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**Calvino's Posthuman Journey:
A Posthuman and Ecocritical Analysis of Three Works by Italo Calvino**

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Analysis of Three Works by Italo Calvino**

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and my grandfather, who built their lives out of nothing and raised me believing that, with good books and a little grit, anything was possible.

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Abstract

Calvino's Posthuman Journey: A Posthuman and Ecocritical Analysis of Three Works by Italo Calvino

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This dissertation offers a posthuman and ecocritical analysis of three works – *Marcovaldo*, *Palomar*, and *Le cosmicomiche* by Italian writer Italo Calvino. It explores the potential of moving beyond anthropocentrism and into a hybrid space in which human and nonhuman life coexist and collaborate. The urban center is a significant place of this convergence. Underlying these novels is Calvino's prescient concern for global industrialization, consumerism, and climate change. Posthumanism and ecocriticism overlap in their desire to combat these ongoing environmental crises onset by rapid human development in the 20th century. The omnipresence of animals in these stories also highlight Calvino's resistance to see humans as an exceptional planetary species. By giving voice, thoughts, and agency to these animals, Calvino's novels shift the hierarchy into a decentered space in which humans are not considered special or unique. Posthumanism reinforces this position.

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Chapter I: Fuori dall'umano: Framing Calvino's Posthumanism

“...we can see how the slowness of human consciousness to overcome its anthropocentric parochialism can be erased in an instant by poetic invention.”¹
Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*

From behind the glass at the Jardin des Plantes, Mr. Palomar auspiciously gazes upon an immobile iguana, who in return observes him through the blinking of an ““evolved eye””² (84). In the reptile house, Palomar is meticulous in this exchanging of glances. He notices the myriad scales that cover the iguana's green skin, which sags far too much from its bones for his liking. He sees the subtle variations between the muscular front arms and the hind legs that wrap around the supporting branch. The white rings around its neck remind Palomar of hearing aids, which complement “a number of accessories and sundries, trimmings, and defensive garnishings”³ (85) that make up the iguana's body. Yet, despite fully cataloguing the reptile's physical appearance like a zoologist in the wild, Palomar still “feels there is something more, and he cannot say what it is”⁴ (84). Perhaps, he concludes, “another being is concealed inside that dragon semblance: an animal more similar to those we are at home with, a living presence less distant from us than it seems...”⁵ (84).

This fascination extends to every other encased biodome that makes up the reptile house of the Parisian zoo. Palomar notices that each resembles – and embodies – the

¹ “...vediamo come la lentezza della coscienza umana a uscire dal suo *parochialism* antropocentrico può essere annullata in un istante dall'invenzione poetica.” (26)

² “quest'occhio ‘evoluto’” (85)

³ “una quantità d'accessori e ammenicoli, rifiniture e guarnizioni difensive” (86)

⁴ “sente che c'è qualcosa in più e non sa dire cosa sia.” (85)

⁵ “un altro essere sia nascosto sotto quelle parvenze di drago: un animale più simile a quelli con cui abbiamo confidenza, una presenza vivente meno distante da noi di quanto sembra...” (85)

material makeup of their natural habitats. The vibrant emerald of the iguana contrasts with the sandy beige of the savanna monitor, whose dry scales drastically compare to the soaked skin of the neighboring turtles. In here, every reptile represents one configuration of life's infinite possible combinations. Palomar sees each cage "the center of a world," and each cage is "separated forever from the others," but together the cages create "the external manifestation of the secret of the nature of creation"⁶ (86). These observations, combined with the sticky atmosphere surrounding Palomar, inspire in him the pointed question: "are these the sensations of a man who *peers out beyond the human*?"⁷ (86) (emphasis mine).

To "peer out beyond the human" creates in Palomar great excitement and even more preoccupation. He is soon overwhelmed by the inability to escape the human gaze and the limits of his senses. When looking upon the pond of motionless crocodiles, his curiosity of their existence is met with further questioning and incomprehension.⁸ There is, of course, no answer to the questions Palomar proposes. It is impossible to know. To think of "time outside our experience is intolerable"⁹ (88) for Mr. Palomar, and he hurriedly leaves the reptile house. The confluence of life forms captured and displayed inside the building triggers in him an episode of convalescence reminiscent of Stendhal Syndrome¹⁰.

⁶ "ognuna di queste forme centro d'un mondo, separata per sempre dalle altre, come qui nella fila delle gabbie-vetrine dello zoo, e in questo numero finite di modi d'essere, ognuno identificato in una sua mostruosità, e necessità, e bellezza, consiste l'ordine, l'unico ordine riconoscibile al mondo." (87)

⁷ "sono queste le sensazioni di chi s'affaccia fuori dall'umano?" (87)

⁸ "In quale tempo sono immersi? In quello della specie, sottratto alla corsa delle ore che precipitano dalla nascita alla morte dell'individuo? O nel tempo delle ere geologiche che sposta i continenti e rassoda la crosta delle terre emerse? O nel lento raffreddarsi dei raggi del sole?" (88-89)

⁹ "Il pensiero d'un tempo fuori della nostra esperienza è insostenibile." (89)

¹⁰ Stendhal Syndrome is described as a physical and mental sensation that can overwhelm a viewer when in the presence of a beautiful piece of art.

Contemplating the animal Other is met with a paradoxical concession: Palomar understands that the reptiles are the product of a tiny variation in the genetic code, and thus argues for their affinity with human beings, but he knows they are just different enough that he may never understand them at all. So close, and yet so far.

The friction between human and nonhuman permeates many of the short vignettes that make up *Mr. Palomar* and Italo Calvino's fiction at large. As Sara Adler writes, "Although Calvino's work presents an extensive range of subject matter, there is to be found virtually everywhere a fundamental theme: a tension between the character and an environment which challenges him in some way" (53). In the chapter in question "The Order Squamata," the zoo becomes an arena of existential confrontation between species, and the tension is marked by the italicized question above. That is, the desire in Calvino to move "*fuori dall'umano.*" Despite his failed attempt in the reptile house, Palomar cannot help but to try again, over and over, forever entranced by the creatures that populate the periphery of his vision. The interaction with the iguana, however, invites special critical attention, and sets the stage for the trajectory of this dissertation.

In Carrie Rohman's reading of "The Order Squamata," we find an echo of the epigraph that introduced this chapter. She writes, "The most crucial species barrier (between human and animal) is also 'a product of the imagination.'... What Calvino's zoo story suggests is a more philosophically radical undermining of human privilege" (75). She sees in the character of Palomar a prototype, a literary model that could "provide an engagement with the animal that takes us beyond even the most recent theoretical emphasis on alterity in animal theory" (76). This is precisely one of my aims here: to thoroughly

examine a small sampling of Italo Calvino's fiction that deemphasizes human exceptionalism and instead advocates for an exploration into nonhuman ontology. As we will see, this definition of nonhuman extends beyond animals: it encompasses an array of biological matter (such as plants and seashells) to even nonbiological, abstract lifeforms (most notably the thought-creature of *Qfwfq*). In Calvino's experimental literature there is an underlying emphasis on, and fascination with, the world outside of the Anthropos. I seek to push the discourse toward this realm, past the limits of poststructuralism and postmodernism that have become synonymous with Calvino's literary output, and into what N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, and others have called 'the posthuman.'

Before doing so, I would like to situate my argument within the context of relevant Calvino studies that overlap with, or can help fortify, my research topic. To begin, I must first mention Sara Adler's book *Calvino: The Writer as Fablemaker* from 1979. Notably written before the publishing of *Mr. Palomar*, this study frames Calvino as a pivotal figure between two generations of writers: the Vittorini era, and the avant-garde, as put forth by Dante Della Terza in the book's preface (xv). It traces chronologically the development of his writing with careful consideration of the ways in which his style emulates that which is found in the traditional fable. Adler argues that "the key to a comprehensive perspective of Calvino lies in the fact that he portrays the world around him in the same way it is portrayed in the traditional fable" (121), that is, imbued with a certain aura of fantasy and magic. Furthermore, she posits that fables are pedagogical tools, and that they function to transmit moral values to their listeners (122-25). I agree, and I will argue that *Marcivaldo*, *Mr. Palomar*, and *Le cosmicomiche* can be read as posthuman fables with a deeply ethical

imperative. They are morally charged stories centered around lighthearted and loveable protagonists, but nonetheless warn against the disastrous anthropocentric behavior characteristic of the 20th century. Their structural resemblance to the traditional fable (short, episodic, and anachronistic) helps sustain Adler's interpretation, and thus reinforces my own adaptation of her framework.

Calvino himself was an advocate for short stories. In a letter to Silvio Micheli from November 1946, long before the production of the aforementioned literary works, Calvino described his preference for the short story format over a lengthy, drawn-out novel. He wrote:

I was hoping to put together a small book of short stories, all nice and neat and taut, but Pavese said no, that short stories don't sell, that I have to do a novel. At present I don't feel that great necessity to write a novel: I could write short stories for the rest of my life. Stories that are nice and spare, that you can finish off as soon as you start them, you write them and read them without drawing breath, rounded and perfect like so many eggs, stories that if you add or remove a single word the whole thing goes to pieces. A novel, on the other hand, always has some dead moments, bits where you are linking one section to another, characters that you don't feel are truly rounded.¹¹ (32-33)

His deep admiration for fables, too, would later be solidified with the compiling of *Le fiabe italiane* in 1956. Thus, to place his short stories in dialogue with the philosophical implications of critical posthumanism would, in my eyes, be in keeping with Calvino's goals for his own works. I argue that in Calvino's shorter works exist his most posthuman

¹¹ "Io speravo di fare un librettino di raccontini, tutto bello pulito stringato, ma Pavese ha detto no, I racconti non si vendono, bisogna chef ai il romanzo. Ora io la necessità di fare un romanzo non la sento: scriverei racconti per tutta la vita. Racconti belli stringi, che come li cominci così li porti a fondo, li scrivi e li leggi senza tirare il fiato, pieni e perfetti come tante uova, che se gli togli o gli aggiungi una parola tutto va in pezzi. Il romanzo invece ha sempre dei punti morti, dei punti per attaccare un pezzo all'altro, dei personaggi che non senti." (167).

ideas. The condensed format allows Calvino to make suggestions to readers without being forced to reconcile with the potential rebuttals. The short story format also allows for more experimentation: Calvino can offer a hypothetical scenario (such as imagining the consciousness of an encaged iguana), leave the story as an unanswered question to contemplate, and then move on to the next idea. As he would express later in a letter to François Wahl in 1960, “the only thing I would like to be able to teach is a way of *looking*, in other words a way of being in the world. In the end literature cannot teach anything else”¹² (210). One of the central themes of this dissertation is the act of critical observation, of *looking*, which is an element that sits at the heart of these three works.

I seek to differentiate my perspective from Sara Adler as well, both in scope and in praxis. While Adler’s book proves useful in interpreting Calvino as a “fablemaker,” her analysis tries to address the entirety of his productions up until 1979. The result is a diluted overview of the stories, a bird’s-eye glance of his oeuvre that hardly scratches the surface of the tales brought forward. By concentrating on only three of the works, I hope to put forth a sharper, more in-depth reading of them strictly through a posthumanist lens. I also seek to advocate for these stories as canonical posthuman texts outside of the realm of Calvino studies. I want to draw attention to Calvino and argue for his place in the burgeoning discipline of posthuman studies, animal studies, and ecocriticism. As we will see, all three of these subdisciplines intersect in Calvino’s writing. These three books have

¹² “L’única cosa che vorrei poter insegnare è un modo di *guardare*, cioè di essere in mezzo al mondo. In fondo la letteratura non può insegnare altro.” (669)

much to offer to the ongoing discussions in these fields, and critics outside of Italian Studies would greatly benefit from studying them.

Next, I would like to address the topic of postmodernism as it relates to both Calvino and the ideas at the heart of posthumanism. These two modes (aside from being what Braidotti has described as “shunned as the latest in a series of annoying ‘post’ fads” [2]) are two branches diverging from the same stem. Because Calvino has been considered a postmodernist (or even a late modernist) for so many decades, I would like to comb through the criticism and extract the points of analysis that can prove useful within the context of posthumanism. And although postmodernism has perhaps run its course in academia, the cousin schools listed above (with which posthumanism certainly intersects in more ways than this dissertation can highlight) push its legacy into new territory. Braidotti, in particular, argues that one of postmodernism’s greatest flaws was its anti-foundationalist tendencies, and posthumanism instead can offer new subjective, materialist, and vitalist perspectives (51). Like her, I consider it a refreshingly *constructive* discourse. A further breakdown of posthumanism and how I will be employing the term in this dissertation will follow later in the chapter.

Constance Markey’s book *Italo Calvino - A Journey Towards Postmodernism* (1999) argues that “in many ways Calvino and postmodernism came of age together” (86). Markey traces the periodical evolution of Calvino’s stories as they drift further into the parodical, fantastical, and surreal, in both their content and their structure. She highlights the author’s suspicion toward reality, a trademark of postmodernism, by describing that “reality has two sides: the events at the surface, which are tangible, and those beneath,

fantastical and clearly at odds with the everyday” (2). Furthermore, she states that postmodernism was never imposed upon Calvino, but rather that it was a force and curiosity that arose within him (88). Undoubtedly Calvino’s extended sojourn in Paris and his correspondence with the intelligentsia of the 1960’s influenced his creative output during this decade. To call Calvino a postmodernist, however, is problematic. It was a label that the author himself often resisted in letters and essays. Semantics aside, Markey’s reading of Calvino’s work is especially useful to me at two junctures: at the isolated, “society of one” (51) figure of Marcovaldo, and at the metaphysical figure of Qfwfq in *Le cosmicomiche* (94). Of the former, she writes:

Having rejected Conradian virility outright this time, the hero’s tale simply trails off vaguely, while he waits patiently as the existential Job for life to unfold around and without him. This apathetic resolution typifies the ultimate direction of Calvino’s modernist short stories, thus marking the author’s own recalcitrant withdrawal from the literature of social engagement, toward a more remote philosophical surveillance of the passing scene. (62)

Although I agree with Markey’s argument that there is a recurring theme of surveillance in Calvino’s short stories (that ties into the theme of *observance* mentioned prior), I disagree with the idea that it is accompanied by apathetic disengagement. I believe that Marcovaldo’s perspective is more than that of a modernist flaneur lost in an overwhelmingly industrial cityscape. Rather, it is a powerfully optimistic vision of a world he aspires to change for the better. His actions place emphasis on the natural, pre-industrial world that is being destroyed around him and invite readers to empathize with the creatures who suffer as a result (fellow humans included). This marks a key difference between a postmodernist and a posthumanist reading of Calvino’s work, and one that will be further

explored in the second chapter of this dissertation. I posit too that Calvino, the writer, also belongs to this initiative. He is not “recalcitrant” and withdrawn; he is instead extremely invested in shifting perspectives with his literary works. Despite venturing away from the overtly political subject matter of Calvino’s earliest writings (most notably *The Path to the Spider’s Nest*), *Marcovaldo* nonetheless carries the same spirit for change. Its political and social implications, especially within the context of posthumanist ethics, are just as prevalent, even if on the surface Calvino has appeared to take a step back from being explicitly ‘political.’ To contrast Markey’s reading of Calvino as “A Journey Towards Postmodernism,” I playfully suggest the epithet of “A Journey Towards Posthumanism” as a descriptor of my interpretation.

Joseph Francese’s work *Narrating Postmodern Time and Space* (1997) is another work of scholarship that I find valuable for this study. The book provides a more nuanced argument with regard to the postmodernist label, pushing instead a late-modernist perspective of the back half of Calvino’s work. Francese argues that Calvino’s search for an “ur-narrative” contrasts with the postmodern tendency to lean into multiplicity and relativism (61). He continues by stating that “observation and enumeration or catalogization of phenomena would permit a pattern, or recursive symmetry, to emerge from the chaos and disorder” (66) of reality. Placing continual emphasis on the visual image, and the significance of the observer in Calvino’s work, Francese shows that “the point of arrival is the visual image, which supplies humanity with its phenomenological link to materiality and makes the word possible” (69). Much like Markey, Francese therefore understands that Calvino is using literature as a means of cataloguing the world

through the use of the poetic image. His characters lean into observation as the tool that bridges the gap between cognition and the external world. Calvino's own enthusiasm for the "word-image" also emerges in his letters (312), as well as in *Six Memos*, as the primary gift that literature can offer. Further solidifying this idea, Francese states that "visual technologies grant the individual power to contemplate the world without being part of it" (86), a central theme that connects Calvino's work to critical posthumanism. Regardless of the debate on postmodernism that appears in Francese's study, his readings of Calvino can be reworked and recontextualized within the discourse on posthumanism, and I will further investigate this study in subsequent chapters. More specifically, I will return to Francese in the third chapter on my discussion on death in *Mr. Palomar*, and again in the fourth chapter when dissecting the function of Qfwfq in *Le cosmicomiche* as a mascot of posthuman life.

The final book on Calvino and postmodernism that I would like to consider (and that comes up in Francese's work as well) is JoAnn Cannon's *Postmodern Italian Fiction: The Crisis of Reason in Calvino, Eco, Sciascia, Malerba* from 1989. Significant to my approach is "the question of indeterminacy" (10), or rather the postmodern tendency to be distrustful about a uniform explanation for epiphenomena. As Cannon states, "Calvino started in reason, then moved slowly but surely toward doubt and perplexity as central elements in his work" (37), which is exemplified succinctly in the encounter between Palomar and the iguana above. However, Cannon's reading of Palomar (the character) frames him as an inept observer at a moment of crisis. In his desperate attempts to catalogue and categorize the world, she argues that he fails to find constructive solutions to satiate

his curiosity. All the vignettes climax in an “*enumeración caótica*” (103), and the work as a whole “reveals the implicit irony of the title by portraying Mr. Palomar [as] myopic, impatient, and generally ill-suited to his role” (100). This reading, like Markey’s of Marcovaldo, considers Palomar a product of late modernism akin to Italo Svevo’s *Zeno*. While extremely observant (and perhaps *because* of this quality), Palomar is confronted by the limits of reason and often must withdraw from the environment that challenges him (by scurrying out of the reptile house, for example). Cannon’s reading of Palomar thus “chronicles man’s inescapable urge to collect, classify, and order, and at the same time underscores the possible futility of that enterprise” (112). Such a conclusion plays into the defeatist impression that postmodernism has left on academia and literary criticism. Rather than consider *Mr. Palomar* a failed attempt at finding definitive meaning in the world, the posthumanist perspective looks at each vignette with excitement and vigor. It is not important whether Palomar himself succeeds in traversing the human-animal divide. The creative attempt to imagine the “being inside that dragon semblance” is exciting because it helps initiate the shift away from anthropocentrism and reframes the animal as a legitimate thinking and feeling subject. This insatiable curiosity about nonhuman life appears as a leitmotif across Calvino’s literary output. Palomar’s contemplation of the “animal other” makes way for discourse on conservation efforts, and indirectly advocates for animal rights. In this way, I argue, Calvino’s texts never ceased being political. They simply needed to be recontextualized, and the posthumanist perspective offers such a framework.

Calvino's relationship with postmodernism was tenuous at best, despite the second half of his literary production synchronizing thematically with many of its tenets. His marginal influence on the avant-gardist *Gruppo '63* combined with his antagonistic attitude toward the figure of the author (which emerges in layers of irony in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*) pushes arguments about his adoration or employment of postmodernism into unconvincing territory. What is important is simply to acknowledge the discourse and take from it the pieces that can be reconfigured elsewhere. The scholarship of Markey, Francese, and Cannon mentioned above can help cultivate such conversation, but I arrive at different conclusions by introducing new themes and modes of thinking about Calvino's literature.

Alongside the discussion of postmodernism in relation to Calvino's posthumanism arises the other area of thought most popularly associated with his work: that of scientific inquiry. In the essay "Literature and Philosophy" (quoted in *The Uses of Literature*), Calvino described the push-and-pull relationship that the titular subjects have endured since the beginning of writing. He called literature and philosophy "embodied adversaries"¹³ (39) who meet on the battleground of ethics. Philosophy, for Calvino, has a way of disrupting "natural thinking" (43) while literature is profound in its ability to give concrete shapes (in the form of characters) to abstractions and ideas (39). Science, however, has slowly made its way into the "twin bed" (45), adding a third element to the formula and disrupting the age-old swing of the pendulum. Calvino welcomed the intrusion

¹³ "Il rapporto tra filosofia e letteratura è una lotta" (150)

of science with open arms because of its desire to respond to similar lines of inquiry to those of a fiction writer. In the same essay, he described science's affinity with literature:

Science is faced with problems not too dissimilar from those of literature. It makes patterns of the world that are immediately called in question, it swings between the inductive and the deductive methods, and it must always be on its guard lest it mistake its own linguistic conventions for objective laws.¹⁴ (45)

To use the example that introduced this chapter, we see in Palomar this same calling into question of the patterns of the world. Palomar's meticulous analysis of the iguana's body recalls Darwin's observations of the Galapagos tortoises. His fascination with observation puts the scientific method into creative practice in the book and makes explicit Calvino's desire to bridge the gap between the disciplines. *Le cosmicomiche* take this same process to even further extremes and will be discussed in chapter 4.

The work of Kerstin Pilz helps break down Calvino's methodology in merging the aesthetics of science and mathematics with his literature. In her book *Mapping Complexity: Literature and Science in the Work of Italo Calvino* (2005), Pilz prefaces her analysis by arguing that Calvino's move toward the shorter narratives (and away from the long-form novel) was a break in the traditional structure and allowed the scientific voice to take form. Like the critics mentioned above, she saw the author caught between modernist and postmodernist thought, resulting in a "multiplicity of viewpoints and/or histories...which frequently blurs the line of demarcation between fact and fiction" (10). This opened the floodgates of experimentation for Calvino. Pilz highlights the tendency in these shorter

¹⁴ "La scienza si trova di fronte a problemi non dissimili da quelli della letteratura; costruisce modelli del mondo continuamente messi in crisi, alterna metodo induttivo e deduttivo, e deve sempre stare attenta e non scambiare per leggi obiettive le proprie convenzioni linguistiche." (154)

works (*T con zero* included) to stress the transmutable quality of everyday objects, stating “the world is being deciphered as a combinatorial construct made up of a finite set of elements infinitely combinable” (22). Using this idea as a starting point, Pilz introduces the concepts of complexity and chaos as they appear both in science and in literature, which then segues her into her closer readings of Calvino’s texts in subsequent chapters.

Important to a posthumanist vision of Calvino is the idea of re-humanizing the sciences, which, according to Pilz, went against the Enlightenment’s banning of anthropomorphism that resulted in nature becoming an inapproachable, soulless realm (29). Calvino, too, considered this among the goals for his work, stating that “literature has a great cosmogonic unity which the ancient Greeks enjoyed but which we are denied today by the fragmented state of our sciences” (quoted in Pilz, 41). To quote from another essay by Calvino titled “Two Interviews on Science and Literature” from *The Uses of Literature*, we see that the desire to inject a humanizing element into the coldness of scientific inquiry has been a staple of Italian literature since the Medieval era:

This is a deep-rooted vocation in Italian literature, handed on from Dante to Galileo: the notion of the literary work as a map of the world and of the knowable, of writing driven on by a thirst for knowledge that may by turns be theological, speculative, magical, encyclopedic, or may be concerned with natural philosophy or with transfiguring, visionary observation.¹⁵ (32)

That Calvino considers literature a potential tool for deciphering the knowable sustains his argument that authors and scientists are operating from the same point of departure. Pilz’s

¹⁵ “Questa è una vocazione profonda della letteratura italiana che passa da Dante a Galileo: l’opera letteraria come mappa del mondo e dello scibile, lo scrivere mosso da una spinta conoscitiva che è ora teologica ora speculativa ora stregonica ora enciclopedica ora di filosofia naturale ora di osservazione trasfigurante e visionaria.” (187)

work helps analyze a potential result of merging those disciplines. Posthumanism is equally invested in incorporating scientific methods into creative work to produce new knowledge. Like Pilz's exploration of the themes of mathematical complexity and chaos, I seek to utilize Calvino's obsession with observation as a way to recontextualize nonhuman life. I am also interested in reading Calvino's work from the perspective of the environmental sciences. Among the many goals of posthumanism is the urgency to combat the destructive effects of global industrialization, and Calvino was repeatedly critical of these same issues in his stories.

Chaos is a critical and recurrent theme in Calvino's literature, and it helps connect, in a transdisciplinary way, traditional humanities research with STEM topics and beyond. Chaos theory in particular emerges in Pilz's work, as well as in Albert Sbragia's article "Italo Calvino's Ordering of Chaos" (1993) and Guy Raffa's book essay "Io amo New York: Calvino's Creatively Chaotic City" (2004). The focal point of each of these pieces is *Le cosmicomiche*, and specifically the radical figure of Qfwfq, who embodies various systems of chaos and order with a uniquely human sense of play. As Raffa writes,

Whereas Qfwfq takes positions, consistent with basic assumptions of Newtonian science (e.g. reversible time, linear equations) and classical ideals of harmony and proportion, Vug's embrace of asymmetries and unforeseen variations puts her in dialogue with the scientific and cultural paradigm shift that has been intriguingly (if controversially) popularized as 'chaos theory' and more accurately described as the study of 'nonlinear dynamics' or complex, 'dissipative' systems.' (283)

Already from this quote you can sense the fuzzy area that Qfwfq occupies in regard to his physicality. This fluidity, which takes inspiration from advanced mathematics and quantum mechanics, can help segue us into posthuman discourse by virtue of Qfwfq's disembodied,

nearly alien ability to shift shapes. Thinking about Calvino's characters with chaos theory and dissipative systems in mind allows us to recontextualize the earthbound human experience and begin to move toward imagining a disembodied, posthuman existence. As I will argue in Chapter 4, I see Qfwfq as a product of the digital revolution and a literary equivalent of a computer bit.

Chaos theory is also a workhorse topic for N. Katherine Hayles' book-length study *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (1990). This book has helped inspire me to re-read Calvino through a transdisciplinary lens. Qfwfq appears in this study as an exemplary figure of the central idea. Hayles reads Qfwfq as a primordial being who existed before the universe was born. In an effort to describe time before language, Qfwfq is "constantly forced to qualify his descriptions," leaving him "radically at odds with an attempt to tell us what it was like" (23). In this chaotic interpretation of Calvino's character, Hayles puts forth an impossible chicken-and-the-egg scenario between the poetic figure and the significance of the word. She suggests that writing "is turbulence, or more precisely, brings turbulence into being" (24), and that language is an organizer of the chaotic material that makes up life. My reading of Qfwfq is decidedly different than Hayles: it takes a new disciplinary approach to the multidimensionality of the character and arrives at other conclusions. Namely, that Qfwfq offers a model not so much of an ancient past, but rather of a totally radical future in which the human spirit can ascend to nonbodily heights. Qfwfq's ability to transcend space and time projects a new possibility of being, one that prioritizes the imagination over the limits of the biological. Furthermore, because Qfwfq takes the form of familiar creatures on earth

and dabbles with communicating their consciousness (in a way that Palomar could only dream of while gazing at the iguana), we are gently pushed into empathy for our neighboring life forms. *Qfwfq* thus plays on two axes of the posthuman: it ponders life multiple millennia into the future as well as highlights the significance of nonhuman life in the immediate present. *Qfwfq* is the posthuman *par excellence*.

As I have attempted to briefly show, criticism of the three Calvino works in question have traditionally tended toward two main topics of analysis: on one side, there is a body of literary criticism that draws parallels between these experimental works and the development of postmodernism in the latter half of the 20th century, and on the other, there is a focus on the ways that scientific theory has shaped Calvino's compositions. Although these are certainly not the only two directions to take in analyzing Calvino's works, they are the most relevant in opening up a third potential pathway. This is what this dissertation seeks to accomplish, adding Calvino's voice to an important part of early 21st century academic discourse in the process. My goal up until this point has been to contextualize this author with the most relevant literature to set the stage for my move into a new conversation, one that departs from the ideas of chaos and postmodern skepticism that have been mentioned in the preceding section and heads toward an affirmative, optimistic, yet urgent space. This new topic of discourse is labelled posthumanism. I will now define the term as succinctly and effectively as possible, then show how I will apply the theory to Calvino's work in the third section of this introduction.

Part II: What is Posthumanism?

The earliest appearance of the term ‘posthumanism’ is widely attributed to literary critic Ihab Hassan. In his seminal article “Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?” (1977), Hassan posits that the human being, as both philosophical concept and biological life form, may be in the process of experiencing another total paradigm shift. The most frequently quoted passage from this piece describes this transformation as follows:

We need first to understand that the human form - including human desire and all its external representations - may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism. The figure of Vitruvian Man, arms and legs defining the measure of things, so marvelously drawn by Leonardo, has broken through its enclosing circle and square, and spread across the cosmos. ‘Stands he not thereby in the center of Immensities, in the conflux of Eternities?’ Carlyle ominously asked. Less than a century after, Pioneer 10 carries the human form and the human sign beyond the solar system into the intergalactic spaces; and Carl Sagan wryly speculates, in *The Cosmic Connection*, about the future of human intelligence, babbling its childhood to the universe. (843)

Notably, Hassan was writing here at the height of criticism on postmodernism and became a prominent voice in that field. I mention this simply to underscore how, despite the petulant ‘post’ prefix, the disciplines share many of the same theoretical origins. Hassan’s paralleling of the Vitruvian Man with developing space technologies and the work of Carl Sagan perfectly juxtaposes the tension between past and future concepts of the humanities. The scientific vision of the cosmos, now mapped and in the process of being explored, has destabilized for Hassan and his contemporaries the significance of ‘Man,’ the previous measure of all things. A couple of paragraphs later, he quotes Levi-Strauss’ *A World on*

the Wane and Foucault's *The Order of Things* as exemplary texts that describe the end of this era.

