

Hybriditales

Posthumanizing Calvino

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Cages and Thresholds

In her essay “On Singularity and the Symbolic,” Carrie Rohman analyzes the way Italo Calvino’s character Mr. Palomar muses, in silent conversations, about the boundaries that separate humans from other animals. Confronted with the enigmatic singularity of an albino gorilla named Snowflake, or with the neat classification of iguanas in a Parisian reptile house, Palomar searches for “an eternal or permanent system, structure, or taxonomy of meaning” (Rohman 73), a recognizable order whose validity would also extend outside cages and boxes. As though challenging the Darwinian evidence of biological continuity with the implicit evocation of a *Linnaeus redivivus*, Palomar dreams of a nostalgic taxonomy of “fixed” forms able to “resist the flux that undoes them and mixes and reshapes [them]”—forms “separated forever from the others, as here in a row of glass case-cages of the zoo” (*Palomar* 86). Calvino is well aware that this dream is an artful delusion: were species separated like cages in a zoo, the order of discourse would prevail over the complexity of nature and its ongoing metamorphosis (Rohman 73). Rohman writes, “[Palomar’s] description [of the zoo] points out the exaggerated and ultimately fantastic idea that species are eternally distinct, that species barriers represent some permanent and reliable mode of differentiation. Rather, this passage implicitly exposes the *human* investment in inviolable and discreet [sic] life-forms. [. . .] Palomar longs for species barriers that are clear and unassailable, but [. . .] such longings are more akin to humanist wish-structures than anything else” (73).

The search for taxonomies is a concern that Calvino shares with two authors with whom he is often associated. Jorge Luis Borges's famous "Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledges," a (seemingly fictitious) ancient Chinese encyclopedia, contains a curious taxonomy that pigeonholes living beings into 14 categories, including "(d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, [. . .] (n) those that resemble flies from a distance" (*Other Inquisitions* 108). Years later, Borges insists that the experience of the animal realm is as "bewildering" as a cognitive phenomenology of ever-emerging things: "[T]o discover the camel is itself no stranger than to discover a mirror or water or staircase" (*Imaginary Beings* 13). In Borges, like in Calvino, the emphasis falls on the ironic and de facto culturally arbitrary character of classification systems. Another author, biographically closer to Calvino, the French *oulipiste* Georges Perec, describes the search for order as an extravagant occupation to which Mr. Bartlebooth, the Palomar-like protagonist of *Life: A User's Manual* (1978), unsuccessfully devotes his existence: "Let us imagine a man [. . .] of exceptional arrogance who wishes to fix, to describe, and to exhaust not the whole world [. . .] but a constituted fragment of the world: in the face of the inextricable incoherence of things, he will set out to execute a (necessarily limited) program right the way through, in all its irreducible, intact entirety" (117).

In all these cases, the attempt to define "orders of things" (Michel Foucault's reference to Borges's "Celestial Emporium" is commonplace here; see Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xvi) and to map the fault lines between species and beings is at the very least problematic. If in Borges it is a cultural construction, in Perec it is a hobby for wealthy male adults. In Calvino, irony and epistemology go together. To sketch separations between life forms, in fact, is a way to counterbalance the inconsistency of the subject, which is in turn always permeable, always exposed to a world full of other and full of others.

But considered more closely, the question underlying Palomar's solitary observations is not solely about a classification of living forms. Palomar focuses on thresholds, including the "threshold of the human," as Rohman evinces, but his zoological adventures are just another occasion for Calvino to explore—taking irony as a heuristic strategy—the way thresholds can be blurred, betrayed, deconstructed, hybridized, and remanipulated in narrative forms. In this essay, I will examine this tendency and criss-cross Calvino's works via the posthumanist lens of a "relational ontology" (Oppermann), maybe the most apt tool for reading through his universe of hybrids, evanescent thresholds, and "queer critters," where the human world is a haphazard emergence on a "turbulent, immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve, and disintegrate" (Bennett ix).

In the stories of Palomar, Qfwfq, Priscilla, and his many “critters,” Calvino shows how, as Latour puts it, “It is possible, to have our cake and eat it too—to be monists and make distinctions” (214). Calvino the monist—like Perec, and certainly like Borges—cuts his posthuman cake by tracing ironical distinctions. But, along with his reader, he is well aware that these lines are marked only in order to reinforce the narrative of connections in a universe of things that are, as Deleuze would say, “ontologically one, but formally diverse” (*Expressionism* 67). Through an *ars combinatoria* made of segments of potential natures and unstable material-semiotic orders, layers of history and layers of biology intermingle and interfere, spreading out a playful complexity of stories and beings, where literature becomes a form of cosmic knowledge and imagination a vibrant extension of reality.

