"The Light-Years" By Italo Calvino

The more distant a galaxy is, the more swiftly it moves away from us. A galaxy located at ten billion light-years from us would have a speed of recession equal to the speed of light, three hundred thousand kilometers per second. The "quasi-stars" recently discovered are already approaching this threshold.

One night I was, as usual, observing the sky with my telescope. I noticed that a sign was hanging from a galaxy a hundred million light-years away. On it was written: I SAW YOU. I made a quick calculation: the galaxy’s light had taken a hundred million years to reach me, and since they saw up there what was taking place here a hundred million years later, the moment when they had seen me must date back two hundred million years.

Even before I checked my diary to see what I had been doing that day, I was seized by a ghastly presentiment: exactly two hundred million years before, not a day more or a day less, something had happened to me that I had always tried to hide. I had hoped that with the passage of time the passage of time the episode had been completely forgotten; it was in sharp contrast -- at least, so it seemed to me -- with my customary behavior before and after that date: so, if ever anybody wanted to dig up that business again, I was ready to deny it quite calmly, and not only because it would have been impossible to furnish proof, but also because an action determined by such exceptional conditions -- even if it was really verified -- was so improbable that it could be considered untrue in all good faith, even by me. Instead, from a distant celestial body, here was somebody who had seen me, and the story was cropping up again, now of all times.

Naturally, I was in a position to explain everything that had happened, and what caused it to happen, and to make my own behavior completely comprehensible, if not excusable. I thought of replying at once with a sign, using a phrase in my own defense, like LET ME EXPLAIN or else I’D LIKE TO HAVE SEEN YOU IN MY PLACE, but this wouldn’t have been enough and the things that would have to be said were too many to be compressed into a short statement legible at such a distance. And above all, I had to be careful not to make a mistake, not to reinforce with an explicit admission what that I SAW YOU merely hinted at. In short, before leaving myself open with any declaration I would have to know exactly what they had seen from the galaxy and what they hadn’t: and for this purpose all I could do was ask, using a sign on the order of DID YOU REALLY SEE EVERYTHING OR JUST A LITTLE BIT? or perhaps LET’S SEE IF YOU’RE TELLING THE TRUTH: WHAT WAS I DOING?, then I would have to wait long enough for them to be able to see my sign, and then an equally long period until I could see their answer and attend to the necessary rectifications. All this would take another two hundred million years, or rather a few million years more, because while the images were coming and going with the speed of light, the galaxies continued to move apart, therefore that constellation was no longer where I had seen it, but a bit father on, and the image of my sign would have to chase it. I mean, it was a slow system, which would have obliged me to discuss again, more than four hundred million years after they had happened, those events that I wanted to make everyone forget in the shortest possible time.

I thought the best line to take was to act as if nothing had happened, minimize the importance of what they might have found out. So I hastened to expose, in full view, a sign on which I had written simply: WHAT OF IT? If up in the galaxy they had thought they would embarrass me with their I SAW YOU, my calm would disconcert them, and they would be convinced there was no point in dwelling on that episode. If, at the same time, they didn’t have much information against me, a vague expression like WHAT OF IT? would be useful as a feeler, to see how seriously I should take their affirmation I SAW YOU. The distance separating us (from its dock of a hundred million light-years the galaxy had sailed a million centuries before, journeying into the darkness) would perhaps make it less obvious that my WHAT OF IT? was replying to their I SAW YOU of two hundred million years before, but it didn’t seem wise to include more explicit references in the new sign, because if the memory of that day, after three million centuries, was becoming dim, I certainly didn’t want to be the one to refresh it.

After all, the opinion they might have formed of me, on that single occasion, shouldn’t worry me too much. The facts of my life, the ones that had followed, after that day, for years and centuries and millennia, testified -- at least the great majority of them -- in my favor; so I had only to let the facts speak for themselves. If, from that distant celestial body, they had seen what I was doing one day two hundred million years ago, they must have seen me also the following day, and the day after that, and the next and the next, and they would gradually have modified the first negative opinion of me they might have formed, hastily, on the basis of an isolated episode. In fact, when I thought how many years had already gone by since that I SAW YOU, I was convinced the bad impression must now have been erased by time and followed by a probably positive evaluation, or one, in any case, that corresponded more to reality. However, this rational certainty was not enough to afford me relief: until I had the proof of a change of opinion in my favor, I would remain uneasy at having been caught in an embarrassing position and identified with it, nailed fast in that situation.