Hassan then concludes this section with a brief reflection on the potential for technological advancement to outperform, and thereby directly enhance, human consciousness. "Will artificial intelligences supersede the human brain, rectify it, or simply extend its powers? We do not know. But this we do know: artificial intelligences, from the calculator to the most transcendent computer, help to transform the image of man, the concept of the human" (846). As we can see, Hassan's conceptualization of the term he "helplessly" calls "posthuman" is a product of the convergence of deconstructuralist philosophy, rapid advancements in industrial mechanization, and the pseudo-brain-like behaviors of supercomputers. To speak of science fiction (which he then does) would be the next natural progression in this discourse. Often mentioned alongside Hassan's work is Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), as it takes the idea of melding human and machine into new territory, and further develops this definition of the posthuman. Haraway's essay and posthumanism share conceptual affinities in the ways they challenge the boundaries between human and animal, between the organic and the artificial, and between the living and the nonliving.

Hassan's article and Haraway's essay are foundational texts that inspired another work by N. Katherine Hayles: *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999). The quote from Hassan above appears on the first page of the book, opening the dialogue on hybridizing human consciousness with computer technology. Hayles puts forth the argument that "In the posthuman, there are no essential

differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (3). The trajectory of her argument pushes toward the possibility of removing the human body entirely, arguing that “because we are essentially information, we can do away with the bodies” (12), and again, “If flesh is data incarnate, why not go back to the source and leave the perils of physicality behind?” (37). Hayles’ perspective is deeply interested in such questioning patterns. The premise of her definition of posthumanism takes root in the information systems to which Hassan alluded twenty years prior, and projects them into the future, toward the very real potential of developing the science-fiction-esque cyborg of Haraway’s manifesto. This foundational text helped define the term ‘posthumanism’ in the earlier years of criticism. Calvino’s stories are not as prevalent in this text, aside from her references to *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. More important to this dissertation is instead the continued reciprocity of scientific and literary discourses in the criticism:

The scientific texts often reveal, as literature cannot, the foundational assumptions that gave theoretical scope and artifactual efficacy to a particular approach. The literary texts often reveal, as scientific work cannot, the complex cultural, social, and representational issues tied up with conceptual shifts and technological innovations. From my point of view, literature and science as an area of specialization is more than a subset of cultural studies or a minor activity in a literature department. It is a way of understanding ourselves as embodied creatures living within and through embodied worlds and embodied words. (24)

This perspective is closely aligned with Calvino’s desire as an author to merge science with literature. It also stresses the illusory materiality of the body and the embodiment of the word, suggesting once more that “perhaps another being is concealed inside that dragon semblance,” and that maybe we are not much different from it.

Moving closer toward a philosophical structuring of the term ‘posthumanism’ brings us to Rosi Braidotti’s influential book *The Posthuman* (2013). The thesis of her project, which she affectionately calls “affirmative” (54) in its urgency, offers a concise definition of posthumanism in 21st century academia that I would like to use to help round out the term. She writes,

Posthumanism is the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives. The starting point for me is the anti-humanist death of Wo/Man which marks the decline of some of the fundamental premises of the Enlightenment, namely the progress of mankind through a self-regulatory and teleological ordained use of reason and of secular scientific rationality allegedly aimed at the perfectibility of ‘Man’. The posthumanist perspective rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes further in exploring alternatives, without sinking into the rhetoric of the crisis of Man. It works instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject. (37)

Braidotti is operating within a gigantic philosophical and literary context in defining her argument here.¹⁶ Her bibliography draws upon postmodernist critics like Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, and Deleuze, and places them in conversation with newer, posthumanist critics like Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Cary Wolfe. This once again highlights the gradual progression of this new discipline as it moves away from its anti-foundationalist and speculative origins. Braidotti stresses that posthumanism is “pro-active” (54) and needs a new “conceptual creativity” (54) to accomplish its ambitious goals. I find the definition above useful because it seeks to avoid discussion about humanity’s inevitable decline, and instead looks toward “alternative ways of

¹⁶ It is critical to note that Braidotti has deep roots in feminist theory, which informs her approach to Posthumanism and opens the discourse to the question of gender. This dissertation acknowledges this potential pathway but does not explore the topic of gender in Posthumanism or in Calvino’s work.

conceptualizing the human subject.” I follow Braidotti in considering posthumanist research and discourse an optimistic endeavor.

Calvino’s iguana, which has become a sort of mascot of this introductory chapter, offers a quick example of how literature succeeds in providing the refreshing perspectives that Braidotti seeks in her book. The iguana, simply by existing ever so stoically in its cage, flips the switch in Palomar’s mind to re-center (and de-center) his relationship with the world beyond his kind. Calvino’s curiosity toward the creature is affectionate: Palomar offers himself up to moving *fuori dall’umano*, even if the experience is overwhelming. His encounter, as we will see in many of Calvino’s vignettes, is interlaced with an ethical outlook on the nonhuman animal. In this way, Palomar can be seen as an exemplary actor in what Braidotti calls “affirmative politics” (54), or, rather, the embodiment of an active desire for change.

Currently writing alongside Rosi Braidotti on posthumanism and the arts is the contemporary philosopher Francesca Ferrando. Her article “Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations” (2013) offers a brief insight into the various subdisciplines that have emerged under the umbrella term of posthumanism. As the title suggests, each “-ism” offers its own perspective, founded on differing moral codes, thematic focuses, and schools of thought. Antihumanism, for example, differs slightly from posthumanism in its deconstructuralist understanding of the death of man, as put forth by Foucault (32). Transhumanism studies the combining of emergent digital technologies with the human body, with a close eye on the simultaneous evolution of both subjects. Posthumanism, in this article, “can also be

seen as a post-exceptionalism,” whose centers are “mutable, nomadic, ephemeral” and whose perspectives are “pluralistic, multilayered, and as comprehensive and inclusive as possible” (30). Ferrando here sees posthumanism like Braidotti: a heavily relational discipline that seeks to dismantle hierarchies and provide multi-layered, nuanced, and situational modes of thinking. This also opens up the significance of ecocriticism to the posthuman perspective, as expressed by Ferrando at the end of her article:

In tune with antihumanism, posthumanism stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well. In such a framework, the human is not approached as an autonomous agent, but is located within an extensive system of relations. Humans are perceived as material nodes of becoming; such becomings operate as technologies of existence. The way humans inhabit this planet, what they eat, how they behave, what relations they entertain, creates the network of who and what they are: it is not a disembodied network, but (also) a material one, whose agency exceeds the political, social, and biological human realms, as new materialist thinkers sharply point out. (32)

Posthumanism recognizes the environment as the arena in which humans have extended their dominance over nonhuman life and stresses the fragility and futility of that domination. This is crucial in understanding posthumanism as an ecological imperative. It not only challenges the concept of the body, but it also understands the animal origins of the human being and reminds us of our ongoing material ties to the natural world. Despite the desire to inhabit digital spaces and transcend the limitations of our bodies, posthumanism reminds us that we are nonetheless bound to the planet and our survival is heavily dependent on the well-being of nonhuman life. To return to Hassan’s evocation of Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man as a metaphor of Humanism in the Enlightenment, I see posthumanism a spider web in its place, whose webbed branches form a perfect

geometrical figure behind a nonhuman creature. The spider web is a natural, decidedly non-humanmade piece of technology that nonetheless possesses high artistic, structural, and aesthetic value. Ferrando's emphasis on a network of relations is reinforced in this metaphor, and perhaps can serve as a recurrent mental image to help navigate the waters of the rest of this dissertation.

The final passage I would like to bring forth to sketch the boundaries of the multifaceted term of posthumanism comes from a chapter of Michael Mack's book *Contaminations: Beyond Dialectics in Modern Literature, Science and Film* (2016). In chapter seven, Mack connects the central themes of his book, contamination and biopolitical theory, to posthumanism, claiming that "both theoretical approaches are capable of contaminating what have traditionally been posited as opposites: human and animal, nature and society, mind and body, natural and human history" (192). Posthumanism specifically targets the presupposed opposing forces of human and animal, as well as human and machine (192). In regard to the latter, Mack points out that "the distinction between machines and humanity is spurious, because both entities have been mutually implicated with each other: humans after all invent and programme machines" (195). Mack reminds us that there can be no artificial intelligence, no cyborg, without the initiative to create them in the first place. They then must be programmed and maintained by humans. And as I write this dissertation on a laptop using digital software, I am ominously reminded that I am not simply directing inputs into the motherboard, but rather that I am participating in a feedback loop between system and thought, between bytes and brain. The experience is not unidirectional, but circular, and therefore I am not exempt from the contamination of

the sensors and programs that I manipulate. Posthumanism recognizes our growing dependency on digital spaces and computer technologies as signs of a shift in what it means to be human.

I would like to extend this idea onto another of Mack's dichotomies, that of the human and animal, as I perform a posthumanist analysis of Italo Calvino's stories. Much like the feedback loop between user and computer, I argue that there is a porous and reciprocal relationship between human and nonhuman life in these stories. There is no opposition in the posthumanist vision of this dialectic, but rather a horizontal and non-hierarchical levelling of the binary. Palomar's iguana, to use the old Nietzschean adage, stares back at him, too. The act of observation goes in both directions, and despite the incommunicability between man and reptile, there must also be a profound effect on the psyche of the creature inside the dragon semblance. Palomar's experience in the Parisian zoo is remarkably destabilizing because he is confronted, from every exhibit, not just with the *possibility* of a lived experience encased in the bodies of all the encaged animals, but of the overwhelming *proof* that these creatures are *alive*. His storming out of the reptile house is a moment of awakening to this fact and marks a massive foundational shift in his own human-being experience.

And with this shift in perspective comes a moral responsibility, reinforcing my vision of *Mr. Palomar* as carrying a great ethical drive. From *Hermit in Paris*, we can draw from two passages that sustain this argument.¹⁷ The first comes from an interview for a

¹⁷ This book is a posthumous compilation of Calvino's nonfiction journal entries and essays. It provides a charming insight into Calvino's various travel experiences, including his extended sojourn in Paris and voyage across America at the end of the 1950s. *Hermit in Paris* offers an intimate and personal insight into

questionnaire for *Il Caffè* from 1956. Calvino, in responding to an inquiry about his construction of character and theme, wrote:

The stories that I am interested in narrating are always stories about a search for human completeness, integration, to be achieved through trials that are both practical and moral at the same time, and that constitute something above and beyond all the alienation and division that is imposed on contemporary man. This is where any poetic and moral unity in my work should be sought. (10)

Already early in his career, Calvino was aiming for a literature that could serve a practical and moral function. This search for “human completeness” and “integration” is recurrent in the protagonists I seek to analyze in subsequent chapters, but the example above can also attest to this goal for the time being. Palomar’s trials in the Jardines des Plantes are an attempt to break through the alienation and division that define the zoo experience. Regardless of his successes, Palomar wants to push through the glass that separates him from the reptiles and integrate himself into *their* world (and *not* vice-versa). The result is a destabilization of his exceptionalism and a newfound appreciation for nonhuman existences.

The second example of Calvino’s ambition to create moral writings (and again I am arguing in favor of their consideration as ‘posthumanist fables’) comes from 22 years later in the survey “The Situation in 1978” taken from *Hermit in Paris*. To a question about the themes of harmony and retribution in *The Cloven Viscount*, Calvino responded:

This is how I arrived at the cosmos. But the cosmos does not exist, not even for science, it is only the horizon of a consciousness that goes beyond the individual, where all chauvinistic and particularistic ideas of humanity are overcome, and one can perhaps attain a non-anthropomorphic perspective. I have never indulged in

the mind of the author and lays bare many of his anxieties about his status as a writer and the shifting geopolitics of the time in which he wrote.

cosmic euphoria or contemplation in the ‘ascent’. More a sense of responsibility towards the universe. We are part of a chain that starts at a sub-atomic or pre-galactic level: giving our actions and thoughts the continuity with what came before us and what will come after is something I believe in. And I would want this to be something that could be gleaned from that collection of fragments that is my *oeuvre*. (187)

After two decades of writing, Calvino was still attracted to literature that could promote a “sense of responsibility towards the universe.” Here too we have an idea of his desire to move outside of the individual and attempt to achieve a non-anthropocentric perspective of the world. This, he claims, is true in all of his writings. As evidenced in this quote, a moral and ethical responsibility to other living and nonliving entities drives this pursuit. Calvino’s attitude toward the cosmos is not entrenched in bewilderment of its vastness or magnitude (as can often be the case in the narratives of pop-science). Instead, he sees the cosmos an imaginary realm, a profoundly nonhuman one, which connects the human to pre- and post-humanity. Calvino feels an ethical responsibility to “what will come after us,” which makes clear my understanding of him as a profoundly posthuman thinker.

Part III: Calvino and Posthumanism

So far, I have sought to highlight two thematic approaches to Calvino’s work (the discourse on postmodernism and the inclusion of science-based knowledge) as an entryway to understanding posthumanism, as well as offer a general sketch of how the term is understood at this moment in academia. The remainder of this chapter will bridge Calvino studies with posthumanism, touch upon the main criticism that discusses both topics, and provide a methodological framework for my own reading of Calvino’s work through this lens.

Serenella Iovino is the premiere scholar who has brought Calvino into posthumanism studies in the past decade, and her work has profoundly inspired this research project. I would like to call upon her scholarship to help solidify the structuring of this chapter and illustrate the ways that both fields can overlap to create new, exciting conversations and perspectives. The first work relevant to my reading is the article “Storie dell’altro mondo: Calvino post-umano” (2014). Here, Iovino offers another serviceable definition of posthumanism that emphasizes the reciprocity between the human and the nonhuman at the core of the discourse. She writes,

Per questi autori, il *post-human* è una visione della realtà per la quale l’umano e il non umano sono confluenti e co-emergenti, e si definiscono sulla base delle loro reciproche relazioni. Più precisamente, una visione *post-human* rifiuta la separazione essenzialistica tra l’umano e il non umano e, come le storie e i personaggi di Calvino, ne enfatizza gli intrecci, le alleanze, le configurazioni associative. (122)

Iovino argues that in Calvino’s stories, this alliance between “l’umano e il non umano” is indispensable: “In sintonia con l’idea calviniana di un mondo pieno di ‘alieni umani,’ il *post-human* implica perciò una realtà in cui l’altro è parte indispensabile del nostro essere e l’umano dipende radicalmente da tutte le sue nature” (122-123). It is not simply that we are living contemporaneously with other life forms (animals and microbes alike), but that our existence is intrinsically reliant on them for survival. Calvino’s stories help underscore how fundamentally intertwined we are with the Other, and furthermore that we are morally responsible for its maintenance and wellness. I think once again about the reptile house and Palomar’s infatuation with the being *inside* the dragon semblance, implying that the

differences in the external cannot overshadow the possibility of consciousness, and therefore the presence of knowledge, in the iguana.

Information on the surface, or rather the appearance of things, is at the center of *Mr. Palomar's* meditations. Iovino highlights how obsessed Palomar is with categories as a means to organize the world and establish some level of order, and yet how dividing the visible based on differences can paradoxically lead to examples of sameness. This reveals a “relational ontology” as a central theme of the novella, and Palomar embodies the intersection between the id and the Other: “come una membrana permeabile che connette (e insieme separa) l’io e il mondo, la mente di Palomar è infatti costantemente sospesa tra il ‘fuori’ e il ‘dentro’” (124). The blending between “l’io e il mondo” results in a collision between objectivity and subjectivity and shows how creative literature can distort our perception of reality. Thus, for Iovino, Palomar’s posthumanity is evident in the dissolution of boundaries between the character and his ever-expansive surroundings.

Building upon this reading, I would like to offer another perspective of Palomar that also emphasizes his “in-betweenness.” Where Iovino sees Palomar as a liminal character with permeable boundaries focused on categorizing the world, I see him as an exemplary posthuman figure that puts theory into practice. His obsession with observation leads to ethical conundrums that live at the heart of posthuman value systems, and his careful eye for the suffering of animals gives the work a subtle moral charge. I consider *Mr. Palomar* a posthuman political text that cares greatly about the here and now and calls into question (through irony) the human behavior that greatly affects the future survivability of human and nonhuman life. It achieves this primarily by going “beyond the

human,” via the consciousness of Palomar himself and through the subjects he so carefully observes. He is removed from his world, often acting as a simple passerby rather than an active participant, which allows Calvino to fully take stock of human societal tendencies in the late 20th century. In his observations lie poignant critiques about city life and the violence it enforces upon its inhabitants, humans included.

Serenella Iovino’s work on ecocriticism also serves as an inspiration and guiding light for my project. In the article “Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism,” Iovino describes how reading literature while focusing on animal subjectivity can open new pathways toward decentering the human experience. She refers to this interpretive mode as an “interspecies literature” in which “the representation of non-human animals or of the natural world is not hierarchically oriented, or not exclusively presented in an anthropocentric perspective” (44), leading to a complex system of interdependent languages and voices. Both *Mr. Palomar* and *Marcovaldo* are relevant texts to her reading of this topic. Iovino describes how these short tales of urban life provide “early examples of an eco-literary form of reaction to environmental degradation,” which “tells us how crucial the role of literature and culture can be for the moral conscience of a society” (49). Calvino’s stories, in this way, read once again like posthumanist fables that deliver a striking moral message about the dangers of human activity on the natural world. It is through the author’s framing of these animals (like the iguana) that he advocates for those without language and without a voice. These tales push the focus away from the human by means of sympathetic protagonists who offer themselves as surrogates for the readers. They gently and indirectly ask us to follow their lead in championing a system of ethics that

incorporate (rather than exploit) the nonhuman being into human societies that are rapidly progressing due to technological advancements whose long-term ramifications we still do not fully understand.

Scholars Deborah Amberson and Elena Past argue that creative literature is the perfect arena for such a perspective to take shape, and that “Animal Humanities” (despite the contradictory name) is the discipline fit for the task. In “Animal Humanities, or, on Reading and Writing the Nonhuman,” they elaborate on this idea:

Of course the humanities, as a disciplinary designation, traditionally reflected a critical or speculative attention to human culture as opposed to, on the one hand, the long-standing academic tradition of theological studies and, on the other, the broadly empirical methodologies of the so-called natural sciences. Defined by the OED, in its simplest terms, as ‘learning concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy,’ the humanities seem, at first glance, to allocate no space for the nonhuman. Yet, it is precisely here, in the space of literary language, cinematic image, artistic creation, ethical thinking, and the philosophical imagination, that the nonhuman animal, long defined as being without logos and without reason, might speak most clearly. (3)

From a radioactive rabbit to an encaged albino gorilla grappling with a tire, and even a bird whose whistle calls attention to the communication gap between species, Calvino’s stories are full of examples of nonhuman animals who creatively challenge human exceptionalism. The posthuman discourse welcomes this shift in perspective and gives space for its exploration.

Finally, I would like to call attention to Iovino’s book essay “Hybriditales: Posthumanizing Calvino” in the book *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (2014) as the last exemplary piece of scholarship on posthumanism that has shaped my reading of Calvino’s work. In this piece, Iovino argues

once more that when Calvino draws attention to the differences between living things, he is of course ironically stating under his breath that they are all connected and formally one. When describing the iguana, for example, Calvino is indirectly describing Palomar, and thus emphasizing the universality between all life forms. She returns here to the concept of boundaries and the fluidity between them, underlining the difficulty in precisely separating the ‘human’ ones from the others (217). I especially appreciate the way that Iovino describes bacteria and how it can problematize these stubborn definitions: “From the mitochondria all the way up, the human is constantly mixed with the nonhuman[...]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” (217). After putting forth the theme of hybridity, Iovino then concentrates on the mutability of the self in *Mr. Palomar* and *Le cosmicomiche*, and how, once again, literature is a perfect platform to challenge this concept.

Up until now, I have argued in favor of the posthuman perspective and made clear my own attraction to posthumanist scholarship. That is to say, politically, ethically, morally, and socially, I consider myself posthuman-leaning, and thus admit to these biases. However, despite my favorable view of these topics, animal otherness, ecocriticism, and posthumanism at large are discourses that draw considerable suspicion from critics and scholars. At the heart of the skepticism lies the age-old question: can we ever truly move beyond the human? Is such a displacement possible, or are we forever confined to our own anthropocentric perspective? The crux of the counterargument of many scholars who are

critical of posthumanism is that, inevitably, posthumanism doubles back onto itself, giving rise to Humanism all over again. Rosi Braidotti addresses this circular process in *The Posthuman* by returning to the image of a reimagined version of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man that decorates the cover of her book. She claims that from anti-humanism rhetoric, "the Vitruvian Man rises over and over again from his ashes, continues to uphold universal standards and to exercise a fatal attraction" (29). Cary Wolfe has also repeatedly tried to dismantle this tendency to reinvent the human and to unbind himself from humanist tactics in his own analyses, admitting that they "may still be quite humanist on an internal theoretical and methodological level" (2008: 7). This led to his development of a relational matrix that places all categories of humanism and posthumanism in conversation with one another as they manifest in praxis. These categories are 'humanist humanism,' 'humanist posthumanism,' 'posthumanist humanism,' and finally 'posthumanist posthumanism' (2010: 124-126). According to Wolfe, the first three fail to dismantle anthropocentrism, and only the last one moves toward a non-binary, distanced understanding of humanism in its true form. I reference these categories to show how tricky the term is to pinpoint and develop in the literature, and how it can create many paradoxical trappings for those who seek to clearly define its boundaries.

Rather than pursuing that rabbit, I would like to return to Calvino for some clarity and guidance on how to move forward with employing a posthumanist vision of his work. He, much like the aforementioned leading theorists in the field, was equally suspicious of his own attempts to escape his humanist perspective. Returning to Palomar in the Jardin

des Plantes, for example, we are given the counterargument to moving *fuori dall'umano* merely a paragraph after the appearance of those three key words:

But of the worlds from which man is excluded each case is only a tiny sample, torn from a natural continuum that might also never have existed, a few cubic meters of atmosphere that elaborate devices maintain at a certain degree of temperature and humidity. Thus every sample of this antediluvian bestiary is kept alive artificially, as if it were a hypothesis of the mind, a product of the imagination, a construction of language, a paradoxical line of reasoning meant to demonstrate that the only true world is our own.¹⁸ (87)

For Palomar, the reptile house paradoxically highlights the inescapability of an anthropocentric experience. Drawing attention to the crocodiles and iguanas only demonstrates “that the only true world is our own,” and that man’s relationship to the Other is only the product of thought experiments and linguistic mastery. The zoo is a technological triumph that can keep the reptiles alive artificially through climate control apparatuses and regulated feeding. It is fully “man-made” in the perfect sense of the term, and thus serves as a trophy of human exceptionalism. The ability to harness natural ecosystems and then reproduce them in a safe and secure looking gallery is a testament to this power. It seems that here, Calvino is realizing that the desire to move beyond the human is ultimately doomed.

He was equally suspicious of being bound to anthropomorphism while writing *Le cosmicomiche*. Once again from “Two Interviews on Science and Literature” in *The Uses*

¹⁸ “Ma dei mondi da cui l’uomo è escluso, ogni vetrina è un campione minimo, strappato da una continuità naturale che potrebbe anche non essere mai esistita, pochi metri cubi d’atmosfera che congegni elaborati mantengono a un certo grado di temperatura e d’umidità. Dunque ogni esemplare di questo bestiario antediluviano è tenuto in vita artificialmente, quasi fosse un’ipotesi della mente, un prodotto dell’immaginazione, una costruzione del linguaggio, un’argomentazione paradossale intesa a dimostrare che il solo mondo vero è il nostro...” (87-88)

of *Literature*, Calvino dismissed the reading of Qfwfq as a mathematical calculation rather than a character who could represent mankind:

The cell rather than man — is that really the case? Because my cosmicomic stories might easily be reproached for exactly the opposite; that is, for making cells talk as if they were people, for inventing human figures and language in the primeval void, and, in short, of playing the old game of anthropomorphism.¹⁹ (33)

In the next paragraph, Calvino openly admitted to “have fully accepted and vindicated this anthropomorphism as an absolutely basic literary procedure”²⁰ (33), one that linked his stories back to animism. In this embrace of transcribing humanlike qualities onto nonhuman objects, Calvino realized that there was no way he could “escape from what is human”²¹ (34). Does this disqualify all of posthumanism in one swift concession? Not quite: the conclusion to this passage is critical. Here Calvino instead draws attention to the relationships that bind the human to its nonhuman environment, and thus reinforce a posthumanist vision of the world: “...I have departed from anthropomorphism. Or, rather, from a certain kind of anthropomorphism, since these human presences defined only by a system of relationships, by a function, are the very ones that populate the world around us in our everyday lives, good or bad as this situation might appear to us”²² (34). In other

¹⁹ “La cellula più che l’uomo...Ma sarà proprio così? Perché qualcuno potrebbe rivolgere ai miei racconti cosmicomici un rimprovero esattamente opposto, cioè di far parlare cellule come fossero uomini, di fingere figure e linguaggi umani nel vuoto delle origini, cioè di giocare il vecchio gioco d’antropomorfismo.” (187-188)

²⁰ “Invece io questo antropomorfismo l’ho accettato e rivendicato in pieno come procedimento letterario fondamentale” (188)

²¹ “ma è successo che poi scrivendo mi è venuto da seguire la via opposta, con dei racconti che sono una specie di delirio dell’antropomorfismo, dell’impossibilità di pensare il mondo se non attraverso figure umane” (188)

²² “mi sono allontanato dall’antropomorfismo: o meglio, da un certo antropomorfismo, perché queste presenze umane definite solo da un sistema di relazioni, da una funzione, sono proprio quelle che popolano il mondo attorno a noi, nella nostra vita d’ogni giorno, buona o cattiva che possa apparirci questa situazione.” (188)

words, Calvino seemed very in tune with how useful this old game of anthropomorphism could be in decentering human exceptionalism and drawing attention to the periphery and the overlooked. By conceding to its pitfalls, Calvino opened up new pathways to explore this seemingly doomed pursuit.

In a lecture at Amherst College in 1976 titled “The Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature,” Calvino described a paradigm shift in the relationship between literature and politics during the 1960’s, one that was caused by “a revolution of the mind” (*The Uses of Literature*: 90). Key to this thesis was the idea of the dethroning of man as the subject of history, brought on by massive urban development, gigantic population growth, and the challenging of previously “stable anthropological categories” such as reason and myth, male and female, and even linguistically sound binaries like above and below and subject and object (91). Among the victims of this shift was “economic and ideological Eurocentrism,” as well as the governability of society and the economy (91), resulting in an antagonist that “must still be called man, but a man very different from what he was before”²³ (90). Clearly, Calvino had his finger on the pulse of the work of the deconstructionists and postmodernists that flourished during that decade. He saw in the political man’s place a new type of human, one that was much more skeptical of reality and the institutions that upheld it, and furthermore one that wanted literature to clarify or

²³ “Se dovessimo dare una definizione sintetica di questo processo, potremmo dire che l’idea di uomo come soggetto della storia è finita, e che l’antagonista che ha detronizzato l’uomo si deve ancora chiamare uomo, ma un uomo ben diverso da prima: il che significa il genere umano dei ‘grandi numeri’ in crescita esponenziale in tutto il pianeta, l’esplosione delle metropoli, l’ingovernabilità della società e dell’economia a qualsiasi sistema esse appartengano, la fine dell’eurocentrismo economico e ideologico, e la rivendicazione di tutti i diritti da parte degli esclusi, dei repressi, dei dimenticati, degli inarticolati.” (287)

challenge the political situation embodied by this transition. The role of the writer, however, could not simply be to amplify the new political values. Nor could it preserve the traditions that literature utilized in the past: Calvino did not want literature to act as “the depository of a given truth” (97). Instead, for Calvino, literature had a much different political function, which was to “give voice to whatever is without a voice” (98). The writer, because of his freedom and his individualism, has the ability to “explore areas no one has explored before, within himself or outside, and to make discoveries that sooner or later turn out to be vital areas of collective awareness”²⁴ (98). The product (a novel, a poem, a treatise, etc.) can therefore inspire political and social action. But the message must not be heavy-handed; Calvino preferred a subtle and indirect approach, a suggestion rather than a decree.