Past the Human

Where do the boundaries of the human lie? Are there boundaries (literally) *de-fining* the division between the human and its other, and where do these borders lie? Or, more properly, where does the human’s “other” lie?¹ To answer these questions, a belief in an essentialist vision about the human would certainly help. The human, according to this vision, would be an ontoepistemological category that doggedly emerged from the evolutionary struggle in order to stay fixed in its purity, simultaneously a being, an essence, and a theory. But is it really so? “I firmly believe that we have never been human,” Donna Haraway writes in “A Kinship of Feminist Figurations”: “There is no border where evolution ends and history begins, where genes stop and environment takes up, where culture rules and nature submits, or vice versa. Instead, there are turtles and turtles of naturecultures all the way down. Every being that matters is a congeries of its formative histories” (2). Our existence, the existence of our species and its cognitive evolution, is far from being pure and confined within secure margins. From the mitochondria all the way up, the human is constantly mixed with the nonhuman. It reveals itself by way of hybridizations. For this reason, a perfectly consequent atlas of human biology would be a treatise on xenobiology. A compelling example is that of the bacteria colonies that constitute our microbiome. Even though they do not have anything “human” in their genetic code, they are an integral part of our body and our health. As Jane Bennett observes, “My ‘own’ body is material, and yet this materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners” (112).² But let us also think of the way pollutants, medicines, and humanly made substances—xenobiotics—become our resident aliens, interacting with our bodies “in unpredictable, uncontrollable ways” (Alaimo 24). Forms of environmental illness, for example multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), speak clearly about the way “human

bodies are coextensive with the natural, unnatural, and hybridized material world” (167).³

The cyborg is also a hybridization of the human: a mingled creature made of humanly built mechanisms and of “ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen ‘high-technological’ guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled labouring, desiring, and reproducing systems” (Haraway, *Simians* 1). Against dualistic assumptions, humanity belongs “in the crossover” of agencies and presences, and like our everyday life, “our very body, is composed to a great extent of socio-technical negotiations and artifacts” (Latour 214). If we keep these examples in mind next time we hydrate our skin, take an antibiotic, or see an advertisement for ear implants, the fact that humans are assemblages of organic and inorganic matter, and therefore blended with alien presences, will become suddenly clearer. In this light, our bodies are congregational entities always reminding us of “the very radical character of the (fractional) kinship between the human and the nonhuman” (Bennett 112).

Calvino’s literary imagination is pervaded by this idea, and much of his narrative undertaking consists in mapping potential otherness within and around the human, in both its ontological and social categories. It is interesting how this vision emerges even in occasional writings, like “The Sky, Man, the Elephant” (“*Il cielo, l’uomo, l’elefante*”), a preface to Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, published in 1982 and included in *Why Read the Classics?* (*Perché leggere i classici*, 1991). In this treatise of things natural and of cultural anthropology *avant la lettre*, Calvino discovers humankind to be located in a pervious zone of forms and matters, precarious in its destiny of unpredictable metamorphoses. “Human beings form an area of the living world which must be defined by carefully drawing its boundaries,” he remarks (*Why Read* 42). However, these boundaries are negotiable, and not only in the case of the unsuspected family ties that “spiritually” connect the human with the “*reliqua animalia*, [. . .] the other animated beings” (45). The human is also a technological hybrid of things and products, in a dimension that Latour would call a “collective” of humans and nonhumans. Calvino comments, in fact, that “[a]nticipating those modern anthropologists who maintain that there is a continuity between biological evolution and technological development, from palaeolithic tools to electronics, Pliny implicitly admits that the additions made by man to nature become an integral part themselves of [human] nature” (44).⁴ Here, the adverb “implicitly” tells us how Calvino thought about the structural hybridity of the human, where biological evolution and technological development are an open horizon of substantial transitions and oscillations. Against such a horizon, it is possible that future layers of existence will ironically reproduce the previous ones by turning their allegedly immovable order upside down. Think of the human-car-petrol symbiosis described in “The Petrol Pump” (“*La pompa di benzina*”), a short story written by Calvino in 1974: “The day the earth’s crust reabsorbs the cities,

this plankton sediment that was humankind will be covered by geological layers of asphalt and cement until in millions of years' time it thickens into oily deposits, on whose behalf we do not know" (*Numbers* 175).

