Dini, Andrea. "Calvino and the Internet." "Approaches to the Teaching of Italo Calvino's Works." Ed. Franco Ricci. New York: Modern Language Association, *accepted*. Invited submission by editor. Peer-reviewed.

1.   "You ask me for a biographical note –something that always embarrasses me. Biographical data, even those recorded in the public registers, are the most private things one has, and to declare them openly is rather like facing a psychoanalyst (Calvino, "By Way of an Autobiography," *The Uses of Literature*: 339)." In this age of blogs and myspace.com personal profiles on the World Wide Web, Calvino's 1980 appeal to a justified restraint in narrating one's personal (and public) life almost comes as an outmoded, unheard-of proposition. Yet, ironically, numerous versions of Calvino's biography can be found on the Internet a quarter of a century later, just a click away. Any search using Italo Calvino's name will yield an inordinate amount of results (for instance, Google has about 1,700,000 - a testament to the writer's place in world literature and book sales).Once commercial sites selling Calvino's books are eliminated, most of the remaining pages will be linked by one, significant factor: a biographical summary or a bio-bibliographical profile. To stop at the threshold of an author's *curriculum vitae* is, after all, the by-product of non-specialized literary information on-line. As Goring, Hawthorn and Mitchell point out in their "Guide to the use of electronic media" (101-132, designed for undergraduate students in literature courses), literature information on-line often limits itself to "when a writer was born and died, what he or she wrote, and perhaps [to] a few standards excerpts from their works. Frequently, the pages are put there by fans –people who are interested in a particular writer, but who do not always have original or useful things to say about her or him. […] what you will get is a brief biography taken from a printed text, a list of books, some photographs and perhaps a few short summaries." (113) (1). This scenario perfectly applies to Italo Calvino, limiting the scope of pedagogically relevant web-based activities to approach his works: issues of copyright *de facto* exclude (or *should* exclude) primary texts from appearing on-line (if not in severely short form), leaving space for fillers or re-writing of standard pieces of information from printed materials, or links to secondary sources, mostly from the popular press. When primary texts appear in lengthier form, they often come from an undocumented source. Pertinence and reliability (how accurate the content-information, how reliable the texts, from a standard philological point of view, etc.) are always at stake (2). Even narrower searches, by typing titles of Calvino's works, yield somewhat similar outcomes in Italian or English (more summaries, a handful of academic papers, syllabi, further links to articles from the popular press). Despite the disheartening situation of randomness these web pages seem to embody (a fact that for some instructors may call into question the possibility itself of approaching Calvino's novels and short-stories through Internet materials), some notable exceptions do exist. It soon becomes apparent how on-line resources for this author can only be used as ancillary components to a printed bibliography; however, ancillary does not equal negligible, and can certainly contribute to spark in-class debates of various kinds.

2. First and foremost, to profit pedagogically from what it is made available on the Internet, instructors must teach students how to adopt a critical thinking approach when examining electronic secondary sources on Calvino's works. As a preliminary task, students must be taught how to identify sites' credentials, when accessed pages do not come from an official (institutional) source, by locating: a) authors or web masters (their affiliation, organization, or host site organization, etc.); b) type of materials (whether they be summaries of works, personal reflections, transcripts from other identifiable critical sources, journal or newspaper articles, etc.) and their pertinence to an in-class discussion of Calvino's *opus*. Once students have assessed the web sites' target audience, they will be able to frame contents in terms of how relevant or trustworthy they might be for a study of the author. One course component in my Senior Seminar in Literary Research is, in fact, researching Internet literary sources. Calvino is one of the authors students need to find electronic materials on, but, as previously outlined, his presence in hyperspace offers challenges worth pursuing. As with any library research with printed materials, students need to be exposed to a variety of sources and be asked to choose between different versions of the provided information, making informed decisions on what to use for their research and, in the process, develop a critical eye, a crucial ability to "read" primary and secondary sources. Sites on Calvino often contain multiple, divergent versions of biographical data (compare, for example, *Wikipedia*'s pages in Italian and in English with *Italica*'s or *Anpi*'s, or even the three profiles given in Todd Comer's "Outside the Town of Malbork," to name a few). Calvino's Internet biography is therefore a good starting point for a twofold examination: one internal (a challenge for students to come up with the most complete, pertinent *and* reliable portrait, or assemble their own based on the various profiles they can find by integrating information), one external (to learn how to compare and evaluate possible embedded points of view in critical materials that disguise themselves as 'factual' –like in biographical accounts). The same may apply to the works whose title recurs in every profile. Students are also invited to reflect on the omissions – on the possible reasons why some works are not included or just briefly outlined, when in other profiles they are devoted a significant amount of lines. This is a good activity to evaluate how summaries of any kind represent interpretative, not just neutral information. In Calvino's case, results are encouraging: on the one hand, students start discussing Calvino's critical reception as represented by these Internet sources directly (even without being aware of it at first); on the other hand, they begin to contextualize his works ('historicize,' if you will), tying them down to his biography, and consider his writings as the product of a specific historical context while, at the same time, they keep interrogating their universal qualities -Calvino's message today. Institutional sites like *Italia Libri*, *Italica*, *Rai* and *Anpi* contain the most stimulating materials (all in Italian) on Calvino. With the exception of Laffi' "Calvino e i libri" –a project from *scuola media* students that re-interprets Calvino's career through *Lezioni americane* (on exactitude, quickness, lightness, etc., taken as a key to Calvino's works), other sites in Italian are mostly disappointing for our academic purposes. Todd Comer's "Outside the Town of Malbork" and Frank Pajares's "Italo Calvino" (the latter with a good amount of excerpts from late works) contain the best material in English, although to date they also appear as equally outdated. Calvino's Internet portrait (from samples of his works or critical bibliography) remains therefore unsatisfactory and strongly biased. These sites are put up by fans who often are not