This desire to “give voice to whatever is without a voice” aligns perfectly with the philosophy of posthumanism, and certainly radiates as a central theme throughout the three works at the center of this dissertation. Here, in Calvino’s conception of literature as holding a discreet form of political sway, is where I place my argument. Marcovaldo, Palomar, and Qfwfq embody the skepticism that characterized the shift in intellectual thought beginning in the 1960’s and uphold a new set of moral values, ones that criticize

²⁴ “La letteratura è necessaria alla politica prima di tutto quando essa dà voce a ciò che è senza voce, quando dà un nome a ciò che non ha ancora un nome, e specialmente a ciò che il linguaggio politico esclude o cerca d’escludere. Intendo aspetti situazioni linguaggi tanto del mondo esteriore quanto nel mondo interiore; le tendenze represses negli individui e nella società. La letteratura è come un orecchio che può ascoltare al di là di quel linguaggio che la politica intende: è come un occhio che può vedere al di là della scala cromatica che la politica percepisce. Allo scrittore, proprio l’individualismo solitario del suo lavoro, può accadere d’esplorare zone che nessuno ha esplorato prima, dentro di sé o fuori; di fare scoperte che prima o poi risulteranno campi essenziali per la consapevolezza collettiva.” (292)

the progress of industrial society and the centrality of the human subject as the primary agents of change. In more ways than one, these protagonists succeed in exploring “areas that no one has explored before” and making “discoveries that sooner or later turn out to be vital areas of collective awareness.” Audiences of the late 1960’s certainly did not feel the same pressure enacted by climate change and late capitalism while skimming the pages of *Marcovaldo* that we do now. Palomar’s critical eye toward the mutilated cow in the butcher shop echo the calls of activists of veganism and animal rights that have only grown in strength and numbers as we spiral toward a fully mechanized farming industry. Qfwfq’s poetic imagining of the Big Bang has been rehashed by pop-scientists like Neil DeGrasse Tyson and Bill Nye and has entered into the collective imagination of a post-dogmatic, educated, and scientifically literate 21st century generation. In Calvino’s many moments of prophetic vision about the near future (in which we now are currently living), he has given examples of those unexplored avenues becoming “vital areas of collective awareness.” He has fulfilled his goal of unifying the trivium of science, literature, and philosophy to produce an ethically sound oeuvre that seeks to solve problems of the world long after his death.

In essence, Calvino achieved a posthuman vision of the world by embracing the paradox of anthropocentrism. He proved that the most effective way to move beyond the human was to go directly through it. Calvino understood the contradiction in this process and nonetheless continued to imagine, unleashing the latent potential of creative literature to offer its unique and powerful perspective for moving the needle of sociopolitical action. As evidence of Calvino feeling bound to the human being as the primary vector for change,

we can turn to the letter he wrote to Sebastiano Timpanaro on 7 July 1970. In this short letter, Calvino responds to Timpanaro's polemics about materialism by offering his own ideas regarding the end of the world. He admits that the key to our survival is the preservation of memory and the human experience, and that perhaps the repository that best captures our time spent on this planet is Earth itself. Rather than attempting intergalactic travel or launching a spacecraft to transport something akin to the Arecibo Message,²⁵ Calvino states that "we must play our part in providing clear information about what the human experience has been, and then the others can sort themselves out"²⁶ (384). He then concludes that "Man is simply the best chance we know of that matter has had of providing itself with information about itself"²⁷ (385). Once again, he admits here to leaning into anthropocentrism, since it paradoxically offers the best opportunity to move beyond it. Nonetheless, Calvino understood that eventually, toward the end of the lifetime of our species, man will be bound to transmitting this "capacity for knowledge/self-transformation/memorization which matter has acquired through him" either to "machines which will automatically reproduce themselves, or to other living species in this or other planets"²⁸ (385). Only through this transference will "the human story close positively,

²⁵ The Arecibo Message is a radio message that was aimed at a nearby star cluster in 1973. It contains various examples of humanity's technological breakthroughs, such as a display of our understanding of numbers, the various elemental compounds that make up human DNA, and a graphic of our Solar System. It is considered an expression of our progress more than a means to communicate with other potentially intelligent lifeforms.

²⁶ "...noi l'importante è che facciamo la nostra parte di elaborare un'informazione chiara di cosa è stata l'esperienza umana, e poi gli altri si arrangino." (1082)

²⁷ "L'uomo è solo la migliore occasione a noi nota che la materia ha avuto di dare a se stessa informazioni su se stessa." (1082)

²⁸ "Un successive gradino di questo processo sarà per l'uomo, alla fine del genere umano, trasmettere questa capacità di conoscenza-autotrasformazione-memorizzazione che la materia attraverso di lui ha

and history will emerge from its anthropocentric provincialism”²⁹ (385). What is profound in this interpretation of the human is precisely how it decenters the exceptionalism that has prevailed since the Enlightenment. Calvino sees humans simply one rung higher on the informational stepladder, and believes we are but a vector for matter to describe and understand itself. In Calvino’s interpretation, this power must eventually be transmitted to a successor, regardless of planetwide destruction of ecosystems or nuclear holocaust. The point is that humans are not eternally special: just temporarily unique in their ability to control the flow of knowledge.

Calvino then continues with perhaps the most explicitly posthuman passage of these letters. It is worth quoting in its entirety:

If the objective of man is the humanization of nature, the total mastery of the forces of matter etc., this objective will be reached only when it is understood that these are rhetorical formulae and that in reality it is the memory of matter that organizes itself through man. We must understand that man is a ‘space’ of matter where certain processes of specialization take place provisionally which will be later redistributed throughout all that exists, that is to say when we finally understand or re-understand that it is in the work of the universe that man must of necessity collaborate.³⁰ (385)

This paragraph touches upon both connotations of the ‘post’ prefix in posthumanism: that of ‘after’ the human, and that of ‘with less attention toward’ the human. Calvino sees

acquistato, trasmetterle vuoi a delle machine autoriproducentisi, vuoi a delle altre specie animali di questo o di altri pianeti.” (1082-1083)

²⁹ “Solo a quel punto l’episodio umano si chiuderà in attivo, e la storia uscirà dal suo provincialismo antropocentrico.” (1083)

³⁰ “Cioè se il fine dell’uomo è l’umanizzazione della natura, la conquista totale delle forze della materia ecc. questo fine si raggiungerà soltanto quando si sarà compreso che queste sono formule retoriche e che in realtà è la memoria della materia che organizza se stessa attraverso l’uomo, che l’uomo è un “luogo” della materia dove provvisoriamente avvengono certi processi di specializzazione che si ridistribuiranno poi in tutto ciò che esiste cioè quando si sarà compreso o ricompreso che è al lavoro dell’universo che l’uomo necessariamente collabora.” (1083)

humanity, for better or for worse, as a pawn in a much larger system of space and time, and as a small link in a long chain of the evolution of matter. This further opens up the dialogue of posthumanism in a constructive way, as it deemphasizes the attacks on humanism that anti-humanist rhetoric puts forward and stresses the significance of a world both after, and beyond, human life. Once again, we can sense here that Calvino was advocating for our involvement in this process, stating that we have an ethical responsibility to guarantee its success.

These are the morals living at the heart of Calvino's posthumanist fables. *Marcovaldo*, *Palomar*, and *Le cosmicomiche* are woven with messages of culpability and, in turn, liability. The characters at the centers of these episodic stories are bound to the dilemma of existence and the difficulties of being human in a violent, postindustrial world, one that prioritizes technological progress over the preservation of human and nonhuman life. Their *responses* to these challenges, however, are always energized with optimism and hope. Their actions correspond to Rosi Braidotti's call for a new wave of research in the Humanities to "find the inspirational courage to move beyond an exclusive concern for the human, be it humanistic or anthropocentric Man, and to embrace more planetary intellectual challenges" (2013: 152). Calvino's own literary goals reflect these same desires, as evidenced in his letters to his contemporaries and in his essays on literary criticism. His post-anthropocentric perspective is present in these works, and I am interested in connecting them to the ongoing discourse in posthumanism studies. Thematically, both Calvino and posthumanism are interested in limits, in cognition, in the relationship with the 'natural' world, in materials, in the interconnectedness of nonhuman

life with that of the human, in decentering, and in observation as a critical act. All of these topics then lead to ethical dilemmas that Calvino so cleverly illustrates and problematizes in his stories.

Rather than proceed chronologically through the three books in question, I have decided to organize the following chapters based on a parabolic, narrative-like arc, that traces the evolution from human to posthuman in Calvino's stories. The second chapter focuses on ecocriticism through a posthumanist perspective and primarily concerns *Marcovaldo* as the central text for analysis. I am interested here in Calvino's framing of an environmentally conscientious man living in a heavily industrial city and the tensions that this relationship cultivates. Marcovaldo, the character, is a man of action, who is consistent in his advocacy for animal rights and ecological preservation. He is critical of consumerism and economic progress and indirectly indicts them as primary agents of the destruction of the natural world. In my reading, Marcovaldo is the most 'human' of the three protagonists: he is grounded in his environment and participates in its struggles in each vignette. Marcovaldo has a sense of responsibility that propels him through his difficulties and renders him a posthumanist in practicum. His acute sensitivity of the world before human development creates the dramatic irony of the book. This is clear for example when Marcovaldo sees through the façade of urban life and envisions everything beneath its surface: "Marcovaldo's eyes peered around seeking the emergence of a different city, a city of bark and scales and clots and nerve-systems under the city of paint and tar and glass

and stucco”³¹ (98). Here we see Calvino’s stylistic mastery in full effect, contrasting earthy materials with the artificiality of those that make up the city buildings. Sustaining my posthumanist interpretation of this book is once again the work of Serenella Iovino, as well as the more creative-leaning scholarship of Karen Pinkus. Her 2016 work *Fuel* explores the difficult relationship between energy production and biological matter in search of options at our disposal for future sustainable resources. In doing so, Pinkus puts forth a philosophical dilemma about what is acceptable to destroy in order to sustain human life. These same issues overlap with Marcovaldo’s internal struggles, and thus raise ethical questions about the viability of humanity’s presence and place on the planet. My goal is to advocate for *Marcovaldo* as a warning text, a snapshot of the planetary crises we are currently enduring and underline the solutions that a posthumanist perspective can help provide. Marcovaldo’s optimism gives energy to these solutions and posits that a posthuman future is achievable and worth pursuing. Similarly, Pinkus reminds us in the introduction to her speculative dictionary that the doom-and-gloom tone that characterizes narratives surrounding climate change is doing us no good. She puts forth instead that “our survival depends on our ability to be nimble and offer, precisely, something others might call ‘hope’” (4-5). Marcovaldo is a champion of such an outlook.

The third chapter will explore Calvino’s transition away from a grounded, anthropocentric world and toward a much more philosophical and distinctly posthuman one. Palomar, both the character and the book, is the primary reference point for this

³¹ “Lo sguardo di Marcovaldo scrutava intorno cercando l’affiorare d’una città diversa, una città di cortecce e squame e grumi e nervature sotto la città di vernice e catrame e vetro e intonaco.” (115)

section. In my view, Palomar exists as a subjectivity suspended between reality and the world of ideas, between the living and the dead, and between the human and the posthuman Other. His sense of being in the world is detached from the people, and animals, and things, in his surroundings, and thus belongs in a liminal space that places all of these elements into dialogue with one another. Palomar is the great equalizer, an almost inhuman agent that meanders through his world and takes note of its peculiarities. Unlike Marcovaldo, he remains at a distance in order to carry out his observations. In these observations, we see he is fascinated by *every-thing*, and in this deep contemplation of the mundane, he elevates nonhuman life (and even the world of objects) to new respectable heights. Palomar's vision of the world is one of endless curiosity that inadvertently destabilizes anthropocentrism in favor of a philosophic/scientific exploration of the overlooked. He is a posthuman philosopher, decades before such a concept had been written into theory. In Palomar we also find the same ecological sensitivity that characterizes Marcovaldo: the nonhuman natural world mingles with the developed urban world and provides examples of mutual symbiosis in the stories. Palomar, in many ways, can be considered an eco-urbanist. He is a character that highlights the many ways in which the animal and the vegetal other has adapted to an unnatural human world. In his daily life we find examples of how we can be more ecologically mindful when building and inhabiting future cities.

Chapter four will detail the full departure into the posthuman via the disembodied, intangible, genderless, non/inhuman Other. My analysis concerns the character of Qfwfq in *Le cosmicomiche*. In my reading, Qfwfq represents the fully realized infinite potential of a posthuman subject, one who is not bound by a material body or the usual limitations

of nature, but rather exists in a totally virtual space, the sort of space shared by thought experiments and scientific inquiries (like those of the epigraphs that introduce each vignette). In these stories, Qfwfq's behavior is reminiscent of the posthuman cyborg, and he behaves like a combinatorial computer bit. *Le cosmicomiche* is Calvino's most explicitly posthuman project. It moves beyond the closing chapter of *Palomar* and into a realm that is vastly underexplored in contemporary Italian literature. Every subdiscipline of posthuman research makes an appearance in *Le cosmicomiche*: from death studies to feminist studies to the cyborg and beyond. The stories, in this reading, stand as a summa of Posthumanism. Here, Calvino attempts to achieve the maximum possible distance between himself (a thinking human subject) and the totality of space and time. Going beyond Marcovaldo's active participation in the city in which he lives and Palomar's distanced notetaking of his surroundings, Qfwfq enters an entirely new realm unbound by the rules of an anthropocentric experience. Qfwfq is the testament to creative literature's infinite potential to imagine life beyond the human, and an attempt for Calvino to explore nonhuman realities. Once again, anthropomorphism becomes a trusty tool in his literary toolbelt to achieve these new perspectives. After exploring prehuman and posthuman existences, I conclude my reading of *Le cosmicomiche* with an attention to the stories in the work that take place in a contemporary world. In these stories, the figure of the Moon emerges as a polluted body that warns again of the same ecological disasters present in *Marcovaldo*. I argue that despite their sci-fi and fantastical tones, *Le cosmicomiche* are still extremely concerned with the well-being of life on the planet in the current day.

My fifth and final chapter will zoom out from the close reading of Calvino's stories and imagine other ways that these themes can be put into practice. Here in this very brief chapter, I conclude my analysis of Calvino's work and seek to answer some of the bigger-picture questions about the convergence of posthumanism and Italian Studies. I hope to make a strong case for future projects that exceed the scope of this dissertation, whether in Calvino studies or in the Posthumanities.

Returning to the iguana in the Jardin des Plantes, now with a clearer framework of posthumanism in mind, we can see how Calvino's destabilization of the man-beast dichotomy can produce a constructive discourse of a predominantly one-sided relationship. Engaging with creative literature in this way transforms the text into a treatise in favor of the nonhuman animal's rights to life and freedom. The image of Palomar making eye contact with the dragon semblance is powerful and poignant given the correct scaffolding for analysis, and I argue that it can be effective enough to morph into an implicitly political text. To clarify this idea, I will return to Serenella Iovino's influential article and conclude this chapter on a hopeful note. From "Storie dell'altro mondo. Calvino post-umano," Iovino writes:

Eticamente, allora, il *post-human* è anche una forma più "umana" di umanesimo: un umanesimo non solo esteso *oltre* l'umano, ma anche maggiormente inclusivo nei confronti di umani diversi. In altre parole, il *post-human* è un umanesimo consapevole del fatto che una caratteristica fondante dell'umano—in sé e fuori di sé—è di essere anche esposto, disarmato, vulnerabile (136).

Like Iovino, I argue that the writings of Italo Calvino help move the traditionally Eurocentric, anthropocentric, hierarchical discourse into a peripheral space, one in which the health of the planet and all its nonhuman inhabitants are given a renewed priority and

significance in an increasingly industrialized and digital world. Furthermore, I explore in this dissertation the urban space as a hybrid locale in which the effects of consumerism are felt most drastically for human and nonhuman citizens. The presence of nature in these spaces blurs the boundaries between the organic and the mechanical and reminds us that we are still intrinsically and materially tied to the environments we inhabit. The ecological subtheme throughout these chapters argues that posthumanism can provide potential solutions to the developing crises characteristic of the rapid globalization of the 21st century. Finally, I seek to use Calvino's imaginative fables as examples of literature's unique power in exercising affirmative solutions. These stories provide frameworks for a more ethically constructive reading than the postmodern interpretations that are typically associated with Calvino's oeuvre. I intend to push toward this more optimistic and constructive space.

Chapter II: Marcovaldo, a Human-Vegetable Symbiosis

“What I write I have to justify, even to myself, with something that is not just individual — perhaps because I come from a secular and intransigently scientific family, whose image of civilization was a *human-vegetable symbiosis*.”
Italo Calvino, “The Situation in 1978”

At the time of *Marcovaldo*'s publication in 1963, the common lexicon did not yet include terms like *global warming* or *climate change*. Scientists studying weather patterns and natural disasters did not yet employ these terms either: they were using the more sterile, technical language of their respective disciplines and referring to the phenomena as *inadvertent climate modification*.³² Researchers certainly suspected (and accepted) that human activity was significantly modifying the composition of atmospheric particles, but they did not understand if this resulted in a heating or a cooling effect on the planet's air. It took until the late 1970's for research to declare with certainty that carbon dioxide's impact on the climate would be non-negligible, and then an entire decade for the term *climate change* to trickle down from the upper echelons of scientific discourse into the vocabulary of the average person. NASA scientist James E. Hansen was pivotal in popularizing this term after he testified to the U.S. Senate about climate change in June 1988.

³² See Erik Conway, “What's in a Name? Global Warming vs. Climate Change.” NASA, 2008, web.archive.org/web/20100809221926/www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/climate_by_any_other_name.html.

The term *Anthropocene* has had a similar lifespan and evolution. The concept originated in Paul J. Crutzen’s article “Geology of Mankind” published in *Nature* magazine in 2002. In its introductory passage, Crutzen states:

For the past three centuries, the effects of humans on the global environment have escalated. Because of these anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide, global climate may depart significantly from natural behaviour for many millennia to come. It seems appropriate to assign the term ‘Anthropocene’ to the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch supplementing the Holocene — the warm period of the past 10–12 millennia. The Anthropocene could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt's design of the steam engine in 1784. (23)

This paragraph directly links human activity to geological time, emphasizing that humanity’s extremely short presence on the planet has produced changes that will be seen in the rock record for millennia to come. For geologists accustomed to speaking in measurements of epochs of millions of years, this was a profound claim. Unlike the popularity of catchphrases like *climate change* and *global warming*, however, *Anthropocene* is still part of a specialized language and reserved for those in-the-know about its implications. It has yet to experience a trickle-down effect and enter public lexicon.³³

In the humanities, “Anthropocene” is rapidly becoming a critical supplemental term in discourses surrounding posthumanism and ecocriticism. For the purposes of this chapter, I would like to draw attention to Serenella Iovino’s employment of the term in her article

³³ Just as I make this claim, celebrated bestselling American author John Green published in May 2021 a collection of essays titled *The Anthropocene Reviewed: Essays on a Human-Centered Planet*, which may help greatly popularize the term in the public sphere.

“Italo Calvino and the Landscapes of the Anthropocene: A Narrative Stratigraphy” found in *Italy and the Environmental Humanities* (2018). Here, Iovino connects geology to sociology, and shows how environmental conditions greatly affect social wellness: “Enormous cities, novel materials, future technofossils – and around them pollution, waste, hierarchical accumulation of wealth, social discrimination...It is impossible to ignore the fact that the Anthropocene’s strata are also social strata” (69). Iovino then points out that “some propose to name it Capitalocene, stressing the fact that its map is shaped by the same dynamics of violence and unequal protection that mold the maps of environmental justice” (69). What is critical here is the intertwining of landscape and discourse. Iovino’s insights call attention to the material conditions of the Anthropocene as molded by capitalism, as well as the philosophical ramifications of the ‘anthro-’ prefix. She underscores the main point: humans are both the agents of environmental change and victims of it.

Iovino’s article then analyzes how these themes are apparent in Italo Calvino’s work, concentrating specifically on the shorter novellas “Smog,” “The Argentine Ant,” and “A Plunge Into Real Estate,” and concluding with a brief reading of the longer form works *Marcivaldo* and *Invisible Cities*. Using the metaphor of strata (both physical and social), Iovino’s reading of *Marcivaldo* concentrates specifically on the material conditions that the most impoverished of citizens of Italy had to face during the years of the economic boom. These people’s struggles are mirrored in the characters of Marcivaldo and his family in the book. Using Iovino’s analysis as a point of departure, I would like to analyze *Marcivaldo* as a work whose relevance was ahead of its time, one that effectively captures the same anxieties and struggles that permeate contemporary city life now. The book’s

prescience continues to come into focus the more climate change becomes part of common speak and awareness about environmental issues becomes part of the collective consciousness. I am also interested in exploring the ethics of *Marcovaldo* as they relate to the human-made environmental crisis. As Monica Seger writes, in these texts “Calvino explicitly makes *caring* an ecologically geared undertaking” (26).³⁴ Marcovaldo, the character, is so charming to his readers because of his brazen empathy and commitment to action. He is heroic, especially in comparison to the apathetic inaction that paralyzes us now in the face of the same sociological and climate-based dilemmas found in the stories.

Marcovaldo, I argue, is also a blueprint for posthuman thought. It is Calvino’s first real step into exploring the world of the nonhuman other. Although the reader is grounded in the perspective of a very human protagonist, Calvino invites us to observe and participate in the lives of the nonhuman animals who live in the periphery of human activity. The arena of convergence between these two worlds, a nameless industrial city of northern Italy, becomes the antagonist of the tales. In these interactions between man-animal-city we can pinpoint Calvino’s ethical stance, which resonates with the posthuman messages of Braidotti and others from the introductory chapter. However, unlike the posthumanist philosophers, Calvino is implicit in his message: he never spells out his rallying cry word-for-word. Quoting Seger once again, “by depicting scenarios, rather than simply espousing unilateral beliefs, Calvino puts the reader in the powerful position of imagining, of contemplating different social and environmental realities” (26). In these scenarios, we

³⁴ Monica Seger, *Landscapes in Between: Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, University of Toronto Press, 2015

notice how slippery the boundaries and definitions of “nature” can be for city-dwellers of the 20th century and beyond. I argue that Calvino, in *Marcovaldo*, recognized the impossibility of a full return to an untouched natural world, and thus made an effort to reimagine and redefine “nature” as it will be conceived in a postindustrial society. The urban space thus becomes the *de facto* locale where this convergence takes shape.

Calvino’s letter to Cesare Cases from 20 December 1958 helps reinforce this claim. Here, Calvino responds to Cases’ analysis of “The Argentine Ant” and “Smog,” two short stories complementary to *Marcovaldo* (and in many ways appendages to the book). Calvino states that “The Argentine Ant” “is a realistic story, then, and one which proposes a definition of nature and man’s attitude toward it” (171).³⁵ He then declares that the story should not be taken as an allegory, but rather as a realistic depiction of this man-nature dichotomy:

Now you formulate things too drastically by making everything an allegory of capitalism. This relationship is better formulated as follows: I am interested above all in how we consider nature, which is much more important than any capitalism or other passing epiphenomena; but to our eyes nature presents herself as a mirror of history, in it we find the same cruel, monstrous reality that we find in the times in which we live (capitalism, imperialism, Nazism, the Cold War).³⁶ (171)

Marcovaldo is an exploration of the same relationship that Calvino describes above. It is meant to be a lighthearted painting of the “cruel, monstrous reality” that is living in a city,

³⁵ “Racconto realistico dunque, e che propone una definizione della *natura* e dell’atteggiamento dell’uomo di fronte ad essa.” (575)

³⁶ “Ora tu formuli le cose in modo troppo drastico facendo d’ogni cosa un’allegoria del capitalismo. Il rapporto si formula meglio così: a me interessa soprattutto il modo di considerare la natura, che è molto più importante di tutti i capitalismi e altri transeunti epifenomeni; ma la natura ai nostri occhi si presenta come specchio della storia, in essa troviamo la stessa realtà crudele mostruoso che è del tempo in cui viviamo (capitalista, imperialista, nazista, algeblico ecc.)” (575)

and the elements of the natural world that appear throughout the book's episodes highlight how punishing that environment can be on its citizens. As I will argue in this chapter, Marcovaldo becomes a surrogate for nature, an advocate for the voiceless beings living in his periphery, and thus must suffer alongside them when combatting the inhuman indifference of the urban center.

My analysis can be broken down into three main foci: Marcovaldo (the human protagonist), the city center (the nameless and faceless nonliving antagonist), and the nonhuman animals populating the periphery (for whom Marcovaldo advocates and provides the posthuman perspective). In nearly every episode, we find a push and pull tug-of-war between these three agents, who all have their own conflicting desires. In this incessant struggle for narrative control, Calvino cleverly destabilizes the anthropocentric perspective and expands its focal point to include nonhuman life, an element characteristic of fables and fairy tales. The result is a collection of vignettes that set the stage for a posthumanist reading and show how the material conditions of our survival are so heavily intertwined with the ongoing environmental crisis. Calvino understood this urgency while Italy was celebrating its postwar economic boom and remained apprehensive of all of its promises. This feeling of distrust toward industrial development radiates throughout *Marcovaldo* and becomes the tonal epicenter of the stories. As previously stated, however, Calvino's message is optimistic, and his vision for a better future passes through the eyes of the human and nonhuman citizens that coinhabit the cement-laden cityscape of his stories.

Marcivaldo also offers to readers what Iovino calls a “culture of co-presence.”³⁷ She defines this idea as a non-anthropocentric humanism that puts “humans and nature together in the same emancipatory discourse” (32). As we will see, the human-nonhuman hierarchy becomes more horizontal in the stories, emphasizing their interdependency. Calvino repeatedly suggests what we now understand to be true: our survival is contingent on the preservation of nonhuman life. We can be emancipated from our environmental crises only by distancing ourselves from self-indulgent behavior and taking care of nonhuman ecosystems. This is key to understanding *Marcivaldo* as an ecocritical text, one that exemplifies literature’s imaginative power to reshape collective behavior and redirect consumer practices toward sustainable solutions.

Part I: The Industrial City as Non-Place

In the opening note of *Marcivaldo*, Calvino writes “These stories take place in an industrial city of northern Italy,” providing the only geographical clue about *Marcivaldo*’s whereabouts in the entire work. It can be deduced that the city’s real-life counterpart is probably Torino, given Calvino’s personal relationship to Torino and its significance as an industrial epicenter during Italy’s economic boom. However, since Calvino never explicitly names this northern industrial city, we are invited to embrace its anonymity, and thus its plurality, while we read through the tales. The city could be any postwar industrial city. In its anonymity lies its power and its warning. When analyzing the city’s

³⁷ Serenella Iovino, “Eco-criticism and Non-anthropocentric humanism: Reflections on local natures and global responsibilities” p. 32

namelessness, JoAnn Cannon comments that “the impression of anonymity thus has created a dual function: not only does it lend universality to the fable, but it also signals the fact that all modern cities are essentially alike” (1978:84). She also states that these stories “present an image of the city that is perhaps even more valid today than it was twenty years ago” (83), which resounds even more strongly in 2020 than it did in 1978 when Cannon wrote her article. That Calvino’s anonymous industrial urban city has become an omnipresent entity of postindustrial civilization is harrowing. As we will see, the economic promises that come with the territory of this city are often made at the expense of nonhuman life in its surroundings. If the setting for Calvino’s stories is still recognizable today, it means that we have done little to respond to the author’s subtle warning for change.

In the anonymity of the city also lies its non-placeness, a term borrowed from the French philosopher Marc Augé’s seminal work *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* from 1992. A single definition of *non-place* is nonexistent: rather, in the literature, it is a supplementary term that helps define the fluid boundaries (and lack thereof) of the developed world. One of Augé’s definitions of a non-place that is immediately useful here is “a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (76-77). Marcovaldo’s city does not have a useful set of relational references (landmarks or street names, for example) that could help define it and separate it from other industrial cities, which adds to its atemporality. It feels so familiar because of its lack of identifying features, even to contemporary audiences. This city is removed from time and, as we will see, has become the arena for consumption and globalization. Unlike the historical signposts and hyper-moments put on display in the cities of neorealist film

and neorealist literature (Rome being perhaps the most iconic example), Calvino's city in *Marcovaldo* has blended into supermodernity. Given that it can still be recognized as familiar half a century after its publication is a testament to its non-placeness.

Augé also points to the omnipresence of the textual object as a defining characteristic of a non-place. Traffic signs along the motorway that communicate their “instructions for use” (96) are an example of the textual overlay of supermodernity. Labels on fruit in the supermarket and the flashing messages of the credit card kiosk also mark the infiltration of language into the city space. The result, in Augé's reading, is an increasing individualization of the subject from its community. Supermodernity produces isolated experiences within a mass of anonymous agents. It allows the user to float between the burden of individual responsibilities and the freedom of blending into the crowd. Marcovaldo, in many ways, embodies this dichotomy. His individuality comes into focus when he separates from the participatory game of city life. He often oscillates between falling in line to obey the rhythmic flow of the urban center and stepping out of cadence to reveal a peculiarity that does not belong to the city (a growing patch of mushrooms at the tram station, for example). The result is what Augé argues is an exposé of the self: “The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude” (103). Glancing at the text from a macro level reveals that Marcovaldo is the lone figure of the stories. Despite his having relationships with family, coworkers, and other citizens, the takeaway experience for the reader is that of a singular perspective. Marcovaldo, in this way, can be read as an example of the individual's experience in hypermodernity. His role as citizen-worker-consumer puts on display the behavioral

patterns that produced and perpetuate the environmental crises of the Anthropocene and thus reinforce the need for the posthuman perspective. Calvino channels this perspective through Marcovaldo, who seems to be the only citizen cognizant of the increasing development of the urban space. Marcovaldo's sensitivity for nature separates him from the other citizens in his periphery and intensifies his isolation. He finds solace and comfort in nonhuman life: his desire to sleep outside under the stars or preserve an office plant from the factory where he works points to the fractured relationship that the hypermodern city instills upon him.

