be in the process of ‘becoming’ a story.

Of course, one could make similar claims about fiction. A story’s criteria for truth—which is to say, for relevance to the outside world—may derive from its own internal structure, its own aesthetic qualities, but these qualities do not emerge from a vacuum. Everyone who has ever called a story not-believable, even while understanding that the film or novel is not necessarily supposed to be believed, understands that the standards which we apply to fiction are simultaneously aesthetic and descriptive—the artwork needs to work by the standards of the artwork; the artwork’s internal standards still need to be applicable in some way or other to the standards of the outside world.

The difference between metaphor and fiction is one of degree. Metaphors tend towards providing audiences with information rather than immersing them within a scenario merely to a greater degree than does fiction. Partly, this is because what we think of as fiction is usually a large scale representation which may intersperse factual elements, but which, even when it does, nonetheless maintains the status of a world of its own. Once fact has entered into fiction *enough*, such that the

fiction's believability no longer seems independent of its references to reality, we go from having *a fiction* to having *fictional elements*, the way much nonfiction boasts of distorted memories and novelistic manipulation. Metaphor can come to resemble a fictional element within a work of nonfiction. Or it can resemble a particular form of fictional element within a larger fiction, the way Calvino's World-as-a-Book/Mind-as-a-Reader metaphor figures within his novel.

In both cases, the brevity of the metaphor keeps it from seeming more immersive than informative. Metaphorical statements cannot encompass the entirety of a possible world the way a fictional story can. What they can do is concentrate the possibility of a possible world into a bite-sized chunk—description *becoming* story but remaining description, which is to say, not achieving full fictionality. A metaphor's brevity prompts us to reference external standards to a greater degree than stories do. This is why I believe metaphorical statements often seem truthful in a way that more seamlessly integrates into everyday discourse (I for one never thought that in using the phrase 'invest my time' I was being metaphorical, not until theorists attempted to convince me so).³⁰ Part of this has to do with habit, sure, but a lot of it I think derives from the way metaphor distills fictionality into the brevity of description, all the while leaving itself obvious enough to be recognized as a fiction, if, that is, something occasions someone to notice its fictionality.

In other words, *immersion* and *information-gathering*, both, are ideals of long form storytelling, whether fictional or not. And *immersion* and *information-gathering* are, likewise, the two aspects of narrative that metaphor brings together in the most succinct way human language has thus far devised. Because it advertises its aesthetic features, metaphor fixes significance into form, to a much greater degree than statements we take literally. These aesthetic features imply the potential to be immersive like fiction. But because of its brevity, metaphor cannot achieve immersion to the level of a fiction. If fiction plunges us into a world of make believe, metaphor merely dips our toes in one.

In this sense is metaphorical interpretation a liminal process. It slides along a scale between one extreme of interpretation and another. Expressions so commonplace as to no longer seem metaphorical ask to be interpreted more literally than an analogy that has not entered into

everyday conversation. Something like, ‘the brain predicts’ seems to be disseminating information much more than something like ‘tomorrow creeps’. The former seems to be calling for an informative reading practice, while the latter seems to be demanding a more immersive mode of reading. But neither statement makes much sense if we read it with an aim *either* to extract information from it *or* to immerse oneself within an aesthetic experience. Read ‘the brain predicts’ for too much information, and the statement becomes overly literal—a brain-shaped homunculus forecasting the future based on some deep, personal insight. Read ‘tomorrow creeps’ too immersively, and it becomes far too figurative to still prove relevant to *Macbeth*—as though an anthropomorphized being known as ‘Tomorrow’ were the hero of its own, distinct story. In other words, read metaphor too much like Lotaria or Ludmila would, and its significance to its particular discourse alters, often radically. A metaphor’s relevance to its context—a predictive brain’s relevance to a scientific paper as much as a creeping tomorrow’s relevance to a story about a murderous Thane—hinges on the different degrees of literal and figurative interpretation its context calls for in the moment of the metaphor’s appearance.³¹

Because, in the end, literal interpretation is not the same thing as informative reading, and immersive reading need not imply metaphorical interpretation. One could immerse oneself in a story which requires little-to-no figurative interpretation; one could extract information from a poem composed of one long metaphor (as my students all-too-often do). What metaphorical statements do is demonstrate the extent to which we undertake literal and figurative modes of interpretation as a result of what we expect from a discourse. Metaphor demonstrates this so well because its brevity makes its artifice seem more informative than a story, while its artifice makes its information seem more contingent than clear-cut nonfiction.