Open to transformations, the human is materially and historically permeable to other natures, other matters, and other cultural agents. To be properly human is therefore, in a certain sense, to go past the boundaries of human "nature." This is the meaning of posthumanism, as theorists such as Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Roberto Marchesini, Bruno Latour, Andrew Pickering, Rosi Braidotti, or Cary Wolfe conceptualize it. For these authors, posthumanism is a vision of reality according to which the human and the nonhuman are confluent, coemergent, and defining each other in mutual relations. More precisely, a posthumanist vision rejects the essentialist separation between the human and the nonhuman and, quite like Calvino's narratives, emphasizes their hybridizations and their active interplay. Such a vision pictures a world whose ontological categories are performed rather than given, where mixing with "otherness" is the dynamic destination of being, and where the human is itself the result of intersecting agencies and meanings. Its very meaning is that of a material-discursive consociability, built "through the pleasurable connection with the other, with the different, with whatever is able to produce new states of instability, thus reinforcing the human endeavor to conjugate with the world" (Marchesini 70).⁵ Against the posthumanist horizon, different forms of agency and materiality feed each other. There is communication within every fragment of existing materiality, and therefore our relationship with the world is of conjoined determination: "The world makes us in one and the same process in which we make the world" (Pickering 26). In this performative account of being and knowing, human experience depends on and produces hybridizations. Not only are our bodies materially entangled with other bodies, but culture and every form of knowledge are discursive processes of coupling with others: "[E]very culture is the outcome of a process of hybridization with an otherness" (Marchesini 15). In tune with Calvino's vision of a world full of human aliens, posthumanism implies therefore a picture according to which, both in discursive and material terms, "otherness saturates the human structure [. . .] [H]umanity oozes with the nonhuman" (Marchesini 70).

But as Calvino will emphasize, the human is not alone in the crossover. A whole world of hybrids, collectives, and "critters" shares with us a horizon on which material forces concur with meanings in the process of hybridization that shapes our existence(s). Existence is composed of the "force of collective life" (Wheeler, *Whole* 30), and this force is expressive: if culture is an ongoing process of hybridization with nature, a continuous formation of "naturecultures," to use Haraway's vivid coinage, the force of life is also a force of signs and information, a semiotic force. It is a potential of stories inbuilt into matter. This world is not only a world of material emergences but also a world that becomes meaningful because meaning

coemerges with matter, as research in the field of biosemiotics shows.⁶ The narrative landscape of posthumanism is a landscape of encounters, where “the organism–environment coupling is a form of conversation” (Wheeler, *Whole* 126), and where the human is constitutionally responsive to “a universe which is—and perhaps always has been—‘perfused with signs’” (155).

In the paragraphs that follow, I will trace the way these issues are developed in Calvino’s narratives. After an overview of works where such topics are most visible, I will concentrate on *Mr. Palomar* (*Palomar*, 1983) and *Cosmicomics* (*Le Cosmicomiche*, 1965). These are, I would suggest, the main expressions of Calvino’s attempt to build stories that move the narrative focus and strategy “past the human,” and where the tangle of matters, forms, and signs shapes “hybriditales”—stories in which reality itself is a continuous flow of crossings.

A World of Hybrids, Collectives, and Critters: Literature outside the Self

The human world emerging from Calvino’s posthumanist “hybriditales” is a combination of substances and meanings: as we have seen, only a game of proportions separates the human from the nonhuman, defining them as *dif-ferents*, as bearers of an internal split. For Calvino this split is profoundly problematic and requires deconstruction. In his narratives, the entanglements with an otherness come often from within—from within the cells, like in *Cosmicomics* or *t zero* (*T con zero*, 1967), or from within the mind, the body, and their social categorization, like in *The Watcher* (*La giornata di uno scrutatore*, 1963). This short novel, in particular, is a reflection on the “borders of humanity,” where the very idea of being human, “essentially” enlightened by reason, is confronted with its own “odd” side: mental and physical illness. One of the most philosophically challenging among Calvino’s novels, *The Watcher* is the story of two days spent by an election watcher in Turin’s Cottolengo, a hospital for the mentally and physically disabled during the elections of 1953. Here, while the protagonist intensely meditates on “the boundary line between the Cottolengo humans and the healthy” (*The Watcher* 36), the very concept of “humanity” is overcome by its internal alterity, and the human becomes a human alien, an anthropological form of wilderness.⁷

But hybridity and enmeshment with alterity are features that Calvino bestows also on other early characters, in works where the realism and conceptual depths of *The Watcher* are superseded by fantasy and ironic lightness. The trilogy *Our Ancestors* (*I nostri antenati*) is an interesting case in point: in *The Baron in the Trees* (*Il barone rampante*, 1957), as a deliberate consequence of his *hubristic* refusal to eat snail soup, Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò turns into an “arboreal” man who will never touch the ground again, becoming part of Europe’s landscape of disappearing forests; *The*