The episode from "Summer: Moon and Gnac" is the first vignette that can help clarify this idea. This chapter begins with a beautiful description of the Milky Way galaxy as it appears at twenty second intervals in the night sky. It is only visible when the gigantic, looming neon sign that advertises "Spaak Cognac" that sits on Marcovaldo's neighbors' rooftop is flashed off. During this interval, Marcovaldo and his family count the stars and fall enamored with the light of the waning moon. They each develop a romanticized relationship with the natural world beyond commerce and industry, which is abruptly interrupted by the relighting of the GNAC sign. When the sign is illuminated, each individual of the family is overtaken by melancholy and anxiety, none more so than Marcovaldo, who is desperately trying to teach his children about astronomy when the sign is off. Notably, his children are confused by the GNAC sign: they do not see it as a separate entity, but instead as another celestial body that fits into the astronomy lesson. "Is cognac

waning, Papà?” asks one of Marcovaldo’s children, “The C’s hump is to the east!”³⁸ (73). After explaining that the sign was placed there by the advertising company, and that it is *not* part of the Milky Way, one of Marcovaldo’s children responds by asking which company put the moon in the sky. The children’s inability to differentiate “terrestrial commerce” (73) from “Marcovaldo’s stars” (73) marks the dramatic irony of the episode and points toward Calvino’s moral. To resolve the issue, one of Marcovaldo’s children fires a pebble at the GNAC sign, deactivating it indefinitely and giving the family a most opportune look at space above them:

The darkness that now reigned at roof-level made a kind of obscure barrier that shut out the world below...And raising your eyes, no longer blinded, you saw the perspective of space unfold, the constellations expanded in depth, the firmament turning in every direction, a sphere that contains everything and is contained by no boundary...³⁹ (74)

The scene does not end here. Soon, a new advertising company moves in and cuts a deal with Marcovaldo to purchase roof space in order to compete with the Spaak company, which was close to going out of business. The vignette concludes with the installment of the “Tomahawk Cognac” neon sign, with “letters of fire...twice as high and broad as before”⁴⁰ (76) that block out the night sky entirely. When Marcovaldo’s son Fiordagli

³⁸ Papà, allora il cognac è calante? La ci ha la gobba a levante!” (97)

³⁹ Il buio che ora regnava all’altezza dei tetti faceva come una barriera oscura che escludeva laggiù il mondo...E ad alzare lo sguardo non più abbarbagliato, s’apriva la prospettiva degli spazi, le costellazioni si dilatavano in profondità, il firmamento ruotava per ogni dove, sfera che contiene tutto e non la contiene nessun limite...” (98)

⁴⁰ “E quella notte, a caratteri di fuoco, caratteri alti e spessi il doppio di prima, si leggeva COGNAC TOMAWAK, e non c’erano più luna né firmamento né cielo né notte, soltanto COGNAC TOMAWAK, COGNAC TOMAWAK, COGNAC TOMAWAK che s’accendeva e si spegneva ogni due secondi.” (100)

attempts to communicate with his neighbors through his bedroom window, he is blocked by the “enormous, impenetrable *W*”⁴¹ (76) of the new sign.

The textual object in this story is the physical manifestation of supermodernity. It becomes a literal barrier between citizen and nature and creates a disorienting effect on the mind of its observers. Each of Marcovaldo’s family members develops in the “landscape-text” (Augé 103) an individual experience with the GNAC sign. When it is illuminated, this relationship is determined and blockaded by the textual object. When it is turned off, the family can re-establish interpersonal relationships with one another, which are guided by Marcovaldo’s astronomy lessons and their own longing to bear witness to the stars above them. When Marcovaldo’s youngest children inquire about the waning letter ‘C’ in the sign’s text, they confuse the boundaries between the human-made and the natural. Calvino’s moral becomes clear here in this tension: he is concerned with the omnipresence of commercial advertising and suggests that future generations may lose sight (literally) of the world outside the sphere of consumption. Their ability to understand the world may become fully informed by their relationships to commerce. In the supermodern and postindustrial city, the point of reference has been inverted: it begins at the product and is subsequently relayed to the external world. This theme, as we will see, resonates throughout the episodes of *Marcovaldo*.

In this story, the textual object becomes a barrier blockading a symbiotic relationship between human and environment. It is important to note, too, that in “Summer:

⁴¹ “Il più colpito di tutti fu Fiordaligi; l’abbaino della ragazza lunare era sparito dietro a un’enorme, impenetrabile vu doppia.” (100)

Moon and Gnac” the Spaak Cognac sign flashes on and off at intervals of twenty seconds. Augé notes that non-places are defined by their “element of spectacle” (103) (in this case, a glowing neon sign), which lends to the “urgency of the present moment” (104). These places are measured not in distance but “in units of time” (104). He points to various locales of travel as examples here (such as highways and long-distance flights), but the cognac sign can also double as a place in which “everything proceeds as if space has been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours” (104). The Spaak Cognac sign, when darkened, provides a momentary vision of the night sky. This vision is clouded when the sign flashes back on, effectively removing the sky and making it impossible for Marcovaldo to continue with his astronomy lessons. This perpetual game of oscillating between city-nature, between supermodern-idyllic, and between hypermoment-eternal marks the poignancy of this vignette. When Spaak goes out of business and Tomahawk moves in, an upgraded sign is installed, which flashes on and off at *two* second intervals. The more streamlined technology thereby condenses the hypermoment into a much smaller window, and we are left to assume that Marcovaldo’s astronomy lessons become all but impossible with this development. What happens when the sign ceases to blink and stays endlessly illuminated? Such a reality has now become a signature of contemporary cities like New York and Tokyo. Light pollution is a staple, rather than an exception, of hypermodern urban life, and Calvino marked the moment of transition in *Marcovaldo* when the last bit of the sky was still visible to the common citizen.

The result is an even sharper focus on the hypermoment and a drifting away from the natural, the intangible, and the inconsumable. Here we also find the same mark of

capitalism that Braidotti analyzes in chapter two of *The Posthuman*, and which we will see reappear throughout *Marcivaldo*. She writes: “the global economy is post-anthropocentric in that it ultimately unifies all species under the imperative of the market and its excess threatens the sustainability of our planet as a whole” (63). Although Calvino does not frame the cognac sign as an existential planetary threat in this vignette, it is clear that his romantic sensibilities see the presence of advertising with giant neon signs as an encroachment on the human spirit. Marcovaldo’s passion for astronomy is, in effect, a passion for the nonhuman. Nothing about the stars in the night sky can provide for the bettering of the family’s material conditions, but Marcovaldo nonetheless considers his lessons a worthwhile endeavor. When the representative of Tomahawk moves in to strike a deal with Marcovaldo, we sense that he is cornered and left without a choice: he must succumb to the demands of global capital and sacrifice his passion for astronomy in order to provide for his family. The vignette ends with the only object of the sky left visible by this transition, which is that giant impenetrable ‘W’ of the billboard.

The takeaway from ‘Moon and GNAC’ is a characterization of the urban artifact as an invasive object distinct from nature. Calvino in *Marcivaldo* repeatedly frames the city as an unnatural “thing,” and Marcovaldo himself is burdened with reconciling the arenas in which the manufactured and the natural overlap and compete for space. In “The forest on the superhighway,” for example, we learn that Marcovaldo’s son Michelino was “born and raised in the city,” and “had never seen a forest, not even at a distance”⁴² (37). Only

⁴² “Nato e cresciuto in città, non aveva mai visto un bosco neanche di lontano.” (69)

by leaving the “area where the houses of the city ended and the street turned into a highway”⁴³ (37) would the children find the “forest.” However, the forest they found was not one of trees, but of billboards with extremely slender trunks and crowns with flat shapes and strange colors. The children mistake the manmade, commercial and textual object (the billboards) for the natural objects they have replaced (the trees), just as they did with the “C” of the Cognac sign and the waning moon behind it. Calvino suggests that something has been lost in the growing divide between nature and culture. That the children cannot distinguish the forest from the artificial trees that populate it touches upon the core worries that drive posthuman philosophy. In the posthuman ethos, it is well understood that a full return to nature is not only impossible but unwise. Calvino’s text echoes this sentiment while also alluding to the alienating effect that consumer capital has enforced on those who are forced to live under its command. The children’s innocence underscores this idea as the melancholic message of these episodes. In the time since the production of Calvino’s text, it has become easier and easier to imagine a world in which the only visions of forests are delivered through television and computer screens. What may have seemed ludicrous in the midcentury may become commonplace a hundred years later. Rapid advancements in digital global mapping and virtual reality are laying the foundation for an environment in which we can endlessly travel the world without leaving our homes. It is possible that Marcovaldo’s children, unexposed to life outside the manmade façade of the city, are already the norm in the internet age.

⁴³ “Così giunsero dove finivano le case della città e la strada diventava un’autostrada.” (69)

So far, I have argued that the city in *Marcovaldo* provides a snapshot of the transition between sacred, untouched nature and totalizing industrial development. Here, Calvino is not painting the picture of a fully mechanized, sci-fi dystopian landscape, nor is he reminiscing on the long-lost idyllic. Rather, he is interested in showcasing the examples of the city's hybridity and providing an apprehensive perspective about its evolution. To quote Seger once again, "there are no easy choices, no clear distinctions when it comes to finding a balance between nature and culture in the author's work. They are already too entwined" (40). The vignette of Marcovaldo wandering the city all alone in "The city all to himself" sustains this idea, but it also suggests that the city *is* the antagonist of the human spirit. This is central to my argument. In this vignette, Seger's position that "readers are left pondering how to strike a proper balance" between the nature-culture divide is contested. I posit instead that we are swayed toward the nonhuman world alongside Marcovaldo as a locus of solace and refuge. This once again enhances the posthuman aura of the book.

The episode "The city all to himself" takes place at the beginning of August – when it is customary in Italy to flee the city in search of beaches and enjoy Ferragosto – and Marcovaldo is left all by himself to wander the empty streets. As he takes to freely jaywalking about the city, he starts noticing "a whole different world: streets like the floors of valleys, or dry river-beds, houses like blocks of steep mountains, or the walls of a cliff"⁴⁴

⁴⁴ "Ma capì che il piacere non era tanto il fare queste cose insolite, quanto il vedere tutto in un altro modo: le vie come fondo valli, o letti di fiumi in secca, le case come blocchi di montagne scoscese, o pareti di scogliera." (115)

(98). This passage, reminiscent of Iovino's strata and the defining features of the Anthropocene, gives an x-ray gaze of the nonhuman world that is dormant when the city is most active during the rest of the year. While walking, Marcovaldo discovers the "emergence of a different city, a city of bark and scales and clots and nerve-systems under the city of paint and tar and glass and stucco"⁴⁵ (98). Soon, everything begins to transform before Marcovaldo's eyes. The materials used to construct the city recall the living world from which they were extracted. In one paragraph Calvino reminds the readers that even the most artificial of substances have their origin in the organic. When the human beings flee the city, Marcovaldo is able to join the ranks of the inhabitants who, without the presence of the citizens, have "now gained the upper hand" (98). Among the nonhuman citizens who emerge are a "file of ants," a "bewildered scarab beetle," and even "a fine layer of mold"⁴⁶(98).

Marcovaldo is defined by his longing for something lost, that primordial world covered up by all the concrete that surrounds him. Important to my reading, Marcovaldo looks toward the animals for guidance and inspiration as he wanders the empty streets. The more he connects to the nonhuman citizens, to life in its other forms, the more he feels connected to his place of residence. This is the ontological underpinning of these stories,

⁴⁵ Lo sguardo di Marcovaldo scrutava intorno cercando l'affiorare d'una città diversa, una città di cortecce e squame e grumi e nervature sotto la città di vernice e catrame e vetro e intonaco." (115)

⁴⁶ "La passeggiata di Marcovaldo seguiva per un poco l'itinerario d'una fila di formiche, poi si lasciava sviare dal volo d'uno scarabeo smarrito, poi indugiava accompagnando il sinuoso incedere d'un lombrico. Non erano solo gli animali a invadere il campo: Marcovaldo scopriva che alle edicole dei giornali, sul lato nord, si forma un sottile strato di muffa, che gli alberelli in vaso davanti ai ristoranti si sforzano di spingere le loro foglie fuori dalla cornice d'ombra del marciapiede." (116)

and it is why a middle-ground argument does not fully pan out. Calvino does, in fact, wants to show readers what is at stake in the industrial city, and through these small instances in which he focuses on the nonhuman is where we feel his sway. Apart from being poetic, his characterization of the vacant city as a living entity, one with “nerve-systems” and overflowing with bugs, is exemplary of the posthuman perspective of the book. When the human citizens finally return from Ferragosto at the end of the story and Marcovaldo is bombarded by filming equipment and machinery, this vibrant nonhuman world is pushed into the background once again.

An image of a potentially ideal city emerges in the vignette “The city lost in the snow.” When a storm moves in and covers the entire urban center in snow, Marcovaldo “felt free as he had never felt before”⁴⁷ (16). In this city without street signs and road indicators (read: without the omnipresence of the textual object and the behavioral rules they enforce), Marcovaldo is able to “walk in the middle of the street, to trample on flowerbeds, to cross outside the prescribed lines, to proceed in a zig-zag”⁴⁸ (16). The snowstorm offers to Marcovaldo a brief escape from the oppression that industrialization has foisted upon him and reconnect with the natural elements that have taken over in its place. In the snow Marcovaldo saw a “friend, an element that erased the cage of walls which imprisoned

⁴⁷ “si senti libero come non s’era mai sentito.” (54)

⁴⁸ “Marcovaldo, anche se affondava fino a mezza gamba ad ogni passo e si sentiva infiltrare la neve nelle calze, era diventato padrone di camminare in mezzo alla strada, di calpestare le aiuole, d’attraversare fuori delle linee prescritte, di avanzare a zig-zag.” (54)

his life”⁴⁹ (17). In the city covered in snow, “progress” is paused in the face of the totalizing power of nature. This fantasy to escape the rules of society is short-lived, though: upon arriving at work, Marcovaldo must shovel snow to clear a pathway so that business may carry on as usual. The story ends with a touch of the fantastic characteristic of fables. After being buried in the snow and mistaken for a snowman, Marcovaldo lets loose a giant sneeze that carries all of the snow into the sky, forming a blizzard. In an instant, all of the snow is gone, and in its place stand “the familiar courtyard, the gray walls, the boxes from the warehouse, the things of every day, sharp and hostile”⁵⁰ (20).

A snowstorm powerful enough to completely cease production and halt the ongoings of urban life marks a playful moment to return to a natural world for Marcovaldo. However, it also reminds readers of the 21st century of the scary realities that climate change guarantees. Images of cities overtaken by natural weather processes certainly make for entertaining blockbuster apocalyptic films, or in this case short stories, but they are becoming less lighthearted settings of fantasy and more harrowing glimpses at future realities. A similar snowstorm recently swept through Texas and completely destroyed the infrastructure of major cities across the state, leading to catastrophic damage at the personal and structural level. Marcovaldo’s city, when enveloped and erased by the snow, allows him total freedom to reconstruct a city “for himself alone,” and “pile up mountains high as

⁴⁹ Marcovaldo sentiva la neve come amica, come un elemento che annullava la gabbia di muri in cui era imprigionata la sua vita.” (55)

⁵⁰ “Quando Marcovaldo riaperse gli occhi dal suo tramortimento, il cortile era completamente sgombro, senza neppure un fiocco di neve. E agli occhi di Marcovaldo si ripresentò il cortile di sempre, i grigi muri, le casse del magazzino, le cose di tutti i giorni spigolose e ostili.” (57)

houses, which no one would be able to tell from real houses”⁵¹ (18). It has a momentary levelling effect on the scaffolding of work that industry has imposed on its citizens and the social strata to which they belong. Marcovaldo’s shovel gives him the power to disregard these human constructs and refocus the gaze on “spires and trees” (18). Like in the previous two short stories, Marcovaldo seeks to reconnect with the elements of the natural world that are being destroyed by urban development and disregarded as useless in the face of production. The snow offers him a temporary respite from the non-place in which he lives, but like the GNAC sign and the billboard advertising Stappa tablets, this escape is only a fantasy.

Part II: Animal Citizens

Marcovaldo is not the only citizen whom Calvino favors in these stories. Coinhabiting *Marcovaldo’s* industrial city is a diverse group of animals who act as the posthuman harbingers of Calvino’s ecological messages. In “The city all to himself,” Marcovaldo catches a glimpse of nonhuman life only when the noisiest and most rambunctious of society disappear for vacation (the human beings). Other vignettes in this book provide a much more explicit image of the creatures with whom Marcovaldo shares space in the city. In these creatures, we see how intertwined human life is with its nonhuman counterpart, and how co-dependent these relationships ultimately are. We also see that the city is not exclusively beneficial to human citizens: Calvino takes note of how

⁵¹ “Rifare la città, ammucciare montagne alte come case, che nessuno avrebbe potuto distinguere dalle case vere.” (55)

animals can survive in an environment that is fully artificial to them. Conversely, we also witness how human development threatens these same animals' existence. Calvino in these tensions showed audiences of the late 1960's what has only become clearer since: our survival is equally dependent on the well-being of these creatures that we so flippantly annihilate. Critical thinking through the posthuman lens provides a similar conclusion. In an offhand comment in the essay "The Situation in 1978", found in *Hermit in Paris*, Calvino addresses his hybrid worldview that manifests in *Marcovaldo*. He wrote, "What I write I have to justify, even to myself, with something that is not just individual — perhaps because I come from a secular and intransigently scientific family, whose image of civilization was a *human-vegetable symbiosis*" (185) (emphasis mine). More than simply an offhand comment, I read this as the thesis of *Marcovaldo*'s posthumanism. All forms of nonhuman life, animals and plants included, make up Marcovaldo's vision of a functional and healthy city.

Consider the story "The wasp treatment." In this vignette, Marcovaldo reads about a cure for rheumatism in the newspaper that involves injecting patients with wasp venom. Excited to test the theory, Marcovaldo captures a wasp from a nearby nest and forces it to sting an old man who is suffering from arthritis. The venom is effective and this man, Signor Rizieri, feels cured. After the procedure proves successful, Marcovaldo seizes the new business opportunity and begins to capture wasps in droves, sending his children out into the city to help gather enough wasps to supply venom to new patients. In a playful

image, Calvino frames Marcovaldo as “an experienced physician”⁵² (23) who applies injection after injection to the elderly citizens in the makeshift office of his house. The story concludes with Marcovaldo’s wasps swarming in the form of “something between a cloud and a human being”⁵³ (24), stinging Marcovaldo and his patients enough for them to require legitimate hospitalization, and Marcovaldo’s newfound business presumably comes to an end. This episode is representative of the intertwining of human-nonhuman relationships and emphasizes their lopsided dependencies. It indirectly draws attention to the human body’s fragility and how health woes can be mitigated by harvesting elixirs already found in nature.

Another question emerges here, too, which is that of dominance. Marcovaldo’s ability to harness wasp venom, despite possessing zero expertise in either medicine or keeping wasps, alludes to the gray areas of posthuman ethics with respect to control. As Felice Cimatti describes in her article “Posthumanism and Animality,” “so far nobody has really put into question the very philosophical question of why humans should have the power to rule over [nonhuman animals]” (118-119). Our ability to do so underscores the reality that “*Homo sapiens* plays a double role in the great game of life; on the one hand, he is a player like any other player, on the other he is the referee of the very game” (119). A posthuman perspective is quick to advocate for nonhuman agency and right to life, yet

⁵² “Applicava il barattolo sulle terga dei pazienti come fosse una siringa, tirava via il coperchio di carta, e quando la vespa aveva punto, sfregava col cotone imbevuto d’alcool, con la mano disinvolta d’un medico provetto.” (59)

⁵³ “I passanti non avevano il tempo di capire cos’era quell’apparizione tra la nuvola e l’essere umano che saettava per le vie con un boato misto a un ronzio.” (60)

it glosses over the key point that Cimatti puts forward here. Marcovaldo's harvesting of the wasps shows this discrepancy in power, one that Cimatti argues is inevitable: "Actually, *Homo sapiens* is a cumbersome species, incapable of placing itself in a non-dominant position in respect to nature. The whole question of the Anthropocene lies in such an impossibility" (120). Despite the wasps' ability to resist (forming a humanlike swarm and attacking Marcovaldo's patients), they are overpowered by human ingenuity and succumb to human control. This leads us back to *caring*, an ethical undertaking, and the role of posthumanism as an act of responsibility. If there is a lesson to be found in "The wasp treatment," it is that exploitation of the nonhuman subject does not bear long-lasting fruit. Marcovaldo is punished for his mishandling of the wasps and the mishandling of his patients. He must suffer the consequences of removing the wasps from their natural habitat and reaping their venom as a resource. In this instance, Calvino shows readers the results of mishandling that fragile power that human beings possess over the subordinate, nonhuman entities with whom he lives. The "human-vegetable symbiosis" here is unbalanced.

Calvino also invites us to consider that our cities do not belong *only* to us. We saw glimmers of thriving nonhuman life in "The city all to himself," but stories like "The garden of stubborn cats" from *Marcovaldo* shift the focus entirely to the city as a locale of the nonhuman urbanist. The story opens with its thesis statement: "The city of cats and the city of men exist one inside the other, but they are not the same city"⁵⁴ (101). Calvino then

⁵⁴ "La città dei gatti e la città degli uomini stanno Luna dentro l'altra, ma non sono la medesima città." (118)

writes that cats used to roam freely about the city, but because of the endless vertical expansion of skyscrapers and the omnipresence of “cat-crushing automobiles” (101), they have since become “prisoners of an uninhabitable city”⁵⁵ (101), pointing once more to the reality that industry, commerce, and development are oppressors of life in its nonhuman forms. After lunch one day, Marcovaldo begins following a friendly tabby through the neighborhood and suddenly becomes involved with the city of cats. At this juncture, we see another example of Calvino playing with the non-anthropocentric perspective: “Marcovaldo had started looking at places as if through the round eyes of a cat”⁵⁶ (102), thereby reframing the city to match this new vantage point. In this shift, Marcovaldo sees his own world anew: “from the cat city there opened unsuspected peep-holes onto the city of men”⁵⁷ (103). This moment marks a clever bend into the nonhuman world, a defining characteristic of fairy tales, but one that reframes the industrial city as a threatening environment for the cats. Henceforth, Marcovaldo is attempting to understand the world as it presents itself to the nonhuman being.

The remainder of this story opens the conversation on what can now be termed “Animal Humanities” (Past / Amberson: 2016). As Marcovaldo follows the tabby through a high-class restaurant and ventures “into more and more cattish places”⁵⁸ (105), he

⁵⁵ “Ma già ormai da più generazioni i felini domestici sono prigionieri di una città inabitabile: le vie ininterrottamente sono corse dal traffico mortale delle macchine schiacciagatti...” (118)

⁵⁶ “Marcovaldo aveva preso a guardare i posti come attraverso i tondi occhi d’un miccio...” (119)

⁵⁷ “In compenso, dalla città dei gatti s’aprivano spiragli insospettati sulla città degli uomini” (119)

⁵⁸ “Marcovaldo, inoltrandosi in luoghi sempre più gatteschi, arrampicandosi su tettoie, scavalcando ringhiere, riusciva sempre a cogliere con lo sguardo.” (121)

assumes the form and perspective of a cat. Everything is new to him. At the end of his journey, he discovers the last unkempt garden in the industrial city where all the cats congregate. We soon learn that this sanctuary of nature belongs to a stubborn Marchesa who refuses to sell her plot of land to housing developments. As such, neighboring women sustain the cats with food waste and help preserve the last bit of refuge available to the animals. When the Marchesa dies, the gigantic and heavy machinery that characterized the opening passages of the tale (and by extension the rest of the menacing, industrial city) moves into the garden to establish a building site. Calvino leaves the reader with the image of the cats, birds, and frogs resisting the builders, fighting back against the expansion of the city to preserve the last safe space for them to live freely.

Once more, we sense in this story Calvino's concern for human expansion and the ways in which it threatens nonhuman life. I argue again that Calvino implicitly connects the dots between nature and culture (to employ Seger's terms), but he still prefers the former over the latter. Like the wasps, the cats resist, but they are ultimately no match for the machine. It is easy to conclude that the cats, birds, and frogs lost the war against the mechanized terraformers, and likely will not survive once the new apartment complex is set up in place of the garden. Marcovaldo, the human advocate, repeatedly champions the side of the nonhuman, echoing the central tenet of the posthuman perspective that caring is a political and ecological undertaking. Marcovaldo is in the ultimate position of power. He cannot unpin himself from the top of the hierarchy. Even when he morphs into the feline

form by walking on all fours and pursuing a runaway trout, he still leaves the scene a human being. This is the posthuman dilemma. Nonetheless, in imagining and entertaining the city as perceived by cats, the attention of the reader is directed toward the livelihood of the animal Other. We morph alongside Marcovaldo, and in doing so, we must face the consequences of overdevelopment from the perspective of those who suffer them the most. If *caring* is the first step toward ecologically-oriented action, then it is important to see that Calvino writes all of these stories charged with empathy for the nonhuman being. He gives us a blueprint to posthuman thought, but not the instruction manual.

“The poisonous rabbit” is another vignette that showcases human domination and control over the animal subject, this time in the context of scientific advancements and the ways in which we test new products on animal subjects. The story begins with Marcovaldo departing from a hospital after a momentary sickness overcomes him. While waiting for his hospital bill, Marcovaldo stumbles upon an encaged rabbit who seems unhappy about being trapped there. Marcovaldo, the surrogate for sympathy toward nonhuman life, decides to release the rabbit from its cage and feed him a nearby carrot. When the doctor reapproaches Marcovaldo with his bill, Marcovaldo hurriedly wraps the rabbit in his hospital gown and hides it from view. After sneaking the rabbit out of the hospital and returning to his family, Marcovaldo proudly presents the animal with plans of fattening it up for a large Christmas feast. The plan goes awry when officials tell Marcovaldo that the rabbit has been “injected with the germs of a terrible disease and it can spread it through

the whole city⁵⁹” (54-55). Halfway through the story, Calvino shifts the narrative focus away from Marcovaldo and onto the rabbit. When the hospital begins pursuing the rabbit to ensure the disease does not spread through the city, we are omnisciently placed into the thoughts and feelings of the animal in question. This subtle shift in narrative focus marks the posthuman ethos of the book: we are invited to empathize with this creature who, “for the first time in its life,” was experiencing “the greatest gift it had known” which was “the ability to have a few moments free of fear”⁶⁰ (57). Our empathetic connection to its well-being is fortified when, after being tempted with food from neighbors who are seeking to trap it, the rabbit is reminded of the painful experiments involving syringes and scalpels at the hospital. The story ends with a macabre insight into the rabbit’s psyche: “in its contempt of humans, at what seemed, to the rabbit, somehow a base ingratitude, it decided to end it all”⁶¹ (59), leading to an attempt at suicide. The attempt is unsuccessful, however, and the rabbit is “foiled even in that extreme act of animal dignity”⁶² (59).

“The poisonous rabbit” like “The wasp treatment” challenges the ways in which we mistreat or, as mentioned, show a “base ingratitude” for nonhuman life. Calvino highlights in these stories how industrial societies exploit animal subjects for human gain with a total

⁵⁹ “Perché gli abbiamo iniettato i germi di una malattia terribile e può spargerla per tutta la città.” (82)

⁶⁰ “Era una bestia nata prigioniera: il suo desiderio di libertà non aveva larghi orizzonti. Non conosceva altro bene della vita se non il poter stare un po’ senza paura. Ecco ora poteva muoversi, senza nulla intorno che gli facesse paura, forse come mai prima in vita sua.” (84)

⁶¹ “Comprese: era una dichiarazione di guerra; ormai ogni rapporto con gli uomini era rotto. E in dispregio a loro, a questa che in qualche modo sentiva come una sorda ingratitudine, decise di farla finita con la vita.” (86)

⁶² “Impedito fin in quell’estremo gesto di dignità animale.” (86)

disregard for the wellness of the animals being exploited. I find it also significant that both Marcovaldo and the rabbit have a point of origin in the hospital. We are reminded as well in this story that we are biologically linked to the nonhuman animal; the fact that the rabbit could be useful in any tests that benefit the human being is indicative of this affinity. Marcovaldo's successful stay at the hospital that opens the story (in which Marcovaldo becomes "the healed man" that "recognizes [the world] as natural and usual" [51]) and his return to the hospital in the concluding lines (in order to be tested for potential vaccines against the disease that the rabbit carries) remind us of the fragility of the health of our human bodies. We need animals to survive and thrive. The suffering the animals must endure in order to sustain human life marks the paradoxical position that humans occupy with respect to the food chain and life beyond our species. Like Cimatti stated, we are masters of the game and ultimately decide the rules. The downfall of this power is that we must be reminded of when and how we overstep these boundaries, and furthermore that we must be the ones to remind ourselves. Calvino, through the poisonous rabbit, emphasizes this ethical responsibility and warns of a reality in which it is neglected. The industrialization of animals marks this unbalanced reality and, as we have seen in the past year of a spreading global pandemic with zoonotic origins, has dire consequences for our own health and wellness. The human-nonhuman link is more than one of exploitation: it is a symbiotic system that cannot be mismanaged or mistreated.