Read metaphor too categorically, and it loses its ability to be *both* surprising *as well as* expected, to provide a glimpse of a possible world as well as be a bridge to our own. For another of metaphor’s hallmarks, which connects it to fiction, is its ability to seem novel, even when it is anything but. According to Davidson, the very fictionality of metaphor equates with its potential to be original: ‘What we call the element of

novelty or surprise is a built-in aesthetic feature we can experience again and again, like the surprise in Haydn's Symphony no. 94, or a familiar deceptive cadence'.³²

Davidson's comparison makes this argument seem like common sense. Metaphors can be like miniature artworks, and as everyone understands, artworks often produce novel experiences even after the umpteenth encounter. But the comparison between art and metaphor is also counterintuitive. When we sit down to a symphony or crack open a novel, we set aside our concerns in order to focus on a potentially extraordinary experience. We set aside one world in order to immerse ourselves within another. Preoccupied? Hungry? Uncomfortable? Any of these distractions will diminish an artwork's potential to immerse you in its cadences, as every artist understands: 'Let the world around you fade', says Calvino's narrator, as the Reader sits down to his first book, 'Find the most comfortable position'.³³ Otherwise, dear Reader, how else do you hope to encounter 'true newness'?³⁴ The potential for art to elicit immersive experience diminishes the more our everyday world intrudes.

In order for reading to stand a chance at immersing us in its world, we have to set aside our own, at least to a certain extent. Metaphor does not ask this of us, because its brevity automatically contextualizes it within a larger world, whether fictional or not. Metaphor does not become a full-fledged fiction; it functions as a fictional element within a larger discourse. Its aesthetic feature does not ask us to loosen our standards of reference to the point that the metaphorical statement takes on the fullness of a world unto its own. What the aesthetic feature does is redirect our standards of reference away from what the metaphor means as an individual utterance and towards what it might mean as a form of utterance. Which is another way of saying that a metaphorical statement may draw our attention to itself as a *type* rather than as a *token* of a discourse.

In admitting its artifice, metaphor fixes a token's significance into a type's potential. The metaphorical statement takes on the flexibility of a type—a form which is more than one specific iteration (more than its token), even if defined in part by this specific iteration. The verb 'predict' is a type that can be incorporated into an infinite variety of tokens. It can even be made to perform the extra-literal duties that a

statement like ‘the brain predicts’ asks of it. The tokens with which we are familiar, and which a community assumes are possible, define the potential of the type such that a type is always more than any single token. With metaphor, though, the hyperbole, fictionality, or built-in aesthetic feature—however one wants to define the metaphor’s calling attention to the figurative nature of its statement—emphasizes a statement’s indebtedness to form. To the extent that the specific statement no longer seems as much an *iteration* of types as the *creation* of types, or at the very least a *re-definition* of types.

Something similar happens with fiction. Stories often acquire the flexibility of a type, which is to say, a flexibility of *significance*. As Bruner puts it, fiction resists *meaning*—significance taking itself as fact—and instead requires *interpretation*—significance aspiring to fact. Within the possible world of a fiction, significance seems to require *negotiation*, not merely acceptance.

What is the difference then between a metaphor’s *typeness* and a fiction’s? After all, a story can be interpreted in all its particularity, such that it becomes an inimitable token. Or, it can be interpreted much more generically, such that it takes on the status of a repeatable type, the way the *Odyssey* is both a unique masterwork and a template for other traveler narratives.

There is no difference. There is only a different norm for how we read each. The more one reads the *Odyssey* for information—à la Lotaria—the more one emphasizes its qualities as a type. Homer’s characters get abstracted, his plot line essentialized, to the point that Odysseus becomes a representative of a type of hero and his adventures begin to stand in for other similar adventures. We are reading in order to extract information, which is to say, in order to take something specific and categorize it so as to make it useful for later reasoning. Meanwhile, the more a reader immerses herself within the world of Homer’s epic, the more that epic’s particulars come to the fore and the less these particulars seem capable of abstraction, of being subsumed into a category; the more unique the storyworld becomes.