Cloven Viscount (*Il visconte dimezzato*, 1952) is a moral hybrid of good and evil; *The Nonexistent Knight* (*Il cavaliere inesistente*, 1959) is a hybrid of matter and void, a presence-absence, alive only thanks to his armor (he is, we could say, a human-metal-crafted assemblage). In *Marcovaldo*, nature is an ironic hybrid of “urban nature,” which is “mischievous, counterfeit, compromised with artificial life” (Calvino, “Presentazione” 1233). This nature is visible through its absence and its paradoxical appearances: mushrooms near a tram station, municipal pigeons, billboards mistaken for trees by kids who have never seen a forest, the pale light of the moon competing with the neon signs of a cognac brand. In *Cosmicomics* (and in the sequels, *t zero*, *The Memory of the World*, *Cosmicomics Old and New*)⁸ the hybridization is extended to the entire universe, mediated through and concentrated in the indefinable Qfwfq, a “queer critter” who embodies the entire range of natural forms, possibility, and stories.⁹

Marcovaldo’s hybridized nature becomes *Mr. Palomar’s* landscape of naturecultures, a landscape of cheese, stones, gardens, tortoises, butcher shops, stars, geckoes, zoos, slippers, sand, and eyes. Here hybridity takes more explicitly the literal form of *posthumanism*, of a movement aimed to cross the boundaries of the human and to locate processes—whether cognitive or formative—in a wider horizon of mutually dependent phenomena. Palomar’s mind, in fact, is always strained between the “in-side” and the “out-side,” like a consciously permeable membrane connecting (and separating) the self and the world. Stretching the human beyond itself in space and in time, this coevolutionary gaze is an essential component of Calvino’s relational ontology. Palomar’s fluctuations between subjectivism (“All this is happening not on the sea, not in the sun, [. . .] but inside my head. [. . .] I am swimming in my mind” [15]) and objectivism (“If I see and think and swim the reflection, it is because at the other extreme there is the sun, which casts its rays. [. . .] All the rest is reflection among reflections, me included” [15]) are—if not overcome—conciliated in a geoevolutionary vision in which experiences and presences are occasional coemergences. Humans, too, are episodes in the world’s self-shaping:

Mr. Palomar thinks of the world without him: that endless world before his birth, and that far more obscure world after his death; he tries to imagine the world before eyes, any eyes; and a world that tomorrow, through catastrophe or slow corrosion, will be left blind. What happens (happened, will happen) in that world? Promptly an arrow of light sets out from the sun, is reflected in the calm sea, sparkles in the tremolo of the water; and then matter becomes receptive to light, is differentiated into living tissues, and all of a sudden an eye, a multitude of eyes, burgeons, or reburgeons. (18)

This passage is the typical example of the human’s material and historical porosity, of its contiguity with other natures and agents. Like all other physical systems, humans do not exist *a priori* or separately; the

scale of their existence is participatory and relational. In the dicey process of evolutionary causality, humans “happen” in a world of spontaneously concurring phenomena, outside any preexisting order or harmony. The “before-and-after” sequence taking place in Palomar’s mind is therefore not a way to delimit the human as a chronological or ontological watershed. It is rather an instant movie that recapitulates evolutionary pathways tracing them back to the unpredictable ways nature’s “agentic force [. . .] interacts with and changes the [. . .] elements in the mix, including the human” (Alaimo and Hekman 7). Far from ruling the world in its ongoing evolution, order and harmony are only a misleading human projection, a vague aspiration. In fact, as Palomar says, between humankind and world, “there is a sense of possible harmony, as if between two nonhomogeneous harmonies: that of the nonhuman in a balance of forces that seems not to correspond to any pattern, and that of human structures, which aspires to the rationality of a geometrical or musical composition, never definitive” (94).

This structural impermanence justifies and spawns the observational attitude displayed by Mr. Palomar, whose name recalls an astronomic observatory in California. While using this quality, Calvino is perfectly aware that objectivity is a mere regulative ideal, in the first place because the human eye is conditioned by biocultural factors. Nonetheless, the eyes of a human can be open to a world in which all things inexhaustibly emerge and converge. This explains a narrative and linguistic strategy that, in almost all Calvino’s late works, becomes more and more antimetaphysical and antisubjective: only if the human self recedes can the world be visible and eloquent. Here, instead of a knowledge based on depth, and therefore on hierarchy, whether of objectivity or subjectivity, Calvino privileges a nonhierarchical way of looking, knowing, and describing phenomena. This both inverts and enlarges our cognitive patterns: “It is only after you have come to know the surface of things [. . .] that you can venture to seek what is underneath. But the surface of things is inexhaustible” (55). Only in a perceptive and conceptual horizon made of silence, of hearing, of observing, can humans acquire familiarity with the world in which they *occur*: a world both *before* and *after* the human one, inhabited by things and beings proving that “the world of man is not eternal and is not unique” (*Palomar* 86).