Now you will say I could very well have shrugged off the opinion of me held by some strangers living on a remote constellation. As a matter of fact, what worried me wasn’t the limited opinion of this or that celestial body, but the suspicion that the consequences of their having seen me might be limitless. Around that galaxy there were many others, some with a radius shorter by a hundred million light-years, with observers who kept their eyes open: the I SAW YOU sign, before I had glimpsed it, had certainly been read by inhabitants of other celestial bodies, and the same thing would have happened afterwards on the gradually more distant constellations. Even if no one could know precisely to what specific situation that I SAW
YOU referred, this indefiniteness would not in the least be to my advantage. On the contrary, since people are always ready to believe the worst, what I might really have been seen doing at a distance of a hundred million light-years was, after all, nothing compared to everything that elsewhere they might imagine had been seen. The bad impression I may have left during that moment of heedlessness two million centuries ago would then be enlarged and multiplied, refracted across all the galaxies of the universe, nor was it possible for me to deny it without making the situation worse, since, not knowing what extreme and slanderous deductions those who hadn't directly seen me might have come to, I had no idea where to begin and where to end my denials.

In this state of mind, I kept looking around every night with my telescope. And after two nights I noticed that on a galaxy at a distance of a hundred million years and one light-day they had also put up a sign I SAW YOU. There could be no doubt that they were also referring to that time: what I had always tried to hide had been discovered not by only one celestial body but also by another located in quite a different zone in space. And by still others: in the nights that followed I continued to see new signs with I SAW YOU on them, set on different constellations every time. From a calculation of the light-years it emerged that the moment when they had seen me was always the same. To each of these I SAW YOUs I answered with signs marked by contemptuous indifference, such as OH REALLY? HOW NICE or else FAT LOT I CARE, or else by an almost provocative mockery, such as TANT PIS or else LOOK! IT'S ME!, but still retaining my reserve.

Though the logic of the situation led me to regard the future with reasonable optimism, the convergence of all those I SAW YOUs on a single point in my life, a convergence surely fortuitous, due to special conditions of interstellar visibility (the single exception was one celestial body where, corresponding to the same date, a sign appeared saying WE CAN'T SEE A DAMN THING), kept me in a constant state of nerves.

It was as if in the space containing all the galaxies the image of what I had done that day were being projected in the interior of a sphere that swelled constantly, at the speed of light; the observers of the celestial bodies that gradually came within the sphere's radius were enabled to see what had happened. Each of these observers could, in turn, be considered the center of a sphere also expanding at the speed of light, projecting the words I SAW YOU on their signs all around. At the same time, all these celestial bodies belonged to galaxies moving away from one another in space at a speed proportional to the distance, and every observer who indicated he had received a message, before he could receive a second one, had already moved off through space at a constantly increasing speed. At a certain point the farthest galaxies that had seen me (or had seen the I SAW YOU sign from a galaxy closer to us, or the I SAW THE I SAW YOU from a bit father on) would reach the ten-billion-light-year threshold, beyond which they would move off at three hundred thousand kilometers per second, the speed of light, and no image would be able to overtake them after that. So there was the risk that they would remain with their temporary mistaken opinion of me, which from that moment on would become definitive, no longer rectifiable, beyond all appeal and therefore, in a sense, correct, corresponding to the truth.