conversant with any recent scholarship in Italian or English on the author. Or, on the other hand, institutional sites offer an unbalanced image of the author: for example, students should notice how Italian sites privilege the writer's production up to the late 50's, to then concentrate on *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979). Most of their discussions and summaries will be geared towards defining the realistic (or 'neorealistic') qualities in Calvino's texts, or in discussing the fairy tale elements, or in examining his political engagement between 1945 and the early '60s, between *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* and *La giornata d'uno scrutatore*. They will tend to stick to Calvino's relationships with other Italian writers like Pavese and Vittorini (hyperlinks will be provided) and to escape his formalistic, Oulipo-related season. Calvino's contribution to the debate on postmodernism or the influence of post-analytical philosophy (Goodman, Nagel) on his thought will not be mentioned. Angloamerican sites, on the contrary, will underline the late production, from *Cosmicomiche* on, with greater emphasis on *Città invisibili*, *Se una notte d'inverno*, *Lezioni americane* and Calvino's connections to Barth, Borges, etc. Not surprisingly, even biographical accounts will continue to strike a discordant note, in the way this or that title is emphasized, de-valued or re-evaluated within a particular period. These aspects constitute a potential field of discussion on Calvino's reception by two literary traditions: by accessing these pages (conceived for dissimilar audiences), any Internet user interested in the writer may end up with two rather divergent ideas of who Calvino was or what his production was like. (If we were to rely, for example, on the portrait given by Willenberg's "In Calvino Veritas: The Critical Calvino Page," the Calvino we'd know would just be a champion of postmodernist thought –to name a possible case). Student are invited to explore how (and possibly why) summaries of same works diverge, by contrasting, whenever possible, Italian and Anglo-American websites – to finally report to the class their inferences on 'what kind' of writer is proposed to the public audience. I assign West's "L'identità americana di Calvino" to clarify some issues pertaining to his 'popular' (nonetheless, critical) reception.

3. The main reason why I use the Internet for Calvino is that it allows us to listen to Calvino's voice directly. Presently, the RAI sites (Rai.it –for Italian tv and radio,- and Italica -"a RAI International website devoted to Italian language and culture") remain pivotal for any approach to teaching Calvino that advocate using multimedia sources as integration to printed materials. The writer materializes on our screens to become an indelible memory. On Rai.it, a special, 20th-year anniversary section ("Eventi e ricorrenze. Italo Calvino 1923-1985") divided into 7 subsections (on biography, web links, bibliography, 2005 events), includes 5 videoclips of interviews with Calvino made in 1968, 1979, 1981 and 1983. Of all on-line contributions dedicated to the writer, this is perhaps the most useful. (3) Each videoclip (in Realplayer format: mediocre video quality, excellent audio) is accompanied by its transcript, which enormously facilitates the design of pre- and post- viewing activities. I introduce these clips towards the end of a module devoted to Calvino, when most of the assigned readings and in-class discussions have already shaped students' ideas on what kind of writer he was and what his place in the Italian literary canon might be. To activate students' background knowledge and ease the overall comprehension of each segment (both at the linguistic and content-level), previewing materials include:

a. Vocabulary glosses (in the target language or in English, when needed);
b. Data sheet with factual information on the works or the topics being discussed in the clips. Students may not be familiar with all the subjects Calvino touches upon in his conversations: data integration (in the form of summaries or other supplementary texts that directly pertain to what it is alluded to in the interviews) promotes better undertanding;
c. Written questions taken from the actual interview's transcript, that are circulated to be preliminarily discussed in class as group work, in the light of what students know of the writer's works and habits. This brainstorming activity normally raises valid questions with regard to what students perceive are Calvino's values on literature, culture and the use of one's language.