If the world is narratable only through the silence of the ego, literature mirrors this paradox, this ambivalence between silence and narration. Sustained by a vision of imagination as a creative force, a “means to attain a knowledge that is outside the individual, outside the subjective” (Calvino, *Six Memos* 91), literature can explore how the world progressively *opens* to itself. In this openness, Calvino situates Palomar’s attempt to mingle his existence and perspective with the existence of other beings, whether geckoes, grasses, slippers, tortoises, or birds. For example, as Palomar assumes

the perspective of a bird flying over the rooftops, the categories of experience are moved “past the human” again, and the self is outspread:

Nothing of this can be seen by one who moves on his feet or his wheels over the city pavements. And, inversely, from up here you have the impression that the true crust of the earth is this, uneven but compact, [. . .] and it never occurs to you to wonder what is hidden [. . .]. This is how birds think, or at least is how Mr. Palomar thinks, imagining himself a bird. “It is only after you have come to know the surface of things,” he concludes, “that you can venture to seek what is underneath. But the surface of things is inexhaustible.” (*Palomar* 54–55)

Palomar is an extended ego, a self “outside the subjective.” He is the intersection of city, birds, plants, roofs, things, and himself as a human individual who tries to “escape subjectivity” (38), not so much in order to reach a supposed objectivity, but rather to embrace a wider portion of the never-ending surface of things. Here, while the posthuman finds the form of an urban-animal-architectonic-cultural-vegetable assemblage, Rome, the city’s experiences and bodies, the humans, and the birds form a collective. In this collective, unexpectedly, the human finds itself in a relationship of communication based on sharing a landscape of materiality and signs, a situation that can be addressed using the words of the ecophenomenologist David Abram:

It is the reticence, the inexhaustible otherness of things, that enables them to hold my gaze, to sustain themselves in my awareness. I can never plumb all the secrets of even a single blade of grass [. . .] or the totality of the relations that it sustains [. . .] because I am not a disembodied mind [. . .], because, that is, I myself am a body, a material being of weight and density like this tree or that stone [. . .]. Because, finally, I am thing myself, and hence have only a finite access to the things around me. (43)¹⁰

The human is a finite being among other finite beings, and this finitude is the horizon for the ontological crossover in which humans, nonhumans, and their stories belong. Likewise, Calvino’s reflections on the human-bovine’s coimplication also emphasize the hybridity of the human and of its “naturecultural” reality: “[T]he man-beef symbiosis [. . .] has guaranteed the flourishing of what is called human civilization, which at least in part should be called human-bovine” (*Palomar* 77–78).

Calvino highlights the need to describe the story (and nature) of human civilization in the perspective of its intersection with the stories (and natures) of others. But these stories could also be inverted, or written from perspectives that are not necessarily human-centered. After all, humans,

too, are parts of the metabolic cycles of nature's economy: if we incorporate "the world's flesh" into our own "it can only be so because we, too, are edible. Because we, too, are food" (Abram 62). Thus Calvino radically ushers in a narrative microcosmology, enunciated in "Being Stone" ("*Essere pietra*"), a two-page monologue "in Palomar's style" written in 1981 for an exhibit of sculptures by Alberto Magnelli. Here a stone speaks and reflects on the entanglement of agencies and elements that characterizes the temporality and stories of impersonal matter:

[T]he stones' time is concentrated in our interior, where ages thicken and sediment [. . .]. But our story lies also upon us, it is carved on our dented and broken and whittled surface [. . .]. And I am not talking only of a mineral story of rocks, which are subjected to slides, exfoliations, erosions, slow flows or sudden cataclysms. I am talking of a story marked by human tools, too: by the helical band of the electric saw that, sliding, cleaves its groove in the hard cohesion of molecules; by the well-aimed chisel stroke; by the crack-opening wedge that has been struck by the hammer; by the frenzied explosion of the mine. ("*Essere pietra*" 420)

As Manuel De Landa put it, "[I]n a nonlinear world in which the same processes of self-organization take place in the mineral, organic, and cultural spheres, perhaps rocks hold some of the keys to understanding [. . .] humanity [. . .] and all [its] mixtures" (70).¹¹ While advancing along the paths of the human's structural "mixtures," we are accompanied in a migration outside the human, and thus *ipso facto* outside the subject, in a process through which the very category of identity is reconfigured. In *Mr. Palomar's* closing chapter this issue is matter of a very intense scrutiny:

[H]ow can you look at something and set your own ego aside? Whose eyes are doing the looking? As a role, you think of the ego as one who is peering out of your own eyes as if leaning on a window sill, looking at the world stretching out before him in all its immensity. So, then: a window looks out on the world. The world is out there; and here, what do we have? The world, still—what else could there be? [. . .] perhaps the "I," the ego, is simply the window through which the world looks at the world. To look at itself the world needs the eyes (and the eyeglasses) of Mr. Palomar. (114)

These words, published in 1982,¹² obey the logic Calvino expressed in a 1967 interview, where he declared, "I believe that the world exists independently from the human; it existed before the human and will exist after it, and the human is only an opportunity that the world has to organize some information about itself. Therefore literature is for me a number of attempts to know and organize information about the world" (*Romanzi e*

racconti II 1347). In Calvino's mind, literature has both creative and cognitive functions, which can extend our experience "outside the individual and outside the subjective" but also explore the realm of potentialities that lies "out there." Again in *Six Memos*, hybridity emerges as a realization of a nonsubjective imagination and of the interconnected potentialities of more-than-human existence: "Think what it would be to have a work conceived from outside the *self*, a work that would let us escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, [. . .] give speech to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in spring and the tree in the fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic." (124).

The literature "outside the self" that Calvino describes is a creative apprehension of things that includes the self only as long as its consciousness is not superimposed on the totality of phenomena. Quoting Carlo Emilio Gadda, in fact, Calvino emphasizes that, while modern novels are a way to know and recreate the complexity of the world, "to know is to insert something into what is real, and hence to distort reality" (*Six Memos* 108). In this process, the self profoundly interferes with the world, changing it irremediably: consciousness, as Haraway says, "changes the geography of all previous categories; it denatures them as heat denatures a fragile protein" ("Manifesto" 16). The object of a literature "from outside" escapes the borders of definitive morphologies and converges instead in processes of mixing and becoming. In so doing, this literature contemplates not "life" generally taken but rather the pure asubjective stream of vitality of what Gilles Deleuze would call "a life"—that is, "an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects" (*Immanence* 29). These asubjective narratives draw attention "not to a world of human design or their accidental, accumulated effects, but to an interstitial field of non-personal ahuman forces, flows, tendencies, and trajectories" (Bennett 61).

Going past the human and finding the narrative pathways of its hybridizations with other beings is what a posthumanist literature par excellence does. In this framework, the *Cosmicomics* are an important station on the way toward *Mr. Palomar's* postsubjectivity. In the infinite forms and matters assumed by Qfwfq, Calvino expresses both the contingency of the human as a cosmic actor and the expansive asubjective and aindividual narrativity of things in their evolutionary becoming, from atoms to planetary forces. The *Cosmicomics* are the history of a hybridizing universe. Scientific hypotheses give Calvino the cue for imagining stories whose main character is the unpronounceable Qfwfq, an unstoppable flow of material-semiotic stages that speaks, plays, and evolves using the human as a form of representative mimicry. Qfwfq is everything: a nebula, a simple cluster of primordial matter, a dinosaur on the verge of becoming extinct, a mammal just emerged from its previous evolutionary stage of pulmonate fish. Qfwfq is the universe in its synchronic and diachronic metamorphoses,

the whole presenting itself in different fragments. In its very narrative strategy, this book is based on a stylistic-cognitive hybridization: scientific hypotheses and theories are first quoted in an opening paragraph and then ironically anthropomorphized and disguised as the settings for everyday situations. The result is a cosmological Darwinism, a collective evolutionary biography of the world in which Qfwfq is and becomes a huge number of things, reminding us of the permeability and continuity of every being.

Moving from subatomic particles to dinosaurs, from empty space to chaos, Qfwfq's identity is asubjective, open, and relational. It is an ecological and hybridized identity, based on the osmotic-semiotic exchange between the self and the other, the inside and the outside. In "Identity" (*Identità*), a short autobiographic essay of 1977, Calvino wrote that "my personal identity is crisscrossed by the genetic continuity that gets splintered and meshed in apparently separated individuals" (2825); "the most solid and self-confident identity is nothing but a sort of bag or hosepipe full of swirling heterogeneous stuff" (2825–27). Every form of identity, whether individual or social, is definable and understandable only through the relationship it has with the "outside": "[I]t is the outside that defines the inside, in the horizon of space, as well as in the vertical dimension of time" (2827). Similarly, Qfwfq's identity is transitive and transitional; it is made of "swirling heterogeneous stuff." In spite of the anthropomorphism of the narrative, here the human is not simply leveled out but restructured in terms of complexity.