So it was indispensable to clear up the misunderstanding as quickly as possible. And to clear it up, I could hope for only one thing: that, after that occasion, I had been seen other times, when I gave another image of myself, the one that was -- I had no doubts on this score -- the true image of me that should be remembered. In the course of the last two hundred million years, there had been no lack of opportunities, and for me just one, very clear, would be enough, to avoid confusion. Now, for example, I recalled a day when I had really been myself, I mean myself in the way I wanted others to see me. This day -- I calculated rapidly -- had been exactly one hundred million years ago. So, on the galaxy a hundred million light-years away they were seeing me at this very moment in that situation so flattering to my prestige, and their opinion of me was surely changing, modifying, or rather refuting that first fleeting impression. Right now, or thereabouts: because now the distance that separated us was no longer a hundred million light-years, but a hundred and one; anyhow I had only to wait an equal number of years to allow the light there to arrive here (the date when that would happen was easily calculated, bearing Hubble's constant in mind) and then I would learn their reaction.

Those who had managed to see me at moment x would, all the more surely, have seen me at moment y, and since my image in y was much more convincing than in x - - indeed, I would call it more inspiring, unforgettable -- they would remember me in y, whereas what had been seen of me in x would be forgotten immediately, erased, perhaps after having been fleetingly recalled to mind, in a kind of dismissal, as if to say: Just think, one who is like y can by chance be seen as x and you might believe he is x although it's clear that he's absolutely y.

I was almost cheered by the number of I SAW YOUs still appearing all around, because it meant that interest in me was aroused and therefore my more radiant day would escape no one. It would have had (or rather, was already having, beyond my knowledge) a much wider resonance than the sort -- limited to give surroundings and, moreover, I must admit, rather marginal -- which I, in my modesty, had formerly expected.

You must also consider those celestial bodies from which -- through absent-mindedness or bad placing -- they hadn't seen me but only a nearby I SAW YOU sign; they had also set up signs saying: LOOKS AS IF THEY'VE SEEN YOU or else FROM WHERE THEY ARE THEY CAN SEE YOU! (expressions in which I sensed a touch of curiosity or of sarcasm); on those bodies, too, there were eyes trained on me and now, precisely because they had missed one opportunity, they would hardly allow a second to escape them, and having received only indirect and hearsay information about x, they would be all the more ready to accept y as the only true reality concerning me.

So the echo of the moment y would be propagated through time and space, it would reach the most distant, the fastest galaxies, and they would elude all further images, racing at light's speed of three hundred thousand kilometers per second and taking that now definitive image
of me beyond time and space, where it would become the truth containing in its sphere with unlimited radius all the other spheres with their partial and contradictory truths.

A hundred million centuries or so, after all, aren’t an eternity, but to me they seemed never to go by. Finally the night arrived: I had long since aimed my telescope at that same galaxy of the first time. I moved my right eye, its lid half closed, to the eyepiece, I raised my eyelid slowly, and there was the constellation, perfectly framed, and there was a sign in its midst, the words as yet indistinct. I focused better ... There was written: TRA-LA-LA-LA. Just that: TRA-LA-LA-LA. At the moment when I had expressed the essence of my personality, with abundant evidence and with no risk of misinterpretation, at the moment when I had furnished the key to interpreting all the acts of my past and future life and to forming an over-all and objective opinion, what had they seen, they who had not only the opportunity but also the moral obligation to observe and note what I was doing? They hadn’t seen anything, hadn’t been aware of anything, hadn’t observed anything special. To discover that such a great part of my reputation was at the mercy of a character who was so untrustworthy left me prostrate. That proof of myself, which -- because of the various favorable circumstances that had accompanied it -- I considered incapable of repetition, had gone by unobserved, wasted, definitely lost for a whole zone of the universe, only because that gentleman had allowed himself five minutes of idleness, or relaxation, we might as well say of irresponsibility, his head in the air like an idiot, perhaps in the euphoria of someone who has had a drop too much, and on his sign he had found nothing better to write than a meaningless scrawl, perhaps the silly tune that he had been whistling, forgetting his duties, TRA-LA-LA-LA.

Only one thought afforded me some comfort: the thought that on the other galaxies there were bound to be more diligent observers. Until then I had never been so pleased at the great numbers of spectators that the old, and unfortunate, episode had had; now they would be ready to perceive the new situation. I returned to the telescope, night after night. A few nights later a galaxy at the proper distance appeared to me in all its splendor. It had a sign. And on it was written this sentence: YOU HAVE A FLANNEL UNDERSHIRT.