Class discussion is immediately resumed as a follow-up (post-viewing) activity. I ask students to read, print and bring to class all transcripts. I also assign further selected readings (from Calvino's own production or from secondary sources) about the interviews' topics expanding over those already assigned for pre-viewing activities. Both pre- and post- viewing phases can therefore be conceived as departing points to further explore Calvino's beliefs on literature, and to use additional texts, or excerpts, from his writings. Examples for segment 2, 4 or 5 include: Calvino's interviews with Gregory Lucente and Guido Almansi (this last one has one section on his supposed antipsychological stance in character portrayal – a key element for clip 2 and the discussion of *I nostri antenati*); *Palomar*'s story "Del prendersela coi giovani," which is to be compared with the clip in which Calvino discusses relationships between generations; excerpts from *Lezioni americane* to address Calvino's philosophical and literary legacy in the 21st-century (debating whether or not his recommendations have been met).

In my teaching module, I leave these clips for last. By now, students should have valued how complex this deceptively easy-to-read writer is, or how difficult it is not to take into accounts national literary traditions, points of view, or bias when attempting to decipher his works and his reception critically. At this point, perhaps, a more coherent view of Calvino's works and legacy has taken shape. Perhaps, too, students have been captivated by his elusive silences (the ones we noticed on his pages, by his restraint), while his uncertainties and his stuttering during the interviews witness to his attempts at finding the most precise word to express thoughts, to clarify his vision of his firm advocacy of humanistic values. The rest is up to them, the student-readers. My task, for now, is over.

Notes.

(1). I strongly recommend this chapter to instructors who want to include electronic media in their courses. The guide is an excellent aid in defining (and narrowing) students' web searches; it clearly illustrates how to browse the web and evaluate first and secondary sources, assessing issues of reliability, pertinence, authority. By assigning the whole chapter, instructors will save a significant amount of class time over explaining basic concepts of what 'reading' an electronic text really means, or how to conduct a successful search. If at the heart of the student's assigned task is, however, the need of finding secondary sources already published in print and currently available electronically, this chapter also plainly explains how to search electronic databases, e-journals, etc. In Calvino's case, together with JSTOR and MLA databases, which contain comprehensive bibliographies, instructors could alert students with a good command of Italian to search essays on Calvino's works in the Italian-based "Italinemo," edited by Marco Santoro (<http://italinemo.it>). The site, in operation since 2000, currently includes 95 literary journals, with more than 800 issues and 19,000 reviewed articles.

(2) To date, no official web site has ever been put up or edited by Calvino scholars fluent in Italian *and* English or with an academic affiliation. In spite of the (relatively) many "Italo Calvino" homepages that come up during a search, no comprehensive site has been published with an academic audience as its target, thus limiting the scope of how relevant to the study of Calvino's works existing materials can be. The natural comparison in the field of highly successful on-line enterprises is the rigorous format followed by the prestigious "Journal of Gadda Studies," edited by Federica Pedriali and officially housed at the University of Edinburgh. The journal, whose mission is to disseminate Gadda's texts and scholarship, solicits and publishes contributions of noteworthy level. We can only hope that in the near future similar initiatives be taken for Calvino to fully exploit the range of secondary sources on the author, given that no primary texts are legally allowed in electronic form.

(3) Clips are downloadable (by right-clicking on the link) and can be distributed via email as attachments or posted on course management systems like Blackboard or WebCt for easier access or guided listenings, or can be used directly in PowerPoint presentations by the instructor, if applicable. Videoscripts can be printed or distributed, if Internet access is a possible issue for the class. The other Rai site, *Italica*, has a monographic subsection on Calvino within its section on "Grandi narratori del '900": it offers students quite a few critical pages on the writer, from an accurate "Biografia" to critical summaries of main works ("Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno", "I nostri antenati", "Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore"), and even a few games
(<http://www.italica.rai.it/index.php?categoria=libri&scheda=calvino>)
A special "Multimedia" section contains links the interviews, to be also found in the RAI main site.

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<div align="center">**Appendix.**</div>

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