In its hybridizing flows, Qfwfq points at the "other" (others) that is (are) present within the human and, at the same time, at a human that is present in its "other." In its material indifference to forms and states, to being individual or collective, Qfwfq is the typical example of what post-humanist thought calls a "critter," a being/thing that is "material, specific, non-self-identical, and semiotically active" (Haraway, *When Species* 250). Critters are, exactly like Qfwfq, animate beings "where the line between 'animate' and 'inanimate' is taken as given, rather than an effect of particular boundary-drawing practices" (Barad, "Nature's Queer" 127). These boundaries are, in fact, always kept open, and for this very reason, a critter "is already internally queer, having contrary associations as a term defined both in contrast to or as distinct from humans (as in its reference to animate nonhumans), and, in relation to humans (e.g., as a term of reprobation or contempt, but also sometimes as term of affection or tenderness)." In an important sense, therefore, critters—like Qfwfq—"do not have inherently determinate identities, by definition" (*ibid.*).

"The Spiral" (*La spirale*) exemplifies Calvino's representation of this "internally queer" world of associations and its blurred boundaries of space-time-matter. Here Qfwfq is a marine organism that, out of love, produces its shell and recognizes it as a nucleus of further development and determination. This organism prompts the emergence of a spiraling constellation that encompasses, "five hundred million years" later, a congeries

of beings: pyramids and Egyptian airlines, Spinoza and the “Spinoza” entry in a Dutch encyclopedia, a Neolithic mattock buried into a field and the mattock of the peasant that unburies it, Herodotus and those who read him in bilingual editions, a cloud of bees, coal, horoscopes, Cleopatra, and films about Cleopatra (*Cosmicomics* 147–48). Identity, like reality, is here a process of mutual determination of interconnected phenomena, not a property of individuals. It is “diffracted through itself” (Barad, “Nature’s Queer” 126) and open to multiplicity.

In the *Cosmicomics* and their sequels, the striving toward becoming multiple—and toward multiple becomings—is represented as intrinsic to an agentic universe that uses itself as a partner and as a language. One of the most significant examples of this dynamic is “Priscilla,” a tale from *t zero* in which Calvino describes the phenomenology of a vibrantly active matter busy organizing itself and moved by love, perception, imagination, consciousness, and memory. In this journey of self-organization, Qfwfq, a “loving/desiring” cell, produces other beings and meanings, marked by the emergence of plurality within the nucleus: “[M]y state of desire, my state-motion-desire of motion-desire-love moved me to say, and since the only thing I had to say was myself, I was moved to say myself, to express myself. [. . .] [A]ll this me was a place where there was everything except me: what I mean is, I had the sense of being inhabited, no, of inhabiting myself. No, of inhabiting a me inhabited by others” (68–69). This plurality is our immanent destiny. Generation by generation, it is inscribed in our cells and becomes a future-producing memory in which every move appears like a recapitulation of the past: “[O]nce we’ve established that what I call ‘I’ consists of a certain number of amino acids which line up in a certain way, it’s logical that inside these molecules all possible relations are foreseen” (*Cosmicomics* 79).

Here Calvino, with one of his tranquil *coups de théâtre*, moves us to another landscape, one derived from the transformation of cells, their loves, and their combinations:

All we can say is that in certain points and moments that interval of void which is our individual presence is grazed by the wave which continues to renew the combinations of molecules [. . .] and this is enough to give us the certitude that somebody is ‘I’ and somebody is ‘Priscilla’ in the temporal and spatial distribution of the living cells [. . .]. This is in itself enough, Priscilla, to cheer me, when I bend my outstretched neck over yours and I give you a little nip on your yellow fur and you dilate your nostrils, bare your teeth and kneel on the sand, lowering your hump to the level of my breast so that I can lean on it and press you from behind bearing down on my rear legs. (85–86)

In this vorticious horizon in which language and consciousness, memory and love, pop up from bubbling oceans of matter, it does not matter

whether a human voice is used to let a cell speak of its (our) semiotic desire or is lent to a camel to recall his (our) mating joy.

“Priscilla”—like Calvino’s numerous “hybriditales” on biological themes—is theoretically mirrored in a passage from *A Thousand Plateaus*: “[A]ll becomings are already molecular. [. . .] Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the functions one fulfills, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and the rest [. . .]. This is the sense in which becoming is the process of desire. [. . .] It indicates [. . .] a *zone of proximity or copresence*.” (Deleuze and Guattari 300–301). And like Deleuze’s and Guattari’s, Calvino’s subjects are nomadic subjects distributed in a space without enclosures or boundaries. Embracing multiple perspectives of subjectivity and identity, Calvino’s narrative technique, especially in *Mr. Palomar* and *Cosmicomics*, is also nomadic and deterritorialized. By tracing the genealogy of life back to the universe’s genealogy, Calvino rewrites human history in a more inclusive way, enacting a “creative sort of becoming” and staging a “performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, experience, and knowledge” (Braidotti 38).