Tears in my eyes, I racked my brain for an explanation. Perhaps in that place, with the passage of time, they had so perfected their telescopes that they amused themselves by observing the most insignificant details, the undershirt a person wore, whether it was flannel or cotton, and all the rest meant nothing to them, they paid no attention to it at all. And, for them, my honorable act, my -- shall we say? -- magnanimous and generous act, had gone for nothing; they had retained only one element, my flannel undershirt: an excellent undershirt, to be sure, and perhaps at another moment I would have been pleased at their noticing it, but not then, oh no, not then.

In any case, I had many other witnesses awaiting me: it was only natural that, out of the whole number, some should fail; I wasn’t the sort of person to become distraught over such a little setback. In fact, from a galaxy a bit farther on, I finally had the proof that someone had seen perfectly how I had behaved and had evaluated my action properly, that is, enthusiastically. Indeed, on a sign he had written: THAT CHARACTER’S REALLY ON THE BALL. I noted it with complete satisfaction -- a satisfaction, mind you, which merely confirmed my expectation, or rather my certainty that my merits would be suitably recognized -- but then the expression THAT CHARACTER attracted my attention. Why did they call me THAT CHARACTER, if they already knew me and had seen me, even in that unfortunate circumstance? Shouldn’t I be quite familiar to them already? With some adjustment, I improved the focus of my telescope and discovered, at the bottom of the same sign, another sentence written in smaller letters: WHO THE HELL CAN HE BE? Can you imagine a worse stroke of luck? Those who held the key to understanding who I really was hadn’t recognized me. They hadn’t connected this praiseworthy episode with that deplorable incident two hundred million years earlier, so the deplorable incident was still attributed to me, and the other wasn’t, the other remained an impersonal, anonymous anecdote, which didn’t belong to anyone’s history.

My first impulse was to brandish a sign: IT’S ME! I gave up the idea: what would be the good of it? They would see it more than a hundred million years after moment x had gone by; we were approaching the half-billion mark; to be sure of making myself understood I would have to specify, dig up that old business again, and this was just what I wanted most to avoid.

By now I had lost my self-confidence. I was afraid I wouldn’t receive any greater amends from the other galaxies, either. Those who had seen me had seen me in a partial, fragmentary, careless way, or had understood only up to a point what was happening, missing the essential quality, not analyzing the elements of my personality which, from one situation to the next, were thrown into relief.

Only one sign said what I had really been expecting: YOU KNOW SOMETHING? YOU’RE REALLY ON THE BALL! I hastened to leaf through my notebook, to see what reactions had come from that galaxy at moment x. By coincidence, that was the very place where the sign had appeared saying WE CAN’T SEE A DAMN THING. In that zone of the universe, I surely enjoyed a higher esteem, no denying that, and I ought to have rejoiced at last, but instead I felt no satisfaction at all. I realized that, since these admirers of mine weren’t those who might earlier have formed an unfavorable opinion of me, I didn’t give a damn about them. The assurance that moment y had refuted and erased moment x couldn’t come to me from them, and my uneasiness continued, exacerbated by the great length of time and by my not knowing whether the causes of my dismay were there and whether or not they would be dispelled.

 Naturally, for the observers scattered over the universe, moment x and moment y were only two among countless observable moments, and in fact, every night on the constellations located at the most varied distances signs appeared referring to other episodes, signs saying STRAIGHT AHEAD YOU’RE ON THE RIGHT TRACK, THERE YOU GO AGAIN, WATCH YOUR STEP, I TOLD YOU SO. For each of them I could work
out the calculation, the light-years from here to there, the light-years from there to here, and establish which episode they were referring to: all the actions of my life, every time I picked my nose, all the times I managed to jump down from a moving tram, were still there, traveling from one galaxy to another, and they were being considered, commented on, judged. The comments and judgments were not always pertinent: the sign TCHK TCHK applied to the time I gave a third of my salary to a charity subscription; the sign THIS TIME I LIKE YOU, to when I had forgotten in a train the manuscript of a treatise that had cost me years of study; my famous proliusion at the University of Goettingen was commented on with the words: WATCH OUT FOR DRAFTS.