We process metaphorical language similarly. The more our attention is drawn to a metaphor’s artifice, the more unique it seems—even if it is not unique. The less our attention is drawn to this artifice, which is to say,

the more our attention is drawn to the context of the metaphor rather than to the metaphorical statement, the more likely we are to read it for clues than experience it as art. The previous sentences should be proof of this. Attention cannot be 'drawn' to anything, not literally. And yet, who is reading this line for an immersive experience? (Though perhaps it now seems much more immersive than it did before, now that I have *drawn* your attention to it.)³⁵

Once again, the major difference between fiction and metaphor is duration, along with cultural expectations. The brevity of metaphor more often provokes informational reading, because the metaphorical statement directs our attention towards a context, of which the metaphor is a part. Whereas the duration of fiction, along with our understanding of it as a genre of storytelling, more easily provokes immersive reading. Lyric poetry stands a better chance at being immersive than metaphor because we consider it a genre, even if it can be as brief as a single metaphor. If we call something a story or a poem—i.e., an independent category of aesthetic production—we more readily set aside our world for the sake of possibly entering into another one. We expect the story to reference other contexts, sure, but not just to reference them. We also expect the story to direct our attention towards a context of its own making.

Expectation conditions experience, and we expect more from that which gives us more, usually. I am not claiming that length guarantees greater immersion. I am arguing that a longer work of art requires our attention for greater stretches of time, thereby giving it more opportunity to grasp and hold an audience. Of course, there are a zillion-and-one exceptions. A pop song can be more immersive than a symphony, a haiku more engaging than *War and Peace*. A longer work can grab audiences and then lose them, precisely because of how long it is. Immersion is conditioned by an infinite variety of factors, including personal taste, cultural associations, and the specifics of one's circumstances in the moment. Whether you are hungry, sad, uncomfortable, or just got elbowed by someone in the crowd contributes to the experience. And this is common sense. I am merely applying the logic of this common sense to metaphor and its relationship to fictionality.

So then what? Am I re-arguing a fictionalist account of metaphor? Yes. I am. But not just because of what constitutes a metaphor and

what constitutes fiction. But because of what constitutes our expectations for linguistic art versus poetic language. All reading slides along a scale between informational reading on one end and immersive reading on the other. Reading metaphors and fiction is no different. But metaphor and fiction, by virtue of their drawing attention to themselves as metaphors and works of art, also draw attention to our *capacity* to read differently—to the fact that reading is not mere information processing. Nor is it an escape from reality. It is somewhere always in between, always sliding away from one ideal of reading or another, depending on context and audience.

‘If a book truly interests me’, says an unnamed voice Calvino’s Reader encounters at the library,

I cannot follow it for more than a few lines before my mind, having seized on a thought that the text suggests to it, or a feeling, or a question, or an image, goes off on a tangent.³⁶

Is this then where Lotaria’s and Ludmila’s modes of experiencing fiction coincide? In an image of reading which is so fully immersive as to draw one’s attention back into the world itself? Notice the contradiction—that the most fully encapsulating escape from the world could conceivably draw someone even further into the world from which this new, plausible, but wholly fictional world emerged in the first place.

All interpretations of textual language are conditioned by the reading habits we assume that bit of text necessitates. This is what Calvino’s metaphor demonstrates, that our expectations for how we should read something determine how useful that something will be, as well as how relevant that usefulness will prove to our own momentary necessities. If a metaphor highlights certain associations and obscures certain others—if a brain ‘predicting’ or a tomorrow ‘creeping’ makes the world seem more willful than it is—it is not because metaphorical language is willfully misleading. It is because we have shifted the emphasis of our reading, and in the process, reconsidered a metaphorical statement’s relevance to its discourse. We have begun to read a scientist like Ludmila might and a poet like Lotaria does. And in the process, we have reconfigured the relevance of hyperbole to a genre’s relationship to truth.