My final example of this argument as it appears in *Marcovaldo* can be found in the story "The rain and the leaves" from the Autumn series. In this episode, Marcovaldo feels affection for a plant that is trapped in a corner of an office building. Calvino is keen on

describing its current state, one of suffering, as a result of being enveloped by other unnatural objects in the office: “But still it was a plant, and as such it suffered, because staying there, between the curtain and the umbrella-stand, it lacked light, air, and dew”⁶³ (77). Marcovaldo takes pity on the plant and sets the whimsical plot into motion, which involves first providing the plant proper hydration and ventilation. He takes the initiative to carry the plant outside and thus disrupts the office workers’ preferred order of things. In doing so, however, Marcovaldo experiences his own sort of metamorphosis: “When he examined the gathering clouds in the sky, his gaze now was no longer that of a city-dweller, wondering whether or not he should wear his raincoat, but that of a farmer expecting from day to day the end of a drought”⁶⁴ (78). Soon thereafter, with the onset of a brilliant rainstorm, Marcovaldo’s plant begins to bloom to extraordinary proportions. In a swift, posthuman move, Calvino then describes the convergence of both creatures, underscoring what the plant has lost from being inside so long and providing Marcovaldo with plantlike sensitivity to the ongoing storm:

They stayed there in the courtyard, man and plant, facing each other, the man almost feeling plant-sensations under the rain, the plant — no longer accustomed to the open air and to the phenomena of nature — amazed, much like a man who finds himself suddenly drenched from head to foot, his clothes soaked.⁶⁵ (78)

⁶³ “Ma era pur sempre una pianta, e come tale soffriva, perché a star lì, tra la tenda e il portaombrelli, le mancavano luce, aria e rugiada.” (101)

⁶⁴ “Lo sguardo con cui egli ora scrutava in cielo l’addensarsi delle nuvole, non era più quello del cittadino che si domanda se deve o no prendere l’ombrello, ma quello dell’agricoltore che di giorno in giorno aspetta la fine della siccità.” (101)

⁶⁵ “Restavano lì in cortile, uomo e pianta, l’uno di fronte all’altra, l’uomo quasi provando sensazioni da pianta sotto la pioggia, la pianta - disabituata all’aria aperta e ai fenomeni della natura - sbalordita quasi quanto un uomo che si trovi tutt’a un tratto bagnato dalla testa ai piedi e coi vestiti zuppi.” (102)

This plant-man blending is fully realized at the climax of the episode when Marcovaldo zooms through the city with the plant on the back of his bicycle. In this moment, “bike, and man, and plant seemed a sole thing; indeed the hunched and bundled man disappeared, and you saw only a plant on a bicycle”⁶⁶ (79). The story concludes with the plants’ leaves, now fully grown, dispersing throughout the city in a brilliant array of colors akin to a rainbow.

This episode, like “The wasp treatment” and “The city of cats,” advocates more explicitly for the “human-vegetable symbiosis” that characterized Calvino’s understanding of the world as a child. We see once more that he advocates for the nonhuman agent and sheds light on its struggle. The artificiality of the city shows itself again as the oppressor of nonhuman life: the plant has lost something essential as a result of being trapped inside an office building. Its domestication has led to its dependency, and Marcovaldo is once again making an effort to undo the damage done by the world of the human being. This story also recalls one of Calvino’s comments about the role of literature as found in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. In the essay on multiplicity, Calvino contemplated

a work that allowed us to escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only in order to enter other similar selves but to give voice to that which cannot speak – the bird perched on the gutter, the tree in spring and the tree in autumn, stone, cement, plastic...Wasn’t this, perhaps, where Ovid was going when he described the continuity of forms, where Lucretius was going when he identified himself with the nature that all things have in common?⁶⁷ (152)

⁶⁶ “Dietro, sul portapacchi, aveva legato il vaso, e bici uomo pianta parevano una cosa sola, anzi l’uomo ingobbito e infagottato scompariva, e si vedeva solo una pianta in bicicletta.” (102)

⁶⁷ “Ma forse la risposta che mi sta più a cuore dare è un’altra: magari fosse possibile un’opera concepita al di fuori del *self*, un’opera che ci permettesse d’uscire dalla prospettiva limitata d’un io individuale, non solo per entrare in altri io simili al nostro, ma per far parlare ciò che non ha parola, l’uccello che si posa sulla grondaia, l’albero in primavera e l’albero in autunno, la pietra, il cemento, la plastica...Non era forse

It is understood that Calvino presupposed posthumanism as a philosophical question, as this comment makes clear, but the passage above nonetheless reinforces my understanding of *Marcovaldo* as Calvino's first attempt at distancing from the anthropocentric perspective. Marcovaldo's rescuing of the plant sheds light on the ethical undertones of the stories. To *care* for the nonhuman other is the first step in undoing the ecological disaster that has characterized the latter half of the 20th century. The industrialization of the urban center antagonizes Marcovaldo and points once more to the main problem. Calvino, in recalling Ovid, argues that despite occupying the top of the hierarchy, the human animal is nonetheless intertwined with its nonhuman counterpart. All life forms are connected and interdependent, and this idea is key to understanding Marcovaldo as a posthuman hero.

Part III: Marcovaldo, a fluid agent in between

As posthumanism grows as a philosophical and critical discipline and fractures into its many sub-discourses (transhumanism, anti-humanism, animal studies, and so on), it will become more and more important to specify in which area of the spectrum one's argument sits. For the purpose of this chapter and this work, I would like to situate Marcovaldo as a character that tends safely toward the animal realm. His primary concern is to draw attention to the many ways in which the human being resembles and interacts with nonhuman beings. The city is the primary convergence of these two worlds, and Marcovaldo sticks out because he is the only citizen who takes notice of life in its other

questo il punto d'arrivo cui tendeva Ovidio nel raccontare la continuità delle forme, il punto d'arrivo cui tendeva Lucrezio nell'identificarsi con la natura comune a tutte le cose?" (122)

forms. Through his observations, we reconsider our relationships to nonhuman life, animals, and the health of the environments in which they live. Importantly, Marcovaldo is not aiming at transcendence: his perspective does not seek to detach from his human body or biological needs. In the previous examples, we have seen how he mimics the animals he admires and, in doing so, arrives at new perspectives. Thinking and imagining oneself as another creature is the first step toward arriving at a posthuman understanding of the world. Marcovaldo, however, is not *becoming* these animals, per se. He is fully grounded in the human experience and acts as a conduit through which the nonhuman animal may communicate its concerns. His empathy for these creatures is a defining characteristic. Instead of complete separation from the animal (something that technoposthumanism explores), Calvino nudges readers through Marcovaldo toward *symbiosis* with the animal. If we could imagine a utopian city that satisfies Marcovaldo's ethical concerns for nonhuman life, it would be the moment of stillness and silence at the center of "The city all to himself."

Unfortunately, that city does not exist at the macro level. Despite his myriad attempts, Marcovaldo is repeatedly confronted with the bleak reality that all safe spaces for nonhuman city life are threatened by the looming destruction of industry and expansion. I would like to recall Marc Augé once more here, as he makes clear that non-places are threats to ecological wellness and the future of the planet as a whole. He writes in the introduction:

We are more aware with every day that passes that we inhabit a single planet, a fragile, threatened body, infinitely small in an infinitely large universe; this

planetary awareness is an ecological awareness, and an anxious one, that we all share a restricted space that we treat badly. (x)

As I stated at the beginning of the chapter, this heightened “planetary awareness” is a generation-defining one, and Calvino writing from the midcentury was relatively ahead of the curve in his criticisms. To conclude this chapter, I would like to look at three more episodes in *Marcovaldo* that showcase even more explicitly Calvino’s ecological concerns about modernity. In these vignettes, we see how the human-vegetable symbiosis is under heavy duress in the postindustrial landscape. Calvino makes clear his position, echoed in Augé’s words above, that we “*share* a restricted space that we treat badly.”

The opening chapter of *Marcovaldo* emphasizes how unbalanced the symbiosis has become. This vignette, titled “Mushrooms in the city,” provides a description that underscores Marcovaldo’s position in the narrative as a translator from the nonhuman to the human. Calvino writes that “Marcovaldo possessed an eye ill-suited to city life”⁶⁸ (1) that ignored all forms of flashy advertisements and concentrated instead on yellowing leaves, horse flies on horses’ backs, and signs of the changing seasons. As a result, he was the first to notice a small bunch of mushrooms poking up through the concrete at the tram station. Calvino notes that they were “real mushrooms”⁶⁹ (2), which surprises the incredulous Marcovaldo and brings new life to his monotonous days as an industrial worker. When he returns home, he is excited to tell his family about his discovery. We learn that his children are completely unaware of the world outside the city: Marcovaldo

⁶⁸ “Aveva questo Marcovaldo un occhio poco adatto alla vita di città” (43)

⁶⁹ “Si chinò a legarsi le scarpe e guardò meglio: erano funghi, veri funghi, che stavano spuntando proprio nel cuore della città!” (43)

must teach them what mushrooms are, emphasizing once more the disconnect between the natural world and the city. The story continues with Marcovaldo nurturing the mushrooms' growth, competing for their harvest, then proudly serving them to all the citizens to take home to eat. He learns quickly, however, that the mushrooms are poisonous, and ends up in the hospital to have his stomach pumped.

The mushroom in this story can be seen as the symbol of posthumanism's tie to ecology. To return to Cimatti once again, "the problem is to imagine a way of being human that does not imply the destruction of nature. Posthumanism faces precisely such a question" (118). Marcovaldo, through his awareness of nonhuman life and attention to its survival, changes the fate of the mushroom and allows for its flourishing. His concern for the plant, as is echoed in other vignettes, becomes an ecological act of kindness. There is an implication here that without Marcovaldo's interference, the mushrooms would be trampled upon by the traffic in the tram station. His lessons to his children about fungal life also suggest that without his knowledge, they could theoretically grow up never seeing a mushroom in person. I stated prior that this has become commonplace in the postindustrial world. We have access to observation of all living things through the internet, but their existence is implicitly "elsewhere," some far-off exotic place that is untouched by human hands. The urban center, in contrast, is decidedly a human habitat, and the mushroom is a weed-like growth that looks and feels terribly out of place here. That Marcovaldo and his fellow citizens are poisoned by the mushrooms highlights the growing divide and separation from ancient, pastoral knowledge and contemporary urban life. It is not because they are growing in the city that makes them poisonous (Calvino does not

suggest that they are radioactive or the product of polluted soil as he does in other vignettes), but rather that the urban citizen's understanding of mushrooms is lackluster. This story also points out that we are nonetheless animals bound to our bodies and prone to its biology. Marcovaldo is once again the moving figure between human and nonhuman, between industrial and pastoral, and his body is the terminal bridging both arenas.

“Where the river is more blue” is another standout vignette that problematizes the city's effects on nonhuman life and casts a cautious eye toward the intertwining of industry and environment. The chapter opens with a hostile description of the quality of food in the city, and how even the simplest of products were mixed with plastics and synthetics. This inspires Marcovaldo to find real food for his family. He decides to go fishing where “the water is really water, and fish are really fish”⁷⁰ (68). Soon he discovers a secret lake where he casts his line and reels in a fish. The water here glows blue, but not because of its purity, but because of a neighboring paint factory. Marcovaldo's fish is poisoned, and he must return it to the toxic waters or pay a fine to bring it back into the city.

In response to this vignette, JoAnn Cannon points out that “The city and nature cannot coexist: slowly the city's industries consume or defile the last vestiges of man's natural environment” (85).⁷¹ Marcovaldo is trapped by his naivety here: despite his efforts, he must face the fact that there is no nature left untouched by machine and by industry.

⁷⁰ “«Devo cercare un posto, - si disse, - dove l'acqua sia davvero acqua, i pesci davvero pesci. Lì getterò la mia lenza.»” (93)

⁷¹ JoAnn Cannon, “The Image of the City in the Novels of Italo Calvino.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1978, pp. 83–90.

Remarkably, the fish that Marcovaldo catches still “darts off with great joy” (70) upon release into the toxic pond. Like the flourishing mushrooms in the city, this fish defies its oppressive surroundings and survives the poisoned waters. The takeaway, as stated above, suggests that humans, who are the perpetrators of great environmental destruction, are also those who suffer most from that destruction. Calvino subtly suggests that nature will survive human developments, but the Anthropocene may begin and end with our own industrial technologies. This vignette also touches upon the theme of contamination, a topic heavily explored by Michael Mack in his book *Contaminations: Beyond Dialects in Modern Literature, Science, and Film*. Posthumanism, as Mack points out, is fundamentally a question of contamination, both philosophically and materially. It blends the human with the nonhuman, with animals, with machines, and with the inorganic. As it relates to the ecocritical tones of *Marcovaldo*, contamination is the looming threat behind all “advancements” in quality of life. Marcovaldo is cornered into a catch-22 scenario: his food at the supermarket is contaminated with plastics and synthetics, and his food at the source is *also* contaminated with toxic paint. There is no longer a pure nature, nor a pure city. In this way, Marcovaldo is already living in a posthuman world, one that continues to reveal itself to readers of this century and moving forward. Through his efforts to find pure fish, he acts as a bridge between the human and the animal. Once again, however, the distinction is far too blurred. There is no nonhuman animal left that is not contaminated by the human.

Even the air, Calvino suggests, is already contaminated. A distinction must be made between what city-dwellers inhale and “The good air,” the title of another vignette in

Marcovaldo. In this story, Marcovaldo is advised by the Public Health doctor to take his children to breathe “some good air” (41) in the meadows of the mountains, far away from the city center. When the family ascends the mountain on a tram, they must learn what life looks like away from the city. Their naivety comes through once again when they try to bite the good air and cannot taste the difference. Furthermore, they cannot conceive of life without streets, houses, and courtyards. Soon, Marcovaldo and his family meet a troop of men. Marcovaldo learns that the mountain is not a locale isolated from the city: it is an extension of it. There is a sanatorium atop the hills where workers are sent to repair the damage caused from working in the factory. Dismayed, he leaves with his family back down the mountain.

Structurally, this story mimics all the prior vignettes analyzed: Calvino teases the possibility of a sanctuary, an untouched nature clean and intact that can satisfy Marcovaldo’s desire to separate from the toxicity of the city. In each story, the hero finds an escape route and gets a taste of that haven. However, the veil is peeled back to reveal his misunderstanding: there is no running from the expanse of the city. It extends beyond its borders, its tentacles grasp beyond its limits. Much like in “Where the river is more blue,” Calvino in “The good air” showcases that wherever the human goes, the city follows. Implicitly, this means a certain destruction also follows. When the human contaminates what the Romantics may have considered the pure, untouched, capital ‘n’ Nature, there is an acknowledgement of ecological loss. Marcovaldo sits in an oscillating space between the developed and the periphery. Through his attempts to free himself from the artificiality of his surroundings, he faces the realization that, ultimately, there is no escape. The woes

of city life inevitably follow. His hyperawareness of the nonhuman animal and desire for a cleaner world give the book its ecological aura, and this is where its utility shines through. Marcovaldo, a posthuman activist, is a fable-esque role model to follow. His ambition and willingness to *care* is why the stories have only become more urgent and prescient in the sixty years since their publication.

Concluding Thoughts

I mentioned the terms ‘climate change’ and ‘Anthropocene’ at the beginning of this chapter in order to frame *Marcovaldo* as an ecological text that preceded its own vocabulary. Marcovaldo’s city, a nameless non-place in the heart of an industrial country has since replicated itself repeatedly across the western world. The creatures that appear throughout the book are all victims of the city’s pollution and oppressive expansion. They are also victims of human activity, indirectly (the fish swimming in the polluted water filled with paint) or directly (the wasps harvested to provide a medicinal antidote). Marcovaldo, with his empathetic eye toward both nature and the nonhuman, is a hero of action that seeks to rebalance the human-vegetable symbiosis. The first step in arriving at a more harmonious relationship between the two worlds is caring, an ecological act of protest. Marcovaldo’s children warn of the dangers of insular city life. Their constant framing of the nonhuman world in industrial terms and metaphors suggest that further development leads to more disconnect from the natural, nonhuman world. Calvino, in *Marcovaldo*, is not a bystander to the progression. In his characteristically ironic style, he is warning readers about the consequences of human activity on life in all forms.

In “Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism: Reflections on Local Natures and Global Responsibilities,” Serenella Iovino writes

In the age of ecological crisis, literature can choose to be ‘ethically charged’, and to communicate an idea of responsibility. In the age of ecological crisis, this responsibility is global. And what is endangered is not only ‘nature’ in general but local natures in particular. (31)

This is precisely the function of *Marcovaldo* as an ethically-charged ecological text. She later states, quoting Brazilian scholar Camilo Gomides, that ecocriticism is “the field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations” (41). Posthumanism embraces this perspective as part of its ethos. It is a fundamentally non-anthropocentric field that challenges human exceptionalism and gives audience to the voices of the nonhuman Other.

The subtitle (or perhaps alternative title) *Seasons in the city* is remarkably poignant when considering the ethical questions that *Marcovaldo* asks of its readers. At this point in time, human technologies, despite greatly *affecting* the weather, have yet to master control over the changing of the seasons. For the time being, the natural processes of rain, snow, and sunshine are still out of reach of industrial control. The contrast between the title and the subtitle marks the in-between that Marcovaldo embodies in the story: he oscillates between the world dominated by human activity and a natural environment that exists beyond our grasp. His actions highlight the reality that these worlds are not separate entities, but greatly inform and influence one another. In this tension lies the reminder that human activity has had profound consequences on all life on a planetary scale. Calvino

sensed this before science could confirm his observations, and only now are we beginning to suffer the effects of the changing seasons in the city.

Chapter III: Mr. Palomar, the Posthuman Observer

“An intense observation of the external world makes us less apathetic (dafter or saner, more cheerful or more desperate).”
Gianni Celati, *Towards the River's Mouth*

The twenty-year leap from *Marcovaldo* (1963) to *Mr. Palomar* (1983) encompasses a profound evolution in Calvino's role as an author and a thinker. In the time between writing these two books, Calvino grew massively in popularity, especially in the U.S., with the production of *Invisible Cities*, as well as within Italy for his essays, lectures, and contributions to various literary journals. After *Marcovaldo*, Calvino progressively became more and more experimental with his style, voice, and structure in his fictions. *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979), for example, marks a key point in the author's dabbling with postmodernism as a literary mode. His experimentation with second-person narration, a willingness to break the fourth wall, and calling attention to the text as an object to be manipulated, would not be repeated again. Much of the ongoing praise for Calvino is, in fact, his reluctance to write the same book twice. With every approach to a new novel, Calvino's utilization of the literary text as a schema for understanding the world shifted his own thinking into new spaces. By never returning to the same structures twice, he never stopped challenging his own truths.

For the purposes of this dissertation, *Mr. Palomar* is nonetheless a valuable and insightful text because it marks a literary return-to-form to Calvino's earlier works, but with a difference in tone and perspective. In *Mr. Palomar* we find a much more mature Calvino than the writer of the 1960's. This text poses structural and thematic similarities

to *Marcivaldo* but with a much more distanced and detached approach to storytelling. This difference marks the transition from an on-the-ground perspective of industrial society toward a liminal, posthumanist perspective of not only consumerism and urban life, but existence itself. Tonally, *Marcivaldo* is appropriate for a young audience (children in Italy, for example, are often read the tales as bedtime stories). *Mr. Palomar* reads like a philosophical contemplation of an author looking back on his life in search of its meaning, and thus welcomes an adult readership. Despite its brevity, it is dense with ideas; every vignette asks its reader to contemplate and criticize even the smallest of worries alongside the puzzled Palomar. I also argue it is a key text for scholars engaged in discourses on posthumanism. More specifically, *Mr. Palomar* implicitly challenges anthropocentrism and human importance by shifting the gaze toward nonhuman animals, inorganic materials, and the phenomenon of death. Palomar, the narrator, repeatedly faces crises in efforts to detach himself from himself, and through these conundrums we can analyze how Calvino's thought experiments align with posthumanist frameworks of understanding the world. Where *Marcivaldo* is eager to preserve the remnants of the natural world in the context of a city that ignores life beyond the human, Palomar instead remains in the background and willingly lets life go on as it wishes. Palomar observes where *Marcivaldo* acts, and in his observations, he transcends the limitations of his body and mind.

Returning again to Calvino's letters, we can find traces of *Mr. Palomar* present as early as 1971. In a letter to Franco Fortini, Calvino reflects on his approach to literature and philosophy. This letter is key to understanding Calvino's hesitation toward the

anthropocentricism of the Enlightenment, as well as his determination to produce what I refer to as his posthumanist fables (*Mr. Palomar* included). He writes:

I, on the other hand, prefer to search (still in a confused way) digging inside its Enlightenment and enlightened tradition as well as in the later positivist one. But what I am attempting is to get away from any humanist teleology by seeing man as an instrument or catalyst or chain of I don't know what, of a universe that is also information, of a history or anthropomorphization of matter, and of a world without human beings anymore but one where man has realized himself and become resolved, a world of electronic calculators and butterflies. This does not frighten me, actually it reassures me.⁷² (404)

This attempt of Calvino to locate humanity's place in a universe of information is the central tension of *Mr. Palomar*. Notably, in this letter, Calvino understands that this is far more complex than it seems, and that ultimately (as many posthumanist scholars have concluded as well) we are still bound to our human perspective. Calvino, though, does not feel doomed by this limitation. He instead seeks new horizons, those in which "man has realized himself and become resolved," and embraces a world of high-tech electronics buzzing alongside the bugs and butterflies of the meadows. This juxtaposition is another beautiful image of a posthumanist world, one in which the digital and the organic coexist and coevolve. We see here Calvino's resistance to produce apocalyptic narratives in which humanity has become extinct from the planet, instead favoring stories where humans have mastered technological advancements instead of succumbing to their destruction. In this

⁷² "...mentre io preferisco cercare scavando (ancora confusamente) all'interno della sua tradizione illuministica-illuminata e poi positivista. Ma quello che io tento è di uscire da ogni teleologia umanistica vedendo l'uomo come strumento o catalizzatore o anello non so di che cosa, di un universo-informazione, d'una storia o antropomorfizzazione della materia, e un mondo senza più esseri umani ma in cui l'uomo si sia realizzato e risolto, un mondo di calcolatori elettronici e farfalle, non mi spaventa anzi mi rassicura." (1127)

letter we sense Calvino's sense of hope and optimism for the future of human beings, a future that returns to a symbiotic relationship with the natural world.

Calvino continues in this letter with yet another example of his prescience for posthuman thought. He concludes this letter, in his signature rambling way, by arguing against the privileging of the human being as the most important ontological agent on the planet. Instead, he invites us to consider the nonhuman animal's experience, which emerges in his literary works as a significant central theme:

Except that for me God's pact with man does not contain any clauses privileging man over any other living thing. Or I would put it rather as the pact with the Gods, without any privileging for any one of the codes that can organize what can be experienced and said, and also without any gnostic binary oppositions...but I am straying too far.⁷³ (404)

Already in 1971 Calvino was anxiously distancing himself from the dogmas that place the human at the top of a material hierarchy. He offers instead the possibility that certain experiences *cannot* be filtered through language, through "what can be experienced and said," and furthermore that the human perspective is simply one of many "codes" that make some sense of the phenomenon of living. I find this a profound, offhand comment about Calvino's thinking. In combination with the previous quote, it becomes clear that he was determined to communicate these ideas in his literature.

Five years after writing this letter, Calvino delivered a lecture at Amherst college called "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature." In her essay "Calvino and the Value

⁷³ "Solo che per me il patto di Dio con l'uomo non ha clausole che privilegino l'uomo rispetto a qualsiasi altra cosa esistente. O meglio dirò il patto con gli Dei, senza privilegio per uno dei codici ordinatori dell'esperibile e del dicibile, e anche senza gnostiche opposizioni binarie...Ma sto andando troppo lontano." (1127)

of Literature,” Lucia Re calls upon this lecture as a pivotal moment for Calvino, as it revealed just how much he believed in his vocation to change minds and bring forth new ideas. This lecture, as summarized by Re, also provides us with a point of departure to read *Mr. Palomar* from a posthuman perspective. She writes:

An intellectual shift has occurred, a revolution of the mind, whereby the idea of "man" as the subject of history has ended, and the antagonist who has dethroned him is still man, but in a totally different sense. It is the humankind of the "large numbers" in exponential growth all over the planet, it is the explosion of the giant metropolis, the ungovernability of society and economics no matter which system they belong to, the emergence of neo-colonial and post-colonial peoples with their special problems and claims and, especially, the end of Eurocentrism in both economic and ideological terms. (131)

This is a perfect summation of the postmodern crisis as it began to take shape in the late 1970's and blossomed throughout the end of the century. It is clear that Calvino was deeply concerned about overpopulation, consumerism, and the extreme complexities of globalization even before they fully took shape (consider the fact that Calvino did not live long enough to watch the Internet develop into its current monstrous state, for example). This summary could be applied retroactively to the previous chapter on *Marcivaldo* as well. In combination with the letter to Franco Fortini, it shows Calvino's greatest preoccupations, the conundrums that he attempted to confront in his literature, and the anxieties that bothered him while crafting his narratives. For the purposes of this chapter on *Mr. Palomar*, I am especially interested in the “antagonist” of man who “is still man, but in a totally different sense.” I argue that the book's contemplative and anxiety-riddled protagonist resembles this man, a posthuman man, a character that repeatedly fails to reconcile with the infinite complexities of the simplest objects and ideas that appear to him

in his daily life. Through these contemplations, Palomar reveals the interconnectedness between the human and the world, between us and the Other.

Much like in *Marcivaldo*, Calvino does not preach in this book either. Through the character of Palomar, he simply reveals, chews on, then leaves behind the conflict or quarrel at the center of each vignette. Despite a gentle nudge toward a certain conclusion, there is no condemnation or judgment from Calvino's central character. He is repeatedly trying to make sense of his world and develop (for himself) a moral compass to follow in navigating urban life. This lack of dogmatism that characterizes Calvino's posthuman fables is fundamental for a more empathetic and affective literature. In analyzing the role of posthumanism in ecological studies, for example, scholar Emmanouil Aretoulakis agrees that "literature that never preaches or gives moral lessons is the vehicle par excellence for thinking about what a posthuman ecology might look like" (73). Calvino achieves this unpretentious form in *Mr. Palomar* precisely through the mode of observation, the attribute that gives credence to Palomar's name.⁷⁴ By remaining separated and non-participatory in the activities, favoring instead to watch from afar, Palomar embodies philosophy in motion. He is inconclusive, like all nonscientific methods of thinking, and leaves tormented by the lack of final answers. It is through this game of observation-contemplation that Palomar drifts away from the engagement that characterized Calvino's younger, more ambitious self in the character of *Marcivaldo* and closer toward the figure of the intellectual/philosopher that he became in his later years. In

⁷⁴ Palomar is named after the Palomar Observatory telescope in San Diego County, California. This callback to the telescope reflects the character's main preoccupation with observation as a means to understand the world.

this drift also lies an evolution toward posthuman thinking that I argue is heavily present in the stories. As I explored in the previous chapter, Marcovaldo is intimately connected to the industrial systems that suppress human and nonhuman city life by virtue of his socioeconomic status. Because of his lower status, he is often the victim of the same environmental challenges we now face due to climate change and globalization. Palomar, on the other hand, is not bound to these same difficulties. Instead, like a pensioner, he enjoys his leisure and freedoms. He travels to distant cities and wanders about his own city like a tourist. As a result, he communicates a more removed perspective that is not bound to an immediate human experience and can instead drift into a more creative and imaginative space of ideas. Marcovaldo is an ecological hero of action, while Palomar remains less involved, preferring instead to stay back and observe.

In Palomar's observations we find a separation from anthropocentrism (reminiscent of the letter from 1971) and a turn toward thought experiments consisting of a world beyond human presence and interference. We see more and more Calvino concentrating on nonhumans (like the iguana from the introductory chapter) in an attempt to understand life as experienced by an animal other. Because he remains detached and uninvolved in the events he witnesses, Palomar distinguishes himself fully from the character of Marcovaldo. Instead of combatting the forces of consumer capitalism in a longing to find "nature" (or perhaps the "Seasons in the City"), Palomar lets go of the reins and understands there is no controlling such forces. In doing so, he drifts into a liminal space, one unbound by the rough-and-tumble action of daily life, and comes to much more profound conclusions about the ungovernability of human civilizations in the late 20th century. This liminal space

makes room for the Other and, as I stated before, champions them and argues for their equal place in a world that seeks to destroy or exploit them. To quote Aretoulis once again: “What is at stake is a transition from anthropocentrism to deep ecology: man and nature should become a harmonious ecosystemic whole, so that there would no longer be a differentiation between self and inanimate ‘other’” (75). Palomar’s journey follows this path. It will conclude with Qfwfq in *Le cosmicomiche*.