In a certain sense, I could set my mind at rest: no action of mine, good or bad, was completely lost. At least an echo of it was always saved; or rather, several echoes, which varied from one end of the universe to the other, and in that sphere which was expanding and generating other spheres; but the echoes were discontinuous, conflicting pieces of information, inessential, from which the nexus of my actions didn’t emerge, and a new action was unable to explain or correct an old one, so they remained one next to the other, with a plus or minus sign, like a long, long polynomial which cannot be reduced to a more simple expression.

What could I do, at this point? To keep bothering with the past was useless; so far it had gone the way it had gone; I had to make sure the future went better. The important thing was that, in everything I did, it should be clear what was essential, where the stress should be placed, what was to be noted and what not. I procured an enormous directional sign, one of those huge hands with the pointing index finger. When I performed an action to which I wanted to call attention, I had only to raise the sign, trying to make the finger point at the most important detail of the scene. For the moments when, instead, I preferred not to be observed, I made another sign, a hand with the thumb pointing in the direction opposite the one I was turning, to distract attention.

All I had to do was carry those signs wherever I went and raise one or the other, according to the occasion. It was a long-term operation, naturally: the observers hundreds of thousands of light-years away would be hundred of thousands of millennia late in perceiving what I was doing now, and I would have to wait more hundreds of thousands of millennia to read their reactions. This delay was inevitable; but there was, unfortunately, another drawback I hadn’t foreseen: what could I do when I realized I had raised the wrong sign?

For example, at a certain moment I was sure I was about to do something that would give me dignity and prestige; I hastened to wave the sign with the index finger pointed at me; and at that very moment I happened to make a dreadful faux pas, something unforgivable, a display of human wretchedness to make you sink into the ground in shame. But it was done; that image, with the pointing sign, was already navigating through space, nobody could stop it, it was devouring the light-years, spreading among the galaxies, arousing in the millions of future centuries comments and laughter and turned-up noses, which from the depths of the millennia would return to me and would force me to still clumsier excuses, to more embarrassed attempts at correction ...

Another day, instead, I had to face an unpleasant situation, one of those situations in life that one is obliged to live through, knowing that, whatever happens, there’s no way of showing up well. I shielded myself with the sign with the thumb pointing in the other way, and I went off. Unexpectedly, in that delicate and ticklish situation, I displayed quick-wittedness, a balance, a tact, a decisiveness that no one -- myself least of all -- had ever suspected in me: I suddenly revealed hidden talents that implied a long ripening of character; and meanwhile the sign was deflecting the observers’ gaze, making them look at a pot of peonies nearby.

Cases like these, which at first I considered exceptions, the result of my inexperience, kept happening to me more and more frequently. Too late I realized I should have pointed out what I hadn’t wanted seen and should have hidden what I had instead pointed out: there was no way to arrive before the image and to warn them not to pay attention to the sign.

I tried making a third sign with the word CORRECTION, to raise when I wanted to annul the preceding sign, but in every galaxy this image would have been seen only after the one it was meant to correct, and by then the harm was done and I would only seem doubly ridiculous, and to neutralize that with another sign, IGNORE CORRECTION, would have been equally useless.

I went on living, waiting for the remote moments when, from the galaxies, the comments on the new episodes would arrive, charged for me with embarrassment and uneasiness; then I would be able to rebut, sending off my messages of reply, which I was already pondering, each dictated by the situation. Meanwhile, the galaxies for whom I was most compromised were already revolving around the threshold of the billions of light-years at such speeds that, to reach them, my messages would have to struggle across space, clinging to their accelerating flight: then, one by one, they would disappear from the last-tenth-billion-light-year horizon beyond which no visible object can be seen, and they would bear with them a judgment by then irrevocable.

And, thinking of this judgment I would no longer be able to change, I suddenly felt a kind of relief, as if peace could come to me only after the moment when there would be nothing to add and nothing to remove in that arbitrary ledger of misunderstandings, and the galaxies which were gradually reduced to the last tail of the last luminous ray, winding from the sphere of darkness, seemed to bring with them the only possible truth about myself, and I couldn’t wait until all of them, one after the other, had followed this path.