The reality of metaphor is the reality of fiction, which is the reality of everyday interaction. All are fully immersive and ineluctably deductive. Both Lotaria's and Ludmila's readings apply equally well to how we read stories and analogies as well as people and places. Just think, all this time I have been using Calvino's novel to make larger philosophical claims—a very Lotaria-like procedure. But I never would have noticed anything about his novel worth using had it not immersed me within its world. Likewise, I might never have found myself immersed in this metafictional whodunit, had I not begun to notice the many ways a book like this can be used by someone seeking answers to nonfictional questions.

Notes

1. Donald Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', *Critical Inquiry* 5.1 (1978): 42.
2. Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 44, 60.
3. For a canonical discussion of Plato's condemnations, see Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). For an introduction to the novel's perceived immorality, see Marthe Robert, *Origins of the Novel*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: Harvester, 1980). For an example from non-Western culture, see Jack Goody, 'From Oral to Written: An Anthropological Breakthrough in Storytelling', in Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel. Volume 1. History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3–36.
4. For recent examples, see Jerome Kagan, *Five Constraints on Predicting Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017); Ariane Castellane and Cédric Paternotte, 'Knowledge Transfer without Knowledge? The Case of Agentive Metaphors in Biology', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* xxx (2018): 1–10. For a canonical debate, see Maxwell Bennett et al., *Neuroscience and Philosophy: Brain, Mind, and Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
5. Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 31.

6. Ibid., 59, 98, 150.
7. Ibid., 42.
8. Ibid., 165.
9. Ibid., 69.
10. Ibid., 12. My emphasis.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 34.
13. Ibid., 137.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 139.
16. Ibid., 150–151.
17. Ibid., 33, 10.
18. Ibid., 40.
19. Ibid., 151.
20. ‘I’ve become so accustomed to not reading’, says this character, ‘that I don’t even read what appears before my eyes’. Ibid., 46–47.
21. ‘It’s not easy’, says the non-Reader, ‘they teach us to read as children, and for the rest of our lives we remain the slaves of all the written stuff they fling in front of us’. Ibid., 47.
22. Italo Calvino, *Saggi, 1945–1985*, vol. 2, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 2007), 1869. All translations from this source are mine.
23. Ibid.
24. Kagan, *Five Constraints on Predicting Behavior*, 142.
25. For example: ‘Metaphors and image schema, the way our brain relies on narrative structures, the dynamic ability of the brain to blend old and new schemas, and the unparalleled creativity of the brain are all part of the approaches of the cognitive social science and humanities to social interaction...’—Ib Bondebjerg, ‘The Creative Mind: Cognition, Society and Culture’, *Palgrave Communications* 3 (2017): 1.

Likewise: ‘We can talk about ... ways of reasoning whereby analogies, metaphors, stories, and emotions play an important role, owing to the narrative, emotive, and metaphoric properties of reason’.—Stefán Snævarr, *Metaphors, Narratives, Emotions. Their Interplay and Impact* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 2.

26. Kendall L. Walton, 'Metaphor and Prop-Oriented Make-Believe', *European Journal of Philosophy* 1.1 (1993): 46, 53.
27. Calvino, *Saggi*, 1873.
28. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5.18–19, in *Shakespeare MIT*, created by Jeremy Hylton (published online 1993) <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.5.5.html> accessed 10 December 2018.
29. Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', 38.
30. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
31. That one metaphor comes from a scientific paper and the other from a play is irrelevant. What matters is *where* in the text the metaphor appears and how this metaphor relates to the rest of the discourse.
32. Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', 38.
33. Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, 3.
34. *Ibid.*, 7.
35. So much scholarship conceptualizes metaphorical statements as one-off events, as though the way we read a metaphor for the first time is the way we will always read that or other similar metaphors. Nothing better disproves this than cognitive metaphor theory, which attempts to show that metaphorical concepts are so ingrained in our language that we revert to them unthinkingly, all the time. And yet, once this scholarship has alerted us to this fact, it is hard to take it for granted. As I said earlier, I never considered 'invest my time' metaphorical in the least, and now I do.
36. Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, 248.