The incommunicability between human self and animal other becomes a recurring motif in *Mr. Palomar*. In Dani Cavallaro’s reading, this results in futility and failure in the book. Despite his best efforts, Palomar *cannot* bridge the gap between worlds and must recoil in his increasing isolation. She writes:

The effects of anthropomorphism are uncertainly, if at all, satisfying or illuminating...Palomar’s humanization of the animal realm does not help him explain the human world – let alone assert the latter’s dominance – for it only, at best, highlights the grim travesty of a symbolic language wherein ‘no one can understand anyone’[22] and each individual sends out messages which he or she misrecognizes as essential to him or her while, in fact, they belong to no one. (Cavallaro 135)

Concentrating solely on the incongruity in symbolic language between the agents present in the novella is to undermine *Mr. Palomar’s* posthuman potential. I disagree that “Palomar’s humanization of the animal realm does not help him explain the human world” – in fact it repeatedly results in a subversion of our values and habits and gives us a playfully distorted mirror through which we can criticize our own tendencies. In his own witty and ironic way, Calvino is consistently pushing the issue, and responsibility, back onto the human being. Furthermore, by drawing attention to the difficulties in cross-species communication, Palomar lends a voice to those whose symbolic language does not match

our own. The act of observation and description, once again, becomes the manner in which these nonhuman creatures are given space and significance. Reading *Mr. Palomar* becomes a careful act of self-reflection. By drawing attention to encaged iguanas, mating tortoises, and dismembered pigs and cows, Calvino encourages his readers to scrutinize their relationships with nonhuman animals and the environments in which they must live. Often, these worlds are products of human expansion and self-indulgence, like zoos and butcher shops, which charge the stories with gentle, discreet moral messages of resistance to this way of living. Calvino never explicitly states that we must change these material conditions to better improve the quality of life of nonhuman beings, but he certainly suggests that conclusion. Cavallaro's interpretation thus downplays what I believe is central to the ethos of Calvino's book.

As I described in Chapter 1, posthumanism is interested in exploring and challenging human exceptionalism by concentrating especially on the relationships between humans and animals and the environments in which we coexist. Posthumanism is also critical of consumerism, as it often reduces both human and nonhuman life to products of consumption. Death is also intrinsically central to the debate of posthumanism, since it is both the process that ensures the transformation from living creature to consumable product, as well as the threat that haunts the industrial activity that perpetuates globalization. That is to say, death of the individual and the species is our ultimate punishment if we mishandle our technological prowess and ability to reshape the planet as we wish. Posthumanism is concerned with these issues because it resists self-destruction and seeks ecological wellness for all forms of life. It is an affirmative philosophy that resists

nihilism and the defeatism common when facing seemingly insurmountable global issues. I find all of these same themes present in *Mr. Palomar*, which I will detail in this chapter. The first section concentrates on Palomar's world: that is, the various city locales in which the narrator makes his observations. Fundamentally, Palomar is an urbanist. He does not reach out and long for "nature" in the same ways as Marcovaldo, but his observations draw an analytical eye to its presence in the city. Both Kirsten Pilz's and Joseph Francese's works inform my analysis of Palomar's cities. I put forth that Palomar is a posthumanist in action and in contemplation: he provides a lens and a framework that we can borrow when making sense of our own lives in similar urban centers. Understanding the layout of his world is therefore fundamental to understand his deductions of this world. The second section takes a look at the nonhuman beings living alongside Palomar in this city. Drawing again from Serenella Iovino and Carrie Rohman, I want to concentrate on the instances in which the animal other is placed front and center in the vignette. Objectifying these creatures generates thought experiments and philosophical inquiry in *Mr. Palomar*; they never simply exist in the background. As such, they become main characters themselves. Structurally and thematically, this brings forth a sense of importance to these subjects, and I argue that each animal leaves the reader contemplating their significance in an anthropocentric world. That is to say, it is no accident that Calvino spends so much effort in the text focusing our attention on the animal other. Posthumanism begins at animal ontologies, and as we will see in *Le cosmicomiche*, ends in much more abstract and intangible conceptions of life. Finally, I would like to analyze Palomar's relationship with death. Joseph Francese, Rosi Braidotti, and JoAnn Cannon all confront the issue of death

and try to make sense of it in their respective writings. Calvino does the same through the character of Palomar, who famously attempts to imagine a world without him. The “post-” in posthumanism also connotes life after the human, and Calvino was suggestive of this idea and its implications in this book. Death is omnipresent in Palomar’s contemplations. It is a driving force for the narrative in ways that are not present in *Marcovaldo*. Calvino’s own maturity and old age may be key in understanding its emergence as a central theme, of course, but I am also interested in viewing posthumanism through the lenses of biological and philosophical death. *Mr. Palomar* helps guide this analysis.

Part I: Palomar, the Eco-Urbanist

Framing and segmenting all of Palomar’s adventures are generic places – Mr. Palomar on the Beach, Mr. Palomar in the Garden, Mr. Palomar at the Zoo – and so on. Each of these chapter-like divisions are subsequently divided into three shorter vignettes that correspond to the place in question. When Palomar goes to the beach, for example, we find him “reading a wave,” then contemplating “the naked bosom,” and finally desperately attempting to capture the “sword of the sun” in the ocean’s waves. Calvino’s admiration for neatly divided encyclopedic episodes recalls the heavily structured format of one of his previous works, *Invisible Cities*. His desire to categorize the world into clean boundaries, and the longing for a catalogue of living and nonliving objects, is at the heart of *Mr. Palomar*. Calvino realizes, however, that such a pursuit can only be successful in the writing of the book, and in the object of the book itself; as we will see, no such geometric divisions exist in the observable world. Instead, Palomar is often confronted with the

impossibility of finding the boundaries between things. This leads to frustration on his part. The myopic intellectual must concede to the fluidity of the world in which he makes his observations. As Serenella Iovino questions in “Storie dell’altro mondo,” “Esistono limiti che letteralmente *definiscano* la distinzione tra l’umano e il suo altro e, se sì, dove si trovano? O meglio: dov’è l’altro dall’umano?” (119, emphasis original). As we will see, these limits quickly dissolve when faced with too much contemplation, resulting in Palomar himself becoming a “hybrid” creature suspended between participating in and analyzing his life. The locales where these frustrating conclusions are reached, too, become hybrids themselves. Important to my reading, “nature” is never pure in its representation, nor is its opposite (the manmade, developed city) ever exempt from the annexation of nonhuman organic life. What emerges is an infinitely complex and co-dependent ecosystem, one that cannot be mapped nor segmented. Despite his best efforts, Palomar must repeatedly reconcile with this shapeshifting urban space. As a result, he reads as an example of what I will call an “eco-urbanist.” His observations are more than a detached, scientific surveying of the world. Instead, they invite human-nonhuman coevolution and encourage the development of what we may call “green spaces.”

I will start with the story “The infinite lawn” from the section “Mr. Palomar in the Garden” to illustrate this idea. The opening paragraph is key in bringing forth the anxieties and confusions that define so much of Palomar’s character. Already from the outset we see how Palomar is grappling with contradictions as he struggles to give name and shape to the growth of grass outside of his house. The descriptors fall apart the moment they are written down:

Around Mr. Palomar's house there is a lawn. This is not a place where a lawn should exist naturally: so the lawn is an artificial object, composed from natural objects, namely grasses. The lawn's purpose is to represent nature, and this representation occurs as the substitution, for the nature proper to the area, of a nature in itself natural but artificial for this area. In other words, it costs money. The lawn requires expense and endless labor: to sow it, water it, fertilize it, weed it, mow it.⁷⁵ (29)

Not only does the recurring tension between the terms “artificial” and “natural” lend comedic value to the passage, but it also highlights the impossibility of narrowing down a meaningful descriptor of the lawn. In this instance, the lawn is emblematic of the fragility of the city-nature dichotomy. In very few words, Calvino puts the conundrum on display: the lawn is both natural *and* artificial, an object of nature and an extremely manufactured representation of nature. It has inherent value, but it requires upkeep (money, labor) to maintain that value. This is at the core of eco-urbanism, and how simply adapting “nature” in a city-space becomes infinitely problematic. Costs to keep and maintain plants and trees decorating skyscrapers may severely offset the theoretical benefits of slightly cleaner air that the foliage provides. Calvino's lawn is an example of an increasingly relevant problem to “green” design in cities now: see no further than the bio-architecture of Stefano Boeri, or the new Amazon Headquarters concept in Arlington, Virginia, as real-life proof of this same paradox.

Once Palomar has established that the lawn is interchangeably “natural” *and* “artificial” he begins his quest to mow, weed, and water it. In doing so, Palomar arrives at

⁷⁵ “Intorno alla casa del signor Palomar c'è un prato. Non è quello un posto dove naturalmente ci dovrebbe essere un prato: dunque il prato è un oggetto artificiale, composto di oggetti naturali, cioè erbe. Il prato ha come fine di rappresentare la natura, e questa rappresentazione avviene sostituendo alla natura proprio del luogo una natura in sé naturale ma artificiale in rapporto a quel luogo. insomma: costa; il prato richiede spesa e fatica senza fine: per seminarlo, innaffiarlo, concimarlo, disinfestarlo, falciarlo.” (30)

impasse after impasse: first that a “lawn must be a uniform green expanse,” which is an “unnatural result that lawns created by nature achieve naturally”⁷⁶ (30). How can the lawn be naturally unnatural? How much does Palomar need to interfere in order to achieve this contradicting state? When Palomar begins weeding, he discovers “in no time that stretch of lawn, so smooth that it seemed to need only a few touches, proves to be a lawless jungle”⁷⁷ (30). To weed this unnatural-natural lawn is to change it, fundamentally, and deciding between the desirable weeds and the undesirable dandelions proves impossible. Once the weeds are rooted, the real conundrum sets in: Palomar must distinguish between the good grasses and the bad grasses. Maintaining a curated, monospecific lawn or inviting varying and diverse grasses thus becomes the difference between “English-style- lawns” and “rustic lawns,” a decision that further paralyzes the eco-urbanist (31). Methodology then confuses matters further: Palomar ponders how he should measure the space so as to accurately begin its curation. He considers segmenting the lawn into a sample square, then counting the blades of grass, the weeds, their thicknesses and their heights, to accurately gauge each element’s distribution, which would yield “a statistical knowledge of the lawn” (31). “But counting the blades of grass is futile,” Palomar concludes, “you would never learn their number” (31). He admits that “a lawn does not have precise boundaries”⁷⁸ (31), which becomes the central idea mirrored in the title of the vignette.

⁷⁶ “Il prato per fare la sua figura dev’essere una distesa verde uniforme: risultato innaturale che naturalmente raggiungono i prati voluti dalla natura.” (31)

⁷⁷ “In breve, quel limbo di tappeto erboso che sembrava richiedere solo pochi ritocchi, si rivela una giungla senza legge.” (31)

⁷⁸ “Contare quanti fili d’erba ci sono, di quali specie, quanto fitti e come distribuiti. In base a questo calcolo si arriverà a una conoscenza statistica del prato, stabilita la quale...Ma contare i fili d’erba è inutile, non s’arriverà mai a saperne il numero. un prato non ha confini netti...” (32)

Kirsten Pilz in *Mapping Complexity: Literature and Science in the Works of Italo Calvino* provides a useful summary of “The infinite lawn” and its adjacent stories, claiming that Calvino’s relationship with structure “lends style to his mature works, but it folds in on itself and proves that the observable world is inexhaustible and infinitely complex” (75). To Pilz’s point, Calvino concludes this vignette by drawing a through-line from the infinite lawn to the universe itself, just before ending the story with a stylistic and ever-so-suggestive ellipsis:

He is trying to apply to the universe everything he has thought about the lawn. The universe as regular and ordered cosmos or as chaotic proliferation. The universe perhaps finite but countless, unstable within its borders, which discloses other universes within itself. The universe, collection of celestial bodies, nebulas, fine dust, force fields, intersections of fields, collections of collections....(33)

This passage draws a parallel between the lawn and the deep reaches of space, hinting at the futility of using the observable world as a method of understanding. But we can also reverse the direction of the analogy: the universe’s vastness can just as much be a way of contextualizing the lawn. Palomar’s meticulousness in describing all of the grasses’ intricacies and varieties indirectly (and perhaps unintentionally) educates readers on cultivating a natural space in a city, even if its “artificiality” complicates that definition. The lawn, a biosphere as complex as the universe, cannot be contained, measured, sectioned-off, and categorized. It is an independent organism, one that not only “represents nature” (30) but is also fundamentally nature, too. There are no easy divisions between natural and unnatural: the urban space complicates this relationship, but it does not fully sever the ties in a way that would satisfy Palomar. This is fundamental in understanding that effective ecological solutions must be invisible: they cannot be representational or

symbolic, but rather must be so seamlessly incorporated into daily urban life that we do not notice their presence. The lawn cannot be manicured, nor contained, and Palomar's attempt to reconcile this leads to his nervous breakdown in trying to maintain it.

It can also be argued that Palomar's persistent attempts to quantify the lawn, and his subsequent metaphor of the universe, can actually result in *harmful* treatment of this natural-unnatural, manmade plot of land. Objectifying the lawn reinforces the anthropocentric hierarchy and permits us to continue to behave however we wish; even calling the lawn "artificial" is an example of such dismissal. Palomar is still, ultimately, in control of the lawn's curation. Returning to Aretoulakis, "the idea is that as soon as we stop talking about nature we will paradoxically cease to objectify, exploit and, thus, pollute it. In addition, an ecology without a subject *or* nature is an ecology that puts neither humans nor the environment in the limelight – and this is what makes it really ecological" (71). Palomar's hypersensitivity to categories and quantities has the great potential to backfire. His efforts to weed out the invasive species in hopes of achieving an English-style lawn are informed by an aesthetic ideal of a lawn, and not an ecologically minded model. How is he to know what is "good" for the grass? Perhaps an undisturbed, rustic lawn can be considered healthy, but then what about mowing? Aretoulakis continues:

The postanthropocentric element in my essay lies in actually (but tacitly) privileging the nonhuman – the environment in the case at hand – by uncannily...leaving it alone: the underlying assumption here is that even if humans mean well in treating, representing, protecting or securing the environment, they are still going to harm it, pollute it, misrepresent it or objectify it, by merely trying to *be with* it. (72)

To use Aretoulakis' idea, Palomar's analysis-paralysis may actually be beneficial after all, and not a hallmark of his ineptitude. By leaving the infinite lawn alone, Palomar achieves his goal of curating and representing nature in all its unbound state. Through heavy contemplation of the lawn, he realizes his eco-urbanist potential and learns to respect the biodiversity in the small plot of land in front of his house. I see Calvino's inconclusive ending once again as a nudge to the reader to consider, in this case, the beauty in disarray. Our universe-lawns are at their greatest when they cannot be comprehended, nor curated, nor properly segmented from the rest of the sprawling developments. Thinking retroactively, Marcovaldo's longing to find nature in the city was always there: he simply needed a more hands-off framework to inform his approach. This is where *Mr. Palomar's* posthuman potential shines, and where Calvino himself shows off his own development as a thinker.

Another story that exemplifies Palomar's more complex relationship with eco-urbanism, especially in contrast to that of Marcovaldo, is from the chapter "Mr. Palomar's Journeys." The vignette "The sand garden" presents another example of how landscapes can be repurposed in the context of urban development, in this case to stimulate contemplation and invite thoughts of the divine. During his visit to Kyoto, Palomar takes a tour of the rock and sand garden of the Ryoanji, whose layout is "typical of that contemplation of the absolute to be achieved with the simplest means and without recourse to concepts capable of verbal expression"⁷⁹ (91). Once inside, Palomar readies himself for

⁷⁹ "Questo è uno dei monumenti più famosi della civiltà giapponese, il giardino di rocce e sabbia del tempio Ryoanji di Kyoto, l'immagine tipica della contemplazione dell'assoluto da raggiungersi coi mezzi

this experience, but is interrupted by an aggravating crowd of tourists, “swarms of feet in wool socks” (92), and repetitive flashes of camera bulbs that disturb the tranquil scene. Conflicting with the guidebook’s instruction for use is the impossibility of separating from this noisy crowd and finding the necessary solace that the experience promises to its visitors. As such, Palomar is left to his own, over-analytical tendencies: “he prefers to take a more difficult path, to try to grasp what the Zen garden can give him, looking at it in the only situation in which it can be looked at today, craning his neck among other necks”⁸⁰ (93). In the wavy sand of the Zen garden, Palomar cannot help but see the ecological crises that originated in the great expansion of the 20th century and have since become threats to our species’ survival. Palomar “sees the human race in the era of great numbers...He sees that the world, nevertheless, continues to turn the boulder-backs of its nature indifferent to the fate of mankind, its hard substance cannot be reduced to human assimilation”⁸¹ (93). Notably, Palomar’s vision of this great threat is not drowned in the pessimism and apocalyptic tone that characterizes the ongoing discourse on environmental issues today. Rather, he sees the potential “between mankind-sand and world-boulder...a sense of possible harmony”⁸² (94).

più semplici e senza il ricorso a concetti esprimibili con parole, secondo l’insegnamento dei monaci Zen, la setta più spirituale del buddismo.” (93)

⁸⁰ “Egli preferisce mettersi per una via più difficile, cercare d’afferrare quel che il giardino Zen può dargli a guardarlo nella sola situazione in cui può essere guardato oggi, sporgendo il proprio collo tra altri colli.” (95)

⁸¹ “Vede la specie umana nell’era dei grandi numeri che s’estende in una folla livellata ma pur sempre fatta d’individualità distinte come questo mare di granelli di sabbia che sommerge la superficie del mondo...Vede il mondo ciononostante continuare a mostrare i dorsi di macigno della sua natura indifferente al destino dell’umanità, la sua dura sostanza irreducibile all’assimilazione umana.” (95)

⁸² “E tra umanità-sabbia e mondo-scoglio si intuisce un’armonia possibile come tra due armonie non omogenee...”(96)

The metaphor of mankind-sand, in its ability to conjure up billions of tiny grains “leveled but still made up of distinct individualities” (93), reflects Calvino’s own anxieties about overpopulation and mass globalization. The takeaway image from this inconclusive passage (which again ends in the stylistic ellipsis) is Calvino’s reduction of the individual into an organic, ego-less form of a grain of sand. What Palomar strives to achieve while visiting the Kyoto garden is proven impossible until he detaches his mind from his body and, for lack of a better term, “becomes” the sand garden himself. This is only achievable by observation, by moving beyond the body and entering the space of ideas and contemplation. Drawing a through-line between human and nature here is, once again, no accident, and speaks to Calvino’s sensitivity toward the nonhuman world as a way of providing therapy and clarity about the human condition. It recalls the letter to Fortini in which Calvino admits he seeks in his writing to move beyond human teleology and into a world in which “man has realized himself and become realized” (404), in this instance as a cooperating collective of sand. Postumanism and Eco-urbanism work in similar patterns. They seek to re-incorporate nonhuman life back into the humanmade cityscape. That which has been pushed aside by urban development is being reintroduced to the welcoming delight of citizens, bushes and trees planted on skyscrapers being the most explicit examples, but also subtle inclusions such as skylights installed in car ceilings and pop-up farmers markets. Nature should not be limited to “out there”; it can be everywhere, present in all shapes and sizes, and so fluidly incorporated into daily urban life that we do not notice it as an out-of-place appendage. Marcovaldo’s mushroom at the train station is a signpost of our broken relationship with the nonhuman world. The ethos of the sand garden,

in contrast, echoes Aretoulakis' challenge to not objectify nature, but simply to "be with it." Palomar must arrive at this juncture in his own, overanalytical way, but he nonetheless succeeds in "being" with both the bustling crowd of tourists and the billions of particles populating the city of sand.

The ellipsis here, once again, charges the posthuman fable with an implicit moral but does not leave the reader with a sense of foreboding judgment. In the final sentences, Calvino points out the incongruities between the nonhuman world's indifference toward rational thought and the human tendency to search for meaning in patterns, but nonetheless suggests that there can be cooperation "between two nonhomogeneous harmonies" (94). Palomar's obsession with structure, order, and cataloguing the visible world (as explored deeply by Kerstin Pilz) is met with a tranquil conclusion rather than with the typical anxieties that riddle the protagonist's thoughts. This story ends with a dash of optimism and hope. The dedicated natural space is the harbinger of clarity in this peaceful vignette, reflecting once again the ethos of eco-urban design projects and ecocritical theory. Despite its paradoxical status, a designated spot to contemplate nature in its unexciting form (in this case, a stretch of sand and a few boulders) allows the visitors to connect with the world outside of the human. Through *being* with this (admittedly) contrived form of nature, Palomar lets go of his ever-so human desire to comprehend all that he sees. He releases himself from the tension and concedes to the ungovernability and the lack of pattern that exists in the material world beyond the human. Unlike the Zen monks who yearn to understand the divine in the sand garden, Palomar instead finds his own clarity, one that is more terrestrial in its content and in its application. The "paradise lost" narrative "sounds

too facile for Mr. Palomar,” who opts instead “to take a more difficult path” (93). This path is that of the posthuman eco-urbanist, one who seeks a symbiotic relationship with nature, and who will listen to the silent lessons that nature presents to those who open themselves up to them.

Palomar’s eagerness to name the places in which he makes his observations, like the Kyoto sand garden, grounds the stories in our world and underscores the ecological threats that this planet faces. No longer are we in the fantastical, stylized, and nameless industrial city of Marcovaldo’s jaunts. Instead, we follow Palomar around *this* world: the named settings like the Barcelona Zoo, the Jardin des Plantes, the Mexican ruins of Tula, a cheese shop in Paris, and so on, all correspond to real-life locations. This not only lends a semi-autobiographical tone to the work (Calvino’s journeys to these same places are well-documented in his essays, letters, and articles), but it also invites readers to apply similar observations to our own cities. For those of us interested in adopting posthumanism and eco-urbanism as topics of study in our syllabi, *Palomar* becomes a useful text for analysis precisely because we can find these locations online and study them alongside Palomar. These “visible” cities give the text credence when looking to other places as role models to follow for eco-urbanist practices. The text’s familiarity therefore becomes a pedagogical boon, and in many ways can act as a 20th century travel journal, thus expanding its potential for analysis. Finally, as I have put forth as a recurring motif in this dissertation, Calvino’s willingness to specify these cities and places by name lends the fables a sense of contemporary urgency. The human and nonhuman ecological issues I am drawing attention

to affect our world now, and urban life as it is represented and understood in *Palomar* is more at risk than it was when the book was conceived.

Part II: Animal Citizens

Populating these named, real-life locations are an array of nonhuman animals who are often characterized by their subordination to human activity and desires. Calvino lends ample space to the animal citizen in these vignettes in order to reflect on human behavior in comparison to nonhuman life. The iguana from the introductory chapter is one example of Palomar's attempt to contemplate existence as perceived by the nonhuman being, but there are other animals that provide a similar challenge in the book. Imagining life as a nonhuman other is only the first step in the process: Palomar repeatedly realizes throughout his observations that humans are not exceptional, and in fact are often careless and abusive of the well-being of other species. In these instances, Palomar's ethics align with posthumanism's desire to move beyond the human as the de facto planetary species and warns of the hubris that fuels the domination of nonhuman life. Through Palomar's contemplations, we are challenged to consider our limitations and the ways in which we extend our power onto the animal kingdom.

To frame my analysis, I return to Carrie Rohman's essay "On Singularity and the Symbolic: The Threshold of the Human in Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*" as a guiding light. In this essay, Rohamn sees Palomar's visits to the zoo and the cheese shop as a way of observing how humans make meaning out of animals. In her reading, zoos act as art galleries of animals, where visitors can observe one captivity and move onto the next as if

they were paintings in a museum. Similarly, Palomar dissects meaning from the names and types of cheeses while browsing the cheese shop. Rohman puts forth that the animals in *Mr. Palomar* are always the observed object from which humans create meaning about themselves. Furthermore, Palomar's attempts to reduce the animal world to its simplest structures results in ambiguity and inconclusiveness, thus blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman and moving the hierarchy into a horizontal space. In Rohman's words, "Palomar's narrative invokes the threshold or limit of human abilities to know, and it emphasizes various ahuman, creaturely modalities that decenter the Cartesian human and destabilize the human/animal barrier" (63). Given that I have already made claims about Palomar's iguana and the protagonist's relationship with the zoo, I would like to use this space to analyze the other nonhuman beings present in the book, especially those that exist in the urban space alongside Palomar. This includes the animals on sale in the cheese and butcher shops, as they become entangled with the citizens as food objects through the mechanism of consumption. I am especially interested in the more ontologically distant animals: the albino gorilla Snowflake attempting to understand a rubber tire is rich in Darwin-esque readings, but what about the geckos, turtles, and starlings who *do not* implicitly share a common ancestor with the human? Furthermore, how can these creatures enrich our environmental awareness and sensitivity by sharing city space with the urbanite? The "animal citizens" present in *Mr. Palomar* thus emphasize that cities are not only human spaces, and they subtly advocate for the inclusion of the animal. They also suggest that we, too, are guests of the spaces we create. This is where eco-urbanism and posthumanism can merge and inform how we design and inhabit cities moving forward.

In “The blackbird’s whistle,” Palomar becomes entranced with the soundscape surrounding him while working outside in his garden. In particular, he notices the various songs that blackbirds sing and attempts to separate them into “categories of increasing complexity: punctiform chirps; two-note trills...brief vibrato whistling; gurgles,”⁸³ (23) and so on. Slowly, he observes that blackbirds’ whistles are “identical to a human whistle” (24), as well that “they walk on the lawn as if their true vocation were to be earthbound bipeds, and as if they enjoyed establishing analogies with human beings”⁸⁴ (24). Palomar cannot resist but to draw a through-line between the human and the nonhuman, anthropomorphizing the blackbirds’ behavior as an attempt to understand the complexities of their communication system. He then tries to conceptualize the whistles as a dialogue, as if to claim that “they” have conversations like “us.” Soon thereafter, he starts seeing his own conversation between himself and his wife as similar to those of the blackbirds, full of silences and typical utterances, ones that the blackbirds overhear while in the garden. Calvino, in this instance, performs a subtle inversion: the observers become the observed. The following paragraphs consist of Palomar overanalyzing the impossibility of communicating clearly with his wife, concluding with the idea that Mrs. Palomar confirms “her own primacy as far as consideration for the blackbirds goes” (27). This becomes the framework that leads to a challenging of anthropocentrism: Palomar realizes that “the

⁸³ “Il canto degli uccelli occupa una parte variabile nell’attenzione auditiva del signor Palomar: ora egli l’allontana come una componente del silenzio di fondo, ora si concentra a distinguervi verso da verso, raggruppandoli in categorie di complessità crescente: cinguetti puntiformi, trilli di due note una breve una lunga, zirli brevi e vibrati, chioccolii, cascatelle di note che vengono giù filate e s’arrestano, riccioli di modulazioni che si curvano su se stesse, a così via fino ai gorgheggi.” (24-25)

⁸⁴ “Non tarda a scorgerli: camminano sul prato come se la loro vera vocazione fosse di bipedi terrestri, e si divertissero a stabilire analogie con l’uomo.” (26)

discrepancy between human behavior and the rest of the universe has always been a source of anguish”⁸⁵ (27). The story concludes with Palomar attempting to whistle at the blackbirds, who then “respond” to his whistle, but he ultimately cannot confirm if they were cognizant of his initial call. Thus, “they go on whistling, questioning in their puzzlement, he and the blackbirds”⁸⁶ (28).

The blackbirds become an exemplary animal in the book that challenge human exceptionalism and intellectual prowess. Through Palomar’s incessant self-doubt, Calvino dismantles the claim that language separates human from animal. The incommunicability between species is not the main point here: rather, it is that *our* systems of communication are but one system in a much larger pool of systems. The blackbirds’ ignorance of Palomar’s imitation whistles suggests that we, too, are relatively primitive in our conception of language. When Calvino flips the perspective and imagines that “the blackbirds peck on the lawn and no doubt consider the dialogue of the Palomars the equivalent of their own whistles”⁸⁷ (27), he highlights the weaknesses of anthropocentric thinking. The result is a reading of the book that, very subtly, flattens the hierarchy between human and animal citizens. The concluding image is one that advocates for the blackbirds’ presence in the city, as they have been endowed with a power that humans do not possess, a language that we cannot understand. Palomar’s intense willingness to move beyond the

⁸⁵ “Qui s’apre una prospettiva di pensieri molto promettente per il signor Palomar, a cui la discrepanza tra il comportamento umano e il resto dell’universo è sempre stata fonte d’angoscia. Il fischio uguale dell’uomo e del merlo ecco gli appare come un ponte gettato sull’abisso.” (29)

⁸⁶ “Continuano a fischiare e a interrogarsi perplessi, lui e i merli.” (29)

⁸⁷ “I merli becchettano sul prato e certo considerano i dialoghi dei coniugi Palomar come l’equivalente dei propri fischi.” (29)

human allows readers to consider the animal subject as complex and nuanced as themselves. This is a driving point in posthuman philosophy. The desire to dismantle leftover Enlightenment tenets and reconsider the animal other is the first step in empathetic treatment of the expression of life outside of the human experience. I would like to refer to Felice Cimatti's understanding of posthumanism to reinforce this analysis of Palomar and the blackbirds, which I will quote at length:

Posthumanism poses the question of another kind of humanity, which is no longer humanistic. The 'post' of posthumanism does not refer to an improved form of humanity. 'Post' still means a human animal, however an animal who does not think of itself in a humanistic manner. That is, it does not think of being something special in respect to the rest of nature and life. Someone – or something – who does not think that such a thing like 'human dignity' exists. Maybe such a posthuman being does not think at all about itself. In fact, the hallmark of humanity is such a capacity to think about itself. On the contrary, posthumanism aims to attenuate or cancel all the proud and presumptuous humanistic characters of humanity. (118)

Palomar's willingness to resist thinking of himself as "special in respect to the rest of nature and life" is how I understand the character as a posthumanist in action. There is a hesitation in Calvino, as expressed by Palomar, to commit to ignorantly seeing himself exceptional. "The blackbird's whistle" ends with a discovery and a profound concession: it is not Mr. and Mrs. Palomar who communicate effectively, despite their "advanced" linguistic abilities. They, too, struggle to express their true intentions in words. Significant to my reading, the blackbirds *observe* this weakness: Calvino gives them just as much agency and awareness as Palomar. With this image of the blackbirds dismissing the Palomars' inept communication skills, Calvino ends the story.