Blurring Boundaries without Burning Bridges: Conclusions

In her essay “Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms,” Haraway reflects on the “stunning narrative [. . .] of structural-functional complexity” in which all living forms are “bound together in the ultra-structural tissues of our being” (163). She writes, “We must engage in forms of life with the nonhumans [. . .]. Refiguring conversations with those who are not ‘us’ must be part of that project” (174). A posthumanist vision based on pathways of hybridization and on dynamic entanglements where “mind, body and environment [form] a processual continuum” (Wheeler, *Whole* 22) does not deny the human as such but rather covers the distance between us and “those who are not ‘us,’” “blurring boundaries without burning bridges” (Braidotti 26). This vision aims to relocate the human—and the nonhuman—in a (non-Platonic) horizon in which “being” is not synonymous with “essence” or “nature.” In this monist horizon, distinctions define and connect phenomena, which are not “facts” but coemergences of concurring agencies. Posthumanism is also a more “humane” form of humanism—a humanism more inclusive of human others and aware of the (inner and outer) exposure, openness, and vulnerability that characterize the human. As *Mr. Palomar*, *Cosmicomics*, and also *The Watcher* show, if the human has thresholds and boundaries, these are so subtle that they can be eluded and taken as a chance to reshape our categories of experience, opening borders for reconjunctions.

Calvino's critters, their "hybriditales," give relevant instructions about how to restore the conversation with "those who are not 'us.'" To ask what the world looks like where there are no eyes to see it, or to lend human voice to cells, camels, atoms, and stars, is an exercise in restructuring "otherworldly conversations." It implies a welcoming dimension for a human so mature that it can find itself by going past itself. And maybe, after "posthumanizing" Calvino, we could do the same with another classic: Henry David Thoreau. We could start with this famous passage from *Walden*: "Not until we are lost [. . .] do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations" (459). Here, clearly and unmistakably, cognitively and ontologically, the human's hybridizing nature shines in the luminous form of a declaration of interdependence.

Notes

1. For a development of this question in biosemiotic terms, see Timo Maran, "Where Do Your Borders Lie? Reflections on the Semiotical Ethics of Nature."
2. Analyzing this issue more closely, Bennett discusses the crook of the human elbow, "a special ecosystem, a bountiful home to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria," noting that the "bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least 100 times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome" (citation from Nicholas Wade, "Bacteria Thrive in Crook of Elbow, Lending a Hand," *New York Times*, May 23, 2008; see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 112).
3. On this coextensivity, Alaimo articulates her notion of transcorporeality, a "movement across bodies" that reveals "the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures" (2).
4. In the English version, the last crucial adjective ("human") has been mistakenly omitted.
5. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.
6. First developed in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce and Jakob von Uexküll, biosemiotics is "the study of signs and significance in all living things" (Wheeler, *Whole* 19). As Timo Maran puts it, "[S]ign processes take place not only in human culture but also everywhere in nature [. . .] *Meaning is the organising principle of nature*" (455, 461). Therefore "all living things—from the humblest forms of single-cell life upward—[. . .] are engaged in sign relations" (Wheeler, "Biosemiotic Turn" 271).
7. I have analyzed this novel in my essay "The Wilderness of the Human Other."
8. The original Italian titles of these last two books are *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche* (1968) and *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove* (1984). *Cosmicomics*, a collection of 12 short stories on the life

- of the universe, first appeared in 1965. During the following twenty years, Calvino wrote several other “cosmicomics” books and several scattered tales. Most of these “cosmicomic stories,” in English translation, are collected in *The Complete Cosmicomics* (2011).
9. For an ecocritical interpretation of *Cosmicomics*, see Iovino “Quanto scommettiamo? Ecologia letteraria, educazione ambientale e *Le Cosmicomiche* di Italo Calvino.” On “queer critters” as beings that “do not have inherently determinate identities, by definition” (127) see Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity.”
 10. Abram actually used *Mr. Palomar* as a source of inspiration for his “earthly cosmology,” as he himself declares (285).
 11. For considerations about stone and posthumanism, see Jeffrey J. Cohen, “Stories of Stone,” and the intriguing ecocritical development proposed by Cohen in *Animal, Vegetal, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*.
 12. Before being incorporated into *Mr. Palomar*, the text of this chapter appeared in French (translated by Jacques Roubaud) in the July–August 1982 issue of the *Cnac Magazine*, the journal of the *Centre national d’art et de culture Georges Pompidou*.

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