We can return to Calvino's essay on Lightness to find an influential literary figure that supports this idea: the 17th century French poet Cyrano de Bergerac. In *Six Memos for*

the Next Millennium, Calvino attributes Cyrano with the title of “modern literature’s first poet of atomism” (24). He continues:

In pages whose irony can’t conceal a genuine cosmic excitement, Cyrano celebrates the unity of all things, animate and inanimate, the combinatorics of elementary parts that determine the diversity of life forms, and above all he conveys a sense of the precariousness of the processes that created them – that is, of how close man came to not being man, life to not being life, and the world to not being a world.⁸⁸ (24)

Echoes of Cyrano permeate through *Palomar*, especially here in the story with the blackbirds, and even more so in *Le cosmicomiche*. Important to my reading, I see in Calvino’s writing a recurring attempt to draw attention to the ways in which the human being considers itself to be separate from other life forms (animate and inanimate), and then subverting that exceptionalism with what Calvino calls “poetic invention” (25) in the same essay. This formula returns time and again in the stories and could very well be the thesis statement of Palomar’s observations.

The tone that characterizes Palomar’s admiration for nonhuman life shifts dramatically in the section “Palomar Does the Shopping.” Here, across three vignettes, we are confronted with the reality of animal citizenry in the context of consumer capitalism, as each animal has been reduced to a product of commerce. More than zoos’ capability to hold animals in captivity for human observation (returning again to the image of an art gallery mentioned prior), the shops that Palomar visits become a locus of trading animal bodies for monetary gain. Instead of venturing into the territory of discourse on animal

⁸⁸ “In pagine la cui ironia non fa velo a una vera commozione cosmica, Cyrano celebra l’unità di tutte le cose, inanimate o animate, la combinatoria di figure elementari che determina la varietà delle forme viventi, e soprattutto egli rende il senso della precarietà dei processi che le hanno create: cioè quanto poco è mancato perché l’uomo non fosse l’uomo, e la vita la vita, e il mondo un mondo.” (24)

rights, I would rather concentrate on how posthumanism intrinsically moves beyond simply reducing animals to beasts of burden or to sources for future food. In Braidotti's words, posthumanism highlights how "the global economy is post-anthropocentric in that it ultimately unifies all species under the imperative of the market and its excess threatens the sustainability of our planet as a whole" (63). Braidotti highlights how humans, too, are threatened by global commerce: we suffer just as much as animals under the pressures of trade. Furthermore, this pressure deeply affects the survivability for all species involved. What we see in *Palomar* is the beginnings of connecting the dots between nonhuman life and the chance to live sustainably on the planet. The posthuman element of *Palomar* is found in how the protagonist sees animals as more than food, and furthermore how nonhuman life is an essential element for sustaining human activity in the city. The relationship, once again, becomes one of mutual symbiosis, rather than exploitation and dominance.

In "Two Pounds of Goose Fat," Palomar observes a massive, impatient holiday crowd as they make their way through a Parisian charcuterie. He laments that in their shopping, the people are "concentrated on themselves...each concerned with what he has and what he does not have...a greed without joy or youth drives them" (69). It seems Palomar is the only one aware of "a deep, atavistic bond [that] exists between them and those foods, their consubstance, flesh of their flesh"⁸⁹ (69). Rather than appreciate the

⁸⁹ "Il signor Palomar vorrebbe cogliere nei loro sguardi un riflesso della fascinazione di quei tesori, ma i visi e i gesti sono solo impazienti e sfuggenti, di persone concentrate in se stesse, a nervi tesi, preoccupate di ciò che ha e ciò che non ha. Nessuno gli sembra degno della gloria pantagruelica che si dispiega lungo le vetrine e sui banchi. Un'avidità senza gioia né gioventù li spinge: eppure un legame profondo, atavico esiste tra loro e quei cibi, consustanziali a loro, carne della loro carne." (71)

artform and enthusiasm that is purchasing high-quality meats, Palomar sees the ravenous crowd as one undeserving of “those gifts that nature and culture have handed down for millennia”⁹⁰ (69). This creates doubt in our observer. He wonders if he is disillusioned by the high esteem he holds for his food. Perhaps his gaze is backfiring on him, and that every food object he sees as “a document of the history of civilization, a museum exhibit” (70) is instead simply an object of commerce, one to be consumed, disposed, and ignored. The vignette concludes with the worry that it is Palomar who is “the profane one, the alien, the outsider”⁹¹ (70) for seeing the sacred in the animal products, and not the other shoppers who refuse to do so.

Similarly, the story “The Cheese Museum” elaborates on this analogy of food as encyclopedia, as a history of civilization to be read. Here, Palomar attempts to categorize all the cheeses in a shop in Paris into his notebook. His analytical eye pans across the varieties of options in the store, ones that reveal themselves beyond just their appearance and potential taste to be worthy of serious contemplation. In this intentional act of observing, Palomar connects the cheese products to their context of origin: “behind every cheese there is a pasture of a different green under a different sky...there are different flocks, with their stablings and their transhumances...behind every displayed object the

⁹⁰ “vorrebbe che dai loro vassoi i pâté d’anatra e di lepre dimostrassero di preferire lui agli altri, di riconoscere in lui il solo che merita i loro doni, quei doni che natura e cultura hanno tramandato per millenni e che non devono cadere in mani profane!” (71)

⁹¹ “Sentono che il suo sguardo trasforma ogni vivanda in un documento della storia della civiltà, in un oggetto da museo. Il signor Palomar vorrebbe che la coda avanzasse più in fretta. Sa che se passa ancora qualche minuto in quel negozio, finirà per convincersi d’essere lui il profano, l’estraneo, lui l’escluso.” (72)

presence of the civilization that has given it form and takes form from it”⁹² (73). In his moment of epiphany, Palomar holds up the shopping line and disrupts the normal flow of consumption. He is forced to “fall back on the most obvious, the most banal, the most advertised” of his choices in cheese, “as if the automatons of mass civilization were waiting only for this moment of uncertainty on his part in order to seize him again and have him at their mercy”⁹³ (75). Once again, the vignette ends with a tonal shift, a worry from Calvino about the effects of mass consumerism and the monocultures they perpetuate. The takeaway is that flashy commerce disconnects humans from animals and the ecosystems that birth the products of consumption. This dissonance between consumer and consumed further separates the gap between species. In his subtle way, Calvino delivers the implicit moral: our relationship with animals as food products, once sacred and balanced, is on its way to total exploitation. Market pressures instigate sales. No longer do we understand where food comes from, or how it is made, or who cares for the source. The image of the “automaton” drives this feeling in the conclusion of the narrative. Calvino suggests through Palomar that we are at risk of losing our own histories by neglecting to understand this delicate relationship between humans and animals. What was once symbiotic and cyclical is now linear, and Calvino understands the risks that this implies. His characterization of

⁹² “Dietro ogni formaggio c’è un pascolo d’un diverso verde sotto un diverso cielo: prati incrostati di sale che le maree di Normandia depositano ogni sera; prati profumati d’aromi al sole ventoso di Provenza: ci sono diversi armenti con le loro stabulazioni e transumanze; ci sono segreti di lavorazione tramandati nei secoli. Questo negozio è un museo: il signor Palomar visitandolo sente, come al Louvre, dietro ogni oggetto esposto la presenza della civiltà che gli ha dato forma e che da esso prende forma.” (75)

⁹³ “L’ordinazione elaborata e ghiotta che aveva intenzione di fare gli sfugge dalla memoria; balbetta; ripiega sul più ovvio, sul più banale, sul più pubblicizzato, come se gli automatismi della civiltà di massa non aspettassero che quel suo momento d’incertezza per riafferrarlo in loro balia.” (76)

the other shoppers as “automatons” also shows his frustration with the behaviors of consumers that industrialization has produced.

Finally, Palomar makes his way to a butcher shop. This vignette, called “Marble and Blood” becomes the most explicitly critical of the three from the perspective of animal humanities (or rather, posthumanism’s advocacy of animals as a key agent in the discourse). While browsing for potential steaks, Palomar connects the content of the butcher shop to the histories of civilizations: he is able to transcend his immediate reality and connect it to the distant past. At the butcher counter arrive the most poignant phrases of this chapter: “from hooks hang quartered carcasses to remind you that your every morsel is part of a being whose living completeness has been arbitrarily torn asunder”⁹⁴ (77). Following this is another profound statement about the animal condition in the era of mass civilization: “The map of the human habitat is this...both are protocols that should sanction the rights man has attributed to himself, of possession, division, and consumption without residue of the terrestrial continents and of the loins of the animal body”⁹⁵ (77). Calvino suggests that, in the age of consumer capitalism, humans have overstepped their limits and have broken the boundaries of terrestrial continents imposed onto them by the formation of the planet. Then, in the final two paragraphs of the vignette, the intrinsic parallel between human and nonhuman is made explicit: “It must be said that the man-beef symbiosis has, over the centuries, achieved an equilibrium (allowing the two species to continue

⁹⁴ “Dai ganci pendono corpi squartati a ricordarti che ogni tuo boccone è parte d’un essere alla cui completezza vivente è stato arbitrariamente strappato.” (78)

⁹⁵ “La mappa dell’habitat umano è questa, non meno del planisfero del pianeta, entrambi protocolli che dovrebbero sancire i diritti che l’uomo s’è attribuito, di possesso, spartizione e divoramento senza residui dei continenti terrestri e dei lombi del corpo animale.” (78)

multiplying), though it is asymmetric...and has guaranteed the flourishing of what is called human civilization, *which at least in part should be called human-bovine*⁹⁶ (77-78) (emphasis mine). In this symbiotic relationship, Palomar “recognizes in the strung-up carcass of the beef the person of a disemboweled brother”⁹⁷ (78), which conflict with his selfish desire to eat a tasty meal. So concludes the vignette.

What is at risk in all three of these stories in “Palomar Does the Shopping”? Implicitly, the loss of human history and culture is at risk. Calvino understands the benefit that animals have provided to humans for the building of their civilizations. He recognizes that this relationship has, for centuries, been in balance, enough to merit the rephrasing of “human” to “human-bovine” when describing our past. Posthuman ethics argue for the same inclusion. Palomar is cognizant of nonhuman animals’ agency when he browses the wares of these shops, and he seems to be the only shopper who stops to consider the origin of the products when doing so. The story of “A journey with the cows” in *Marcovaldo* warned of the separation between human and animal as one that exists zonally. In the *Marcovaldo* vignette, there is a clear distinction between city-dweller and farmer, between Marcovaldo and the cows that pass through the piazza. This relationship is a pastoral and ancient one, one that feels increasingly impossible to achieve in a developed, industrial, and hyper-expansive world, where the boundaries of the city overlap into the natural world

⁹⁶ “Occorre dire che la simbiosi uomo-bue ha raggiunto nei secoli un suo equilibrio (permettendo alle due specie di continuare a moltiplicarsi) sia pur asimmetrico (è vero che l’uomo provvede a nutrire il bue, ma non è tenuto a darglisi in pasto) e ha garantito il fiorire della civiltà detta umana, che almeno per una sua porzione andrebbe detta umano-bovina.” (78-79)

⁹⁷ “Il signor Palomar partecipa a questa simbiosi con lucida coscienza e pieno consenso: pur riconoscendo nella carcassa di bue penzolante la persona del proprio fratello squartato.” (79)

and become unrecognizable. Calvino takes this idea further in *Palomar* when analyzing the meat in the butcher shop. No longer is the disconnect so literal: the separation between man and environment takes a more abstract form. Calvino, through *Palomar*, highlights the reality that the further we move from the pastures that sustain the cows, the more disconnected we become from the life force that we consume when eating animal products. The same goes for the ritual of butchering and preparing the meat: the “automatons” present in the shop have no sense of anything but the physical product itself. Notably, *Palomar*’s mood in the last paragraph is one of great conflict. He struggles to separate himself from the knowledge that he possesses. It is a mood of “restrained joy and of fear, desire and respect, egoistic concern and universal compassion, the mood that perhaps others express in prayer”⁹⁸ (78). He understands himself connected (in an almost brotherly way) to the slaughtered animals. This connection is not just atomic (a la *Cyrano*), but also material (*Palomar* sustains himself through consumption of their bodies). The lingering feeling at the end of these three vignettes is that the pressures of the era of “large numbers” are forcing this once sacred and balanced relationship into unsustainable exploitation. At risk is the spiritual element that connects the human to the bovine, as well as the quality of the product itself after death (elements of food culture that the Slow Food movement in Italy has sought to preserve). Calvino is implicit with this message in *Palomar*.

Rosi Braidotti analyzes at length the relationship between human and animal in *The Posthuman* (2013), finding connections between meat consumption and masculinity,

⁹⁸ “lo stato di animo di *Palomar* che fa la fila nella macelleria è insieme di gioia trattenuta e di timore, di desiderio e di rispetto, di preoccupazione egoistica e di compassione universale, lo stato d’animo che forse altri esprimono nella preghiera.” (79)

human's command of language as self-congratulatory, and the employment of metaphor onto the animal other as a manifestation of control. Most important to my analysis of Palomar's relationship with his nonhuman counterpart, however, is the understanding that "in advanced capitalism, animals of all categories and species have been turned into tradable disposable bodies, inscribed in a global market of post-anthropocentric exploitation" (70). Calvino, via Palomar, narrows in on this relationship in relatively few words, and to profound effect. Palomar's preoccupation with the "strung-up carcass of the beef" as "the person of a disemboweled brother" (78) draws a through-line between human and bovine and gives weight to a relationship that is rarely considered in the contemporary imagination. Typically, humans' affinity with apes and chimpanzees becomes the dominant image when understanding ourselves as animals. Palomar goes further: he suggests that we are also like cows. Evoking *Cyrano* once again, humans are so close to cows that we could have been them, and them us, if not for arbitrary, alternative combinatorics of genetic information. This idea exists as an undercurrent throughout *Palomar*, and notably produces anxiety when considering the animal other. As Braidotti states, "Animals are caught in a double bind: on the one hand, they are more than ever the object of inhumane exploitation; on the other hand, they benefit from residual forms of reparative humanization. This conflicting situation leads me to conclude that post-anthropocentrism is for both humans and animals a mixed blessing" (76). Despite this internal conflict riddled with anxieties about seeing a brother in the disembodied cow, Palomar nonetheless purchases his meal. He participates in the inhumane exploitation of the cow in turning it into a disposable product of consumption, but nonetheless recognizes

the life form that existed prior to its mutilation. This is the posthuman conflict in action. The implicit moral of “Marble and Blood” alludes to the complexities of the human-nonhuman relationship and the pressures that industrialization imposes onto both subjects. Furthermore, the central point of tension is that of suffering and death. Palomar’s greatest worry is that the beast’s body has been “arbitrarily torn asunder,” and that the beast’s death has been reduced to simply another process that propels consumerism forward. Death in “Marble and Blood” is the byproduct of consumption and a reminder of the temporary nature of existence. In recognizing the affinity between human and bovine, Palomar also realizes that he, too, will die.

Part III: Palomar Must Die

Death is intrinsically tied up with posthumanism: it is built into its name. Posthumanism explores what death means on the level of the personal, the species, and the planetary. Death is the ultimate warning sign: it is the undesirable future that we fear in our daily lives and seek to avoid at all costs. Posthumanism accepts death as a natural process, a phenomenon that links all living things together, but it also cares about assuring that life can survive in harmony with the planet’s ecosystem. Posthumanism fights against extinction of human and nonhuman life. Technological transhumanism, in contrast, totally rejects death and seeks immortality through advancements in science. This is a fundamental difference between the two cousin disciplines. Calvino, I argue, tends toward the posthuman side of the aisle. *Palomar* ends with a few vignettes that highlight the

protagonist's acceptance of death as an inevitability, and he finds humility in that realization:

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?⁹⁹ (18).

This quotation arrives at the end of "The Sword of the Sun," a story in which Palomar loses himself in contemplation of a reflection of the sun's rays across the sea in which he floats. In this vignette, Palomar's ocular expertise is put to the test: despite the optical illusion, he is desperately trying to "capture" the reflection of the sun on the water. As Calvino writes, "wherever Mr. Palomar moves, he remains the vertex of that sharp, gilded triangle; the sword follows him"¹⁰⁰ (13). In this instance Palomar believes the sun is paying special attention to him and him alone. This is debunked, however, with the second level of contemplation, which suggests instead that "Everyone with eyes sees the reflection that follows him; illusion of the senses and of the mind holds us all prisoners, always,"¹⁰¹ (14). He continues to take this idea further and further until he concludes that "all of this is happening not on the sea, not in the sun...but inside my head" (15). Here, in this "dead-man's float" (16), Palomar's ego begins to unravel. He becomes "immersed in a disembodied world," full of plastic waste and environmental toxins, resulting in Palomar

⁹⁹ "Il signor Palomar pensa al mondo senza di lui: quello sterminato di prima della sua nascita, e quello ben più oscuro di dopo la sua morte; cerca d'immaginare il mondo prima degli occhi, di qualsiasi occhio; e un mondo che domani per catastrofe o lenta corrosione resti cieco. Che cosa avviene (avvenne, avverrà) mai in quel mondo?" (20)

¹⁰⁰ "E dovunque il signor Palomar si sposti, il vertice di quell'aguzzo triangolo dorato è lui; la spada lo segue, indicandolo come la lancetta d'un orologio che ha per perno il sole." (15)

¹⁰¹ "Tutti quelli che hanno occhi vedono il riflesso che li segue; l'illusione dei sensi e della mente ci tiene sempre tutti prigionieri." (16)

feeling “like flotsam amid flotsam, a corpse rolling on the garbage-beaches of the cemetery-continents”¹⁰² (17). His epiphany becomes clear: “for millions of centuries the sun’s rays rested on the water before there were eyes capable of perceiving them”¹⁰³ (18). In this realization, Palomar sees his own inevitable death and understands that the Sun will carry on shining after he is gone. This melancholic image concludes the story.

This passage provides great insight into Palomar’s methodological approach to understanding the visible world. He realizes that the sun’s rays existed before humanity’s ability to perceive them, and they will exist long after Palomar passes on. In the interim, the human experience will continue to make sense of itself and the world in which it lives through observation of the material world. The caveat is that this experience is not uniform and it is not universal. From a posthuman perspective, this human sense-making of the world is not most important, either: it is but one of an infinite number of ways in which life looks critically back onto itself. Palomar’s epiphany in the sea is emblematic of this idea. While he floats among garbage and waste products, he sees in the sun’s reflection the primacy of the human experience. Contaminating the water surrounding Palomar is a motorboat that passes by and “scatters excess fuel in his wake, detritus of combustion, residues that cannot be assimilated, mixing and multiplying the life and death around him”¹⁰⁴ (17). The multiform life and death surrounding Palomar points to the multitude of

¹⁰² “Sollevato anche lui dall’ondo del motoscafo, travolto dalla marea delle scorie, il signor Palomar d’improvviso si sente relitto tra i relitti, cadavere rotolato sulle spiagge-immondezzaio dei continenti-cimiteri.” (19)

¹⁰³ “A ben pensarci, una tale situazione non è nuova: già per la durata di milioni di secoli i raggi del sole si posavano sull’acqua prima che esistessero degli occhi capaci di raccogliarli.” (19)

¹⁰⁴ “Un’onda intrusa turba il mare liscio; un motoscafo irrompe e corre via spandendo nafta e sobbalzando a pancia piatta. Il velo di riflessi unti e cangianti della nafta si dispiega fluttuando dentro l’acqua; quella

experiences, too. Palomar is but one experience among a (literal) sea of infinite experiences, infinite life forms, and infinite death forms.

Joseph Francese in *Narrating Postmodern Time and Space* makes sense of this passage as a point of departure in understanding Palomar's observatory mode. Francese states that "a first important step for Calvino-Palomar, as we have seen, is the acknowledgement of a material world that exists autonomously of the subject" (97), a claim that is on full display in "The Sword in the Sun." In recognizing this autonomy, Palomar is able to remove himself from his bodily experience and achieve a more detached, existential viewing of the world. The clever uses of the preterit, present, and future tenses in the question "What happens (happened, will happen), in that world?" (18) mark this detachment. These tenses also acknowledge Palomar's position in time, one that is fragile and short, and thus non-definitive. His existence is momentary; the "far more obscure world after his death" is both the world we are currently inhabiting now and the endless world that comes after our deaths (personal and of the species). In this way, death is fundamental to Palomar's sensemaking. His floating "amid flotsam" and the motorboat's refuse highlights the materiality of his own body, one that, like the butchered cow, will become organic material for consumption or left to decay. In this vignette is the recognition that the human experience is one that pollutes (polluted, and will pollute) future ecosystems. Posthumanism emphasizes this reality but does not surrender itself to death like Palomar does. It instead points to the urgency of the present as a means to reshape (and

consistenza materiale che al barbaglio del sole manca, non può essere messa in dubbio per questa traccia della presenza fisica dell'uomo, che cosparge la sua scia di perdite di carburante, detriti della combustione, residui non assimilabili, mescolando e moltiplicando la vita e la morte intorno a sè" (19)

avoid) future catastrophes. Braidotti theorizes about death at length in *The Posthuman*, but I would like to concentrate on one short passage as a way to frame my analysis of its presence in *Palomar* from the posthuman perspective. She writes:

...in a posthuman perspective, the emphasis on the impersonality of life is echoed by an analogous reflection on death. Because humans are mortal, death, or the transience of life, is written at our core: it is the event that structures our time-lines and frames our time-zones, not as a limit, but as a porous threshold...Being mortal, we all are 'have beens': the spectacle of our death is written obliquely into the script of our temporality, not as a barrier, but as a condition of possibility. (131-132)

Palomar is embodying and enacting precisely this idea: he understands in "The Sword in the Sun" that death is written at his core. Furthermore, as Braidotti states, "making friends with the impersonal necessity of death is an ethical way of installing oneself in life as a transient, slightly wounded visitor" (132). This attitude shapes the detached character of Palomar, makes sense of his timid and inconclusive observations, and ultimately defines the ethos of the stories at large. Notably, death is invisible: for a character who is fully defined by his visual prowess, it is the phenomenon that exists just outside of the frame, and thus outside of his comprehension. Its omnipresence is only visible through those organic and inorganic beings who have been released, whose corpses and carcasses populate the ocean around him and the butcher shops that he frequents. In the book we are reminded that we experience death primarily through others: Palomar makes sense of himself through the deceased in his surroundings. That the book concludes with these vignettes centered on death outlines Palomar's trajectory from curious urbanist to peripheral bystander to philosopher; it marks the shape of Calvino's own life and a model of our own.

The first vignette “The World Looks at the World” is, thematically, a reflection of “The Sword in the Sun.” Here, Palomar seeks to defend his *modus operandi* of “looking at things from the outside” (113) despite the paradoxical challenges that come with that endeavor. He struggles to set his own ego aside, to remove the “‘I,’ namely Mr. Palomar” (114) from his observations, and concludes that in order “to look at itself the world needs the eyes (and the eyeglasses) of Mr. Palomar”¹⁰⁵ (114). This does not satisfy him, though: he must remove himself further, until all that is left is the outside world viewing the outside world. This conundrum recalls the fundamental paradoxes of posthumanism; namely, the impossibility of separating the human gaze from the nonhuman world. No matter the attempts to move beyond the human and to avoid the pitfalls of anthropocentrism, the conclusions will nevertheless double back onto themselves. However, much like in “The Sword in the Sun,” there is an acknowledgement that “having the outside look outside is not enough: the trajectory must start from the looked-at thing, linking it with the thing that looks”¹⁰⁶ (115). In essence, the value is given to the observed world by the one who observes, and in that lies a responsibility and a code of ethics to represent it accordingly. The sword reveals itself to Palomar and inspires in him contemplation of life before and after him. Through this mode of revealing, we understand Palomar as a finite and mortal subject, one that exists momentarily and emphasizes the brevity of our own lives. In “The World Looks at the World,” that same urgency is brought forth, which sets the stage for

¹⁰⁵ “Per guardare se stesso il mondo ha bisogno degli occhi (e degli occhiali) del signor Palomar.” (116)

¹⁰⁶ “Che sia il fuori a guardare fuori non basta: è dalla cosa guardata che deve partire la traiettoria che la collega alla cosa che guarda.” (117)

the following two vignettes. Emerging again is the conundrum haunting the center of Palomar, the primary driver of the book, which is the question of his place in the world, his place before it, and his place after it. Death is an intrinsic motivator in Palomar's desire to use his time well and make sense of his world. Like Palomar, posthumanism stresses the same urgency.

The second vignette, "The Universe as a Mirror," is Palomar's attempt "toward achieving a harmony both with the human race, his neighbor, and with the most distant spiral of the system of the galaxies"¹⁰⁷ (117). Palomar desires to move beyond the human world and into the cosmos. He finds parallels between the most distant stars and the "watercress leaves in his salad bowl" (117), creating a through-line between the human and the nonhuman and emphasizing their interconnectedness. In "contemplating the stars he has become accustomed to considering himself an anonymous and incorporeal dot, almost forgetting that he exists"¹⁰⁸ (118). Again, the same conundrum emerges: "The universe is the mirror in which we can contemplate only what we have learned to know in ourselves"¹⁰⁹ (119). This turns the gaze back onto himself and reminds us of the fundamental paradox of self-reflection: how can we achieve a posthuman vision of the world when all passes through the human gaze? How can we move beyond the human without Palomar's glasses, without filtering it through our experiences? Palomar arrives at

¹⁰⁷ "Tutti i suoi sforzi, d'ora in poi, saranno tesi a raggiungere un'armonia tanto col genere umano a lui prossimo quanto con la spirale più lontana del sistema delle galassie." (119)

¹⁰⁸ "contemplando gli astri lui s'è abituato a considerarsi un punto anonimo e incorporeo, quasi a dimenticarsi d'esistere" (120)

¹⁰⁹ "l'universo è lo specchio in cui possiamo contemplare solo ciò che abbiamo imparato a conoscere in noi." (121)

impasse after impasse in these meditations, reflecting the same difficulties that posthumanism faces in the theory. The solution is through the contemplation, and acceptance, of death. Calvino suggests that if we understand and accept our temporary state of being on the planet, perhaps we can reconfigure our sense of place in the world. For some, the cosmos is a reminder of the futility and insignificance of human life, but Palomar resists this worldview. He reminds us that in death we find the humility necessary to decenter our experience on Earth as unique and worth prioritizing, and instead encourages us to refocus and preserve the world in order to avoid total annihilation.

This idea emerges in the third vignette of the series “Learning to be Dead.” Already from such a title we can sense Calvino’s comical and ironic detachment at play: Palomar must “learn” to be dead. If we are to use the protagonist as a proxy for our own experiences, Calvino suggests that we also must learn how to be dead, and thus gives us a guideline for thinking. It begins with the acknowledgement that “being dead is less easy than it might seem” (121). This is first because, before our births, there are infinite possibilities, but after our death, there is a closed, unalterable loop. This is a significant distinction that Palomar makes when defining death: he sees the world before life as nonexistence, but the world after life as a concluded story. This instills great anxiety and also great ease in Palomar. On the one hand, “Mr. Palomar does not underestimate the advantages that the condition of being alive can have over that of being dead”¹¹⁰ (124), while on the other hand, “The more Mr. Palomar’s spiritual condition approaches the one here described, the more the

¹¹⁰ “Palomar non sottovaluta i vantaggi che la condizione del vivo può avere su quella del morto, non nel senso del futuro, dove i rischi sono sempre molto forti e i benefici possono essere di corta durata, ma nel senso della possibilità di migliorare la forma del proprio passato.” (126)

idea of being dead seems natural to him”¹¹¹ (123). Calvino concludes this vignette with a parallel between Palomar and the end of civilization. He senses through his character that the micro *could* represent the macro. The death of Palomar is also the death of human history. Here, Calvino zooms out and places our time on earth on the cosmic scale: “the moment comes when it is time to wear out and be extinguished in an empty sky, when the last material evidence of the memory of living will degenerate in a flash of heat, or will crystallize its atoms in the chill of an immobile order”¹¹² (126). With this image in mind, the novella concludes and Palomar dies.

Are there distinct connections between the philosophical ramblings of an author looking back on his life through his semi-autobiographical literary character and the problems facing the humanities into the 21st century? I believe so. First, we can use Palomar’s preoccupation with death as a way to better understand the function of the observatory mode of the book. In many ways, Calvino, via Palomar, already learned how to be dead before its inception: he does not need to wait until the final pages to understand its core lessons. Braidotti emphasizes, just as Palomar realizes for himself, that “death is behind us” (133). She continues:

Death is the event that has always already taken place at the level of consciousness. As an individual occurrence it will come in the form of the physical extinction of the body, but as event, in the sense of the awareness of finitude, of the interrupted flow of my being-there, death has already taken place. (133)

¹¹¹ “Più lo stato di Palomar d’animo del signor Palomar s’avvicina a quello qui descritto, e più l’idea d’essere morto gli si presenta come naturale.” (125)

¹¹² “E così di rinvio in rinvio si arriva al momento in cui sarà il tempo a logorarsi e ad estinguersi in un cielo vuoto, quando l’ultimo supporto materiale della memoria del vivere si sarà degradato in una vampa di calore, o avrà cristallizzato i suoi atomi nel gelo d’un ordine immobile.” (128)

Palomar's passivity and disengagement in his excursions mark the profound realization that his life is ephemeral and transient. The more he detaches from his surroundings and leans into his observations, the more clear this realization becomes. Palomar repeatedly witnesses how life carries on (carried on, will carry on) without him. The character, in effect, marks a profound maturation in Calvino as a writer and thinker. He understands that his own death has already taken place at the metaphysical level. As such, the physical text (the book itself) becomes the object that survives, and it is only through writing that any sense of immortality can be achieved. Palomar's body will deteriorate "amid the flotsam," but his observations will endure. This idea is reinforced by Lucia Re's analysis in "Calvino and the Value of Literature," in which Re argues that "although literature is inherently a form of intellectual and sentimental education, Calvino says, literature is not a school" (128). Furthermore, Re understands that "literature's value is unique in that there is a particular *intelligenza del mondo* ('an understanding of the world') that literature and only literature can give us" (125). I have repeatedly emphasized that Calvino is implicit in communicating these subtle lessons in his stories. He understands that literature has educational value insofar that it is a medium for communicating ideas, and not indisputable facts. The morals at the heart of what I refer to as his posthuman fables are presented indiscreetly, without judgment or force, and invite readers to engage with the ideas that are left open-ended. The final three vignettes of Palomar repeat this methodology and teach us, alongside Palomar, how to be dead. In effect, they put the 'post' in posthumanism in a literal sense. The promise of Palomar's death is the promise of our own individual deaths, as well as the implicit promise that even the human species must, eventually, die.

This is where the ecological element enters the discussion. The invisible, intangible crises that we are facing “in the era of big numbers” are threatening human and nonhuman life at an increasing rate. Climate change, global extinction events, pandemic viruses, toxic waste management problems, and deforestation are but a few examples of how humans have overstepped their place in the material world and sent total ecosystems out of balance to great effect. Death is the byproduct of this unguided and unbridled behavior. Posthumanism emphasizes that we are guests, not hosts, on this planet. Advocacy for nonhuman life is an attempt to restore some of these balances. In order to better communicate the interconnectedness between humans and nonhuman others, we must rely on narratives like those of Calvino to make sense of what is at risk. As Carrie Rohman notes in her analysis of *Palomar*: “Mr. Palomar’s death is not appreciably different from the death of a crocodile. We are, despite our connections to the abstract and transcendent, still primates subject to mortality” (76). Drawing the through-line between crocodile and human man is not simply a flourish for fancy storytelling: it is a profound reminder that we are ontologically cut from the same cloth and subject to the same risks. Calvino’s invocation of Ovid and Cyrano emphasize this connection. Therefore, it is no accident, in my reading, that Palomar spends so much time staring at the animals in his periphery. From the dragon semblance of the encaged iguana to the whistling blackbird standing on two limbs to the dismembered cow that is sold as food, Calvino puts on display an entire world of nonhuman animals in *Palomar*. Death is both the primary phenomenon that connects us to nonhuman life, as well as the primary threat to sustainable life if we abuse that connection.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I have made a case for analyzing *Palomar* as a posthuman and ecocritical text. I see in this work a character who exists in a liminal space, an ontological in-between, who leans into observation as a way of making sense of the world. Through his observations, we must repeatedly consider the nonhuman subject. In *Palomar*, Italo Calvino subtly advocates for this nonhuman subject, be it organic or inorganic, and emphasizes the interconnectedness between all life on the planet. The looming and implicit threat to survival lies in this interconnectedness. Death is the motivator that moves Palomar into his position of observer-philosopher, and it makes its full appearance in the final three vignettes of the collection. Palomar serves as a proxy for readers to “learn how to be dead,” or rather how to learn to understand life in its transitory state. Posthumanism emphasizes the same themes and lessons. Its intrinsic connection to ecocriticism is found in the desire to restabilize the human-nonhuman balance that is greatly at risk in the new millennium. This endeavor can only be achieved through the destabilization of hierarchies and the reincorporation of nonhuman life into our city spaces with greater emphasis on sustainability for all life. *Palomar* gives us multiple examples of this symbiotic relationship, and also hints at the consequences for disregarding this call to action.

Chapter IV: Qfwfq: Posthuman Life Unbound

“By transposing us beyond the confines of bound identities, art becomes necessarily inhuman in the sense of non-human in that it connects to the animal, the vegetable, earthy and planetary forces that surround us. Art is also, moreover, cosmic in its resonance and hence posthuman by structure, as it carries us to the limits of what our embodied selves can do or endure. In so far as art stretches the boundaries of representation to the utmost, it reaches the limits of life itself and thus confronts the horizon of death.”

Rosi Braidotti, The Posthuman

In 1969, the Apollo 11 astronauts snapped a photograph of Earth while orbiting the Moon. The image shows a waxing gibbous, blue marble hovering just above a desolate, brown lunar surface. It is surrounded by the total blackness of space. The stark contrast in colors and shapes give it an artistic quality; its aesthetic beauty complements its scientific significance to the mission. This photograph captured the imagination of Italian photographer Luigi Ghirri, who wrote in 1978 that “it was not only the image of the entire world, but the only image that contained *all other images* of the world: graffiti, frescoes, paintings, writings, photographs, books, films. It was at once the representation of the world and all representations of the world” (18, emphasis original). Ghirri continues and states that “the power of containing everything was annulled in the face of the impossibility of seeing everything all at once” (18). Technically, the image contains everything we have done as a species, but it does not allow us to witness our totality. Ghirri saw in this photo the wavering between the micro and macro: “the need for information or for knowledge emerges from these two extremes – fluctuating between the microscope and the telescope” (18). Carl Sagan’s poetic reflection on the image of Earth as captured by the Voyager 11 mission from outer space in 1990 echoes this same sentiment. Sagan’s timeless words,

“That’s here. That’s home. That’s us,” put the pale blue dot into cosmic perspective and emphasized Earth’s solitude in the vast emptiness of space.

The Apollo 11 moon landing occurred three years after the publication of the first series of Cosmicomic stories. The fervor of the space race no doubt trickled into Calvino’s mind while writing these tales, but the author had larger ideas than simply sending man to the moon. In some playful instances, in fact, Calvino quite literally brought the moon back to man in these stories. If Palomar is to be considered an anthropomorphized telescope, and thus a vector for exploring modes of seeing, then the protagonist Qfwfq of *Le cosmicomiche* can be considered a semi-anthropomorphic, inhuman shapeshifter, or rather a vector for exploring limitless modes of being. We can trace Calvino’s inspiration for Qfwfq back to the rapid scientific advancements of the 20th century (especially the digital technological revolution spurred on by the development of the personal computer) and Ovid’s poetic understanding of the combinatorial qualities of the atom. Calvino describes in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* in his essay on ‘Lightness’ his admiration for science’s ability to fill in the blanks left by literature:

When the human realm seems doomed to heaviness, I feel the need to fly like Perseus into some other space...In the infinite universe of literature there are always other avenues to explore, some brand-new and some exceedingly ancient, styles and forms that can change our image of the world. And when literature fails to assure me that I’m not merely chasing dreams, I look to science to sustain my visions in which all heaviness dissolves...¹¹³ (8-9)

¹¹³ “Nei momenti in cui il regno dell’umano mi sembra condannato alla pesantezza, penso che dovrei volare come Perseo in un altro spazio...Nell’universo infinito della letteratura s’aprono sempre altre vie da esplorare, nuovissime o antichissime, stili e forme che possono cambiare la nostra immagine del mondo...Ma se la letteratura non basta ad assicurarmi che non sto solo inseguendo dei sogni, cerco nella scienza alimento per le mie visioni in cui ogni pesantezza viene dissolta...” (11-12)

Le cosmicomiche are Calvino flying like Perseus into (literal) space, and I argue they become the stories in which he achieves the highest form of his definition of lightness. Echoing Braidotti's quote in the epigraph of this chapter, I also see *Le cosmicomiche* as Calvino's posthuman summa, stories in which the "boundaries of representation" are redefined by the art of literary invention. Many of these stories depart from a scientific theorem that acts as a prompt for the writer to transform mathematics and physics into a fictional narrative. Calvino thus utilizes science to create new fables and emphasizes the imaginative qualities of empirical knowledge in the process.

Calvino also understood science to have its own pitfalls. In the relentless pursuit of objectivity, the author saw the scientific method running a great risk to affirm its own biases and conclusions as unbreakable truths. He notes in *The Uses of Literature* that, if left unchecked, science could fall into the same traps that authors have since the beginning of storytelling: "Science is faced with problems not too dissimilar from those of literature. It makes patterns of the world that are immediately called in question, it swings between the inductive and the deductive methods, and it must always be on its guard lest it mistake its own linguistic conventions for objective laws"¹¹⁴ (45). The scientific developments of the 20th century were especially proving of this idea. From the discovery of the wave-particle duality in quantum mechanics to the theory of general relativity established by Einstein, the cut-and-dry veracity of Newtonian physics shifted into much more unstable territory with the development of new technologies. Kerstin Pilz makes note of this shift and

¹¹⁴ "La scienza si trova di fronte a problemi non dissimili da quelli della letteratura; costruisce modelli del mondo continuamente messi in crisi, alterna metodo induttivo e deduttivo, e deve sempre stare attenta e non scambiare per leggi obiettive le proprie convenzioni linguistiche." (154)

Calvino's attraction to it as a gateway for literature's intervention, claiming that "he finds inspiration in modern science, which illustrates the fact that the concept of absolute truth is becoming increasingly less valid" (24). *Le cosmicomiche* thus become a playground in which all the paradoxes of science's rational conclusions are turned into theatre. In this hybrid text, Calvino also exercises his own scientific method: he must confront the hypotheses with poetic invention and test the rigor of their claims. The result is often a confounding scenario that escapes the descriptions of language. Nonetheless, our narrator Qfwfq attempts to translate the indescribable. We are told to trust Qfwfq, who is adamant about telling the truth, and repeatedly assures us that he was *actually* there when the universe was created. Much like the multi-dimensional figure of Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, Qfwfq claims a narrative authority built upon personal experience. He is the collision between the scientific method and the literary mode, smashed together in a hypocritical, bodiless voice that tries to contextualize prehistoric events in human terms. As a result, the stories collectively emphasize how minute, temporary, and relatively insignificant the human experience has been on this planet, and thus reinforce posthumanism's ethical stance of decentering anthro-exceptionalism in favor of new material experiences. The stories also repeatedly challenge how we make sense of the world, especially (like in *Palomar*) through what is visible and what is felt through the body.

In this chapter, I would like to analyze the figure of Qfwfq as the posthuman *par excellence*. I see in *Le cosmicomiche* the potential of Calvino's literature to express and make tangible the core ideas of posthuman theory, especially those that call into question

the figure of the body, the role of digital technology in post-industrial societies, and the future of humanity's relationship with a rapidly changing natural environment. As such, in keeping with the flow of the previous chapters, this chapter is also thematically divided into three sections. The first section explores Qfwfq's body (and, in many cases, lack thereof) and reads the character as an informational bit. The second section looks at the materiality of Qfwfq's worlds, concentrating especially on the contrast between the primordial building blocks of life and the evolved, nonhuman species that populate these environments. The third section applies an ecocritical lens to select stories that feature the Moon in order to drive home the analyses offered in my previous chapters on *Marcovaldo* and *Palomar*. Central to the goals of this dissertation is to underscore Calvino's prescient concern for climate change and global industrialization, and despite setting these stories in space or in prehistoric eras, these same anxieties permeate throughout *Le cosmicomiche* as well.

Part I: Qfwfq as Bit: The Posthuman Body is Weightless and Invisible

In the same essay on "Lightness" Calvino makes a nonchalant observation about science's ability to break down our reality into smaller and smaller pieces. He sees that "every branch of science seems intent on demonstrating that the world rests upon the most minute of entities: DNA messages, the pulses of neurons, quarks and neutrinos that have wandered through space since the beginning of time"¹¹⁵ (9). He then applies this idea to

¹¹⁵ "Oggi ogni ramo della scienza sembra ci voglia dimostrare che il mondo si regge su entità sottilissime: come i messaggi del DNA, gli impulsi dei neuroni, i *quarks*, i neutrini vaganti nello spazio dall'inizio dei tempi..." (12)

the relationship between computer hardware and software. The dichotomy between DNA and body can serve as a metaphor for understanding the same interplay between heavy machinery and ‘light’ programs. Calvino states, however, that it is “the software that’s in charge” and these machines will “evolve in order to run ever-more-complex programs”¹¹⁶ (9). This will produce what Calvino refers to as the “second industrial revolution,” one not of “rolling mills or molten steel, but rather with *bits* of information that flow, as electrical impulses, through circuits” (9, emphasis original). Furthermore, despite being composed of heavy steel, the machinery will “now obey bits that are weightless”¹¹⁷ (9). He predicts that digital information will become the driving force for change, development, and evolution, and the machines that interpret digital information will become the passive agent in this new, techno-centric world. Calvino sees here, as well, a parallel to the function of language in literature. The weightlessness of words in stories is akin to the DNA that commands weighted bodies and programs that command weighted computer machines.

Using Calvino’s beautiful metaphor of lightness, and the concept of language as software, I would like to analyze Qfwfq as an informational bit. I see in *Le cosmicomiche* examples of how N. Katherine Hayles defined the concept of the posthuman cyborg in her book *How We Became Posthuman*. She writes in the first chapter that “central to the construction of the cyborg are informational pathways connecting of information as a

¹¹⁶ “È vero che il *software* non potrebbe esercitare i poteri della sua leggerezza se non mediante la pesantezza del *hardware*; ma è il *software* che comanda, che agisce sul mondo esterno e sulle macchine, le quali esistono solo in funzione del *software*, si evolvono in modo d’elaborare programmi sempre più complessi.” (12)

¹¹⁷ “La seconda rivoluzione industriale non si presenta come la prima con immagini schiacciati quali presse di laminatoi o colate d’acciaio, ma come i *bits* d’un flusso d’informazione che corre sui circuiti sotto forma d’impulsi elettronici. Le macchine di ferro ci sono sempre, ma obbediscono ai *bits* senza peso.” (12)

(disembodied) entity that can flow between carbon-based organic components and silicon-based electronic components to make protein and silicon operate as a single system” (2). Qfwfq, like this concept of disembodied information, is defined by his flowing between multiform states of being. He is information in motion, an ‘idea’ constantly made flesh and unflesh in wildly differing scenarios. Qfwfq’s ability to transverse all forms of being gives him cyborg-like qualities. Furthermore, Hayles argues that posthuman bodies do not necessarily need to be a union between the organic and the electronic in order to qualify as cyborgs. Rather, “the defining characteristics involve the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of nonbiological components” (4). Unlike the very human entities of Marcovaldo and Palomar, Qfwfq’s superpower is his ability to disconnect from the body and exist in a space of total subjectivity. To use Hayles’ idea, he is not a body, but rather *possesses* a body (and the compositions of these bodies vary greatly throughout the tales).

Hayles’ book uses the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics as a point of departure for her construction of posthuman theory. She uses cybernetics to understand how computer technologies will merge with human biology in the 21st century. Similarly, Calvino in 1967 wrote the essay “Cybernetics and Ghosts” reflecting on the combinatorial qualities of elements present in stories. He was acutely aware of electronic brains in this essay, and remarked that despite their primitive state, digital technologies will one day have the potential to “think” the way we do. This concept is now common practice and referred to as machine learning or, more broadly, artificial intelligence. Calvino also acknowledged in this essay that “mathematical complexity can be digested instantly by electronic brains. Their abacus of only two numerals permits them to make instantaneous calculations of a

complexity unthinkable for human brains”¹¹⁸ (9). Already in the 1960’s, Calvino saw the infinite potential of computer machines to *process*, but he was still unsure if they could *create*. He questioned their utility in the arena of writing new fables and myths. Literature, after all, was “merely the permutation of a restricted number of elements and functions” (18), so why couldn’t a computer produce a story? Calvino moved one step further in ‘Cybernetics and Ghosts’ and noted that “the struggle of literature is in fact a struggle to escape from the confines of language”¹¹⁹ (18) and the power of modern literature “lies in its willingness to give a voice to what has remained unexpressed in the social or individual unconscious”¹²⁰ (19).

This is where the figure of Qfwfq overlaps and intersects with digital technologies and the computer itself. I see in Calvino’s playful character the literary manifestation of the computer bit, a building block for information in digital space that can be infinitely combined to create new sequences of code and explore infinite realities. Both Qfwfq and the bit are bodiless, genderless, fluid entities that occupy and ‘possess’ bodies but do not adhere to one form. Even Qfwfq’s unpronounceable name speaks to the creative function of letters and words to combine together and produce novel ideas. This name is a palindrome built from the left hemisphere of the computer keyboard – *q, w, f, w, q* all letters

¹¹⁸ “Ma la complicazione matematica può essere digerita istantaneamente dai cervelli elettronici. Il loro abaco di due sole cifre permette calcoli istantanei d’una complessità inespugnabile ai cervelli umani; a loro basta sapere contare su due dita per far giostrare velocissime matrici di cifre astronomiche.” (168)

¹¹⁹ “La battaglia della letteratura è appunto uno sforzo per uscire fuori dai confini del linguaggio; è dall’orlo estremo del dicibile che essa si protende; è il richiamo di ciò che è fuori dal vocabolario che muove la letteratura.” (174)

¹²⁰ “La linea di forza della letteratura moderna è nella sua coscienza di dare la parola a tutto ciò che nell’inconscio sociale o individuale è rimasto non detto: questa è la sfida che continuamente essa rilancia.” (175)

that correspond to the responsibilities of the left hand while typing. Unlike the bodied existences of Marcovaldo and Palomar, Qfwfq can move forwards and backwards in time (like his palindromic name suggests), in and out of bodies big and small, pivot between the human and the nonhuman, the organic and the inorganic, and glide between the familiar and the totally unimaginable. In this way, he echoes the multiple meanings of posthumanism: ‘post’ as in ‘beyond,’ ‘post’ as in ‘after,’ and even ‘post’ as in ‘without.’ Qfwfq is the merger of science and literature, an anthropomorphized thought experiment, a translator of the myriad ways that life has manifested on Earth via the ongoing geological processes in the universe. Like the computer bit, Qfwfq symbolizes a total shift in the paradigm of knowledge and meaning making, as well as an exploration of how we generate new information.

The story “Blood, Sea”¹²¹ (can illustrate both of my points: that Calvino used Qfwfq as an informational bit to creatively explore nonhuman existences, and that storytelling generates new images of previously inconceivable ideas to challenge human predispositions. The story begins with a theorem outlining the primordial makeup of the human body by drawing a through-line between the blood in our veins and the chemical composition of the oceans. Already with a posthuman, disembodied image in mind, Calvino bends the rules of narration and opens the tale with a paradox: Qfwfq tries to explain that the former outside world (the sea) is now the inside world (as blood). Before, Qfwfq was blood-sea, and did not have to adhere to the limitations of a physical body. He

¹²¹ This story was formerly included in *Ti con zero*, but subsequently published in *Tutte le cosmicomiche* in 2002

could expand and contract, absorb materials and release them, remain fluid or solidify with ease. In a poetic description of this primordial world, Qfwfq describes himself as a fluid, effervescent entity that could increase his volume to match that of the sea in which he floated. Through a long series of contradictions, he finds it impossible to describe how the outside of the body has now become embodied, and that the same cells and molecules that used to exist freely in the soupy sea have now become entrapped in the vessels. In his nostalgic and reminiscing way, Qfwfq longs for the disembodied world, where his love for a character called Zylphia could be more easily expressed without the confines of the body. Qfwfq then returns to the present, where he, Zylphia, and two other characters are crammed in a Volkswagen on a highway. He remembers himself healthy before; “in fact I’ve never been so well as I was then” (192). In the blood-sea, he and Zylphia could extend into one other, mix, transmute their bodies into one, and swim unconfined in the substance. Now, however, as embodied figures, they cannot intermingle in the same way, and must connect superficially through “thirsty fingertips” (194). In a gentle and erotic dance, the highway and cars surrounding Qfwfq and Zylphia parallel their prehuman relationship and mirror their desires for one another. What bothers Qfwfq most is that in this prehistoric blood-sea world, he technically had to share space with his antagonist Signor Cècere, and copulations with Zylphia would thus be tainted by this third-party presence. In this tale, Qfwfq wants nothing more than to “make him [Cècere] disappear, eat him up” (197) and spill his blood-sea until he is no more. Soon, this wish is granted; Signor Cècere crashes the car on a tree and kills the party inside. Qfwfq comments that “the sea of common blood which floods over the crumpled metal isn’t the blood-sea of our origin but only an infinitesimal detail of

the outside, of the insignificant and arid outside, a number in the statistics of accidents over the weekend”¹²² (201), thus concluding the story.

In the seminal essay “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” from 1949, mathematician Claude Shannon introduced the term ‘bit’ and subsequently established the field of information theory. In an attempt to build a system that could best communicate information, he wrote that “the choice of a logarithmic base corresponds to the choice of a unit for measuring information. If the base 2 is used the resulting units may be called binary digits, or more briefly *bits*, a word suggested by J. W. Tukey. A device with two stable positions, such as a relay or a flip-flop circuit, can store one bit of information” (1, emphasis original). The bit, in this system, is a binary code (0 or 1, for example) which can be manipulated to match the message of the sender. Shannon’s ideas later paved the way for digital technologies to take shape, eventually leading to the development of the personal computer. Important to my reading of Qfwfq as a bit is the *stored potential* of this most basic unit of information. Intrinsically in the bit is a true-false, logical state, one that can (like Shannon suggests) flip-flop between two stable positions. Bits can also form together into a bit string, an array, or in combinations of these systems to form a byte.¹²³ In essence, the bit is infinitely combinatorial, erasable and reusable, multi-formal and multifunctional, and fundamental to the architecture of digital information. It is the most basic form of data.

¹²² “e il mare di sangue comune che allaga la lamiera pesta non è il sangue-mare delle origini ma solo un infinitesimo dettaglio del fuori, dell'insignificante e arido fuori, un numero per la statistica dei sinistri nelle giornate di weekend.”

¹²³ Notably, computer science also recognizes the term ‘word’ as a manipulation of groups of bits of a certain size. This metaphor shows how two seemingly separate disciplines of science and literature borrow from each other’s vocabulary.

Qfwfq, in “Blood, Sea,” behaves like a bit. He oscillates between the past and present, between the inside and outside of a body, and does not adhere to one form. In the opening paragraphs of “Blood, Sea,” we get the sense that Qfwfq is not a creature per se, but rather an amorphous entity in the blood itself: “where I used to swim under the Sun, and where I now swim in darkness, is inside”¹²⁴ (190). It is unclear where the boundaries of Qfwfq begin and end; Calvino intentionally confuses these boundaries with a series of dualities that fold in onto one another. There is at least a distinction, subjectively, between Qfwfq and what he refers to as his “neighbors” when in this blood-sea state. With the question “we know our neighbor exists because he’s outside, agreed?” (191), Qfwfq ironically suggests the opposite is true: before the body, there was no concept of “other.” All forms were one and swam in a soup of interchangeable subjects and bits of information. This image leads back to N Katherine Hayles’ conception of the body in her framework for posthumanism. She argues against the separation between embodiment and information, claiming that for “information to exist it must *always* be instantiated in a medium” (13, emphasis original). Just as a bit must be enacted upon by circuitry and embedded into a motherboard to transmit information, so too must Qfwfq occupy a form, regardless of how intangible and abstract that form is. Even though Qfwfq can distinguish between “before and now: before, we swam, and now we are swum”¹²⁵ (193), his essence must take a shape to make sense of itself. I read Qfwfq’s previous form (as blood-ocean)

¹²⁴ “In fondo non è che si sia cambiato molto: nuoto, continuo a nuotare nello stesso caldo mare, - disse Qfwfq, - ossia non è cambiato il dentro, quello che prima era il fuori in cui nuotavo, sotto il sole, e in cui nuoto, nel buio, anche adesso che sta dentro; quel che è cambiato è il fuori, il fuori di adesso che prima era il dentro di prima, quello sì che è cambiato, però importa poco.”

¹²⁵ “prima nuotavamo e adesso siamo nuotati”

as Hayles' concept of "virtual body," which "alludes to the historical separation between information and materiality" (20). In his disembodied form, he chases Zylphia's affection and competes for space against Cècere's approaches. In his embodied form (presumably as a human being in a car on a highway), these same relationships exist, but according to Qfwfq, they are less meaningful than before. Qfwfq's nostalgia for the blood-ocean existence mirrors our own infatuation with virtual reality and a longing to separate from the limitations of our biology (as seen in posthumanism's sister study of transhumanism and the writings of Max More). Posthumanism insinuates, especially with the evolution of digital technologies, that this prehuman, bodiless existence is quickly becoming the main manner to experience the world once again. Like the bend of a parabola, we are fast approaching a digital existence that is commanded by and embodied in our computers. Anecdotes of many instructors who are living and teaching during a 15-month quarantine amidst a global pandemic speak to this reality. Like Qfwfq, we have existed mostly in cyberspace among infinite informational bits. My friends, students, and acquaintances intersect in this space without tangible boundaries, like Qfwfq and Zylphia in the blood-ocean. The car crash at the end of this vignette reminds me, however, that despite interfacing in virtual spaces, I am still ultimately bound to my human body, which is mortal and fragile.

Occupying physical space in "Blood, Sea" thus becomes a point of tension and anxiety in the story: it is clear that Qfwfq does *not* enjoy the limitations of the human experience in this vignette. There also emerges the idea that all individuals in the story were once intermingled together (like stated prior, before the body there was no sense of

“other,” and information could combine freely just as it does now in virtual spaces). This same theme appears in “All At One Point” and can serve as the second example of Qfwfq acting as an informational bit. This time, the story is set at the very beginning of the universe. One of the most difficult paradoxes to reconcile in the human mind is the setting for this story. It was the time before space existed at all, and as theorized by Edwin P. Hubble, it was when “all the universe’s matter was concentrated in a single point” (43). Already from the opening paragraphs, the inter-mutability of bodies is outlined by Qfwfq: “Every point of each of us coincided with every point of each of the others in a single point”¹²⁶ (43). Even quantifying the differences between ‘things’ was impossible in this space; “to make a count, we would have had to move apart, at least a little, and instead we all occupied the same point”¹²⁷ (43). Calvino proceeds beyond this conundrum and nonetheless introduces new characters and new bodies to the conglomerate. Neighboring Qfwfq are more incoherent, unpronounceable identities whose names mimic equations and theorems. Mrs Ph(i)Nk_o, De XuaeauX, the Z’Zus, and Mr Pber^t Pber^d all jostle for space in this spaceless realm. Qfwfq emphasizes that before space existed their matter was interchangeable and had not yet reached its material potential: “all the material that was to serve afterwards to form the universe, now dismantled and concentrated in such a way that you weren’t able to tell what was later to become part of astronomy (like the nebula of Andromeda) from what was assigned to geography (the Vosges, for example), or to

¹²⁶ “Ogni punto d’ognuno di noi coincideva con ogni punto di ognuno degli altri un un punto unico che era quello in cui stavamo tutti” (55)

¹²⁷ “Per contarsi, ci si deve staccare almeno un pochino uno dall’altro, invece occupavamo tutti quello stesso punto.” (55)

chemistry (like certain beryllium isotopes)”¹²⁸ (44). Much like the informational bit, all variations and combinations of atoms and molecules were still inert in this point and were awaiting their eventual formation. Then, like in “Blood, Sea,” Qfwfq returns to the present day and interacts with the bodies these entities would eventually become. Once again, we assume they are human beings; the emphasis however is still placed on their primordial chemical makeup and not their current form. In “reminiscing about the old days” (45) the characters desire to return to the very beginning. Their nostalgia for a pre-bodied existence shows up repeatedly in the rest of the story as memories of a better time “when we’ll all be back there again” (45). Erotic desire returns as an undercurrent in this story, too: there is a fascination with being in bed with Mrs Ph(i)Nk_o, which, at the beginning of existence, was a space shared by all. Like in “Blood, Sea,” copulation was “purer” in the time without bodies since it led to more absolute interchangeability. The story concludes with Calvino pointing at erotic desire as the primary motivator for the explosion of the Big Bang. Mrs Ph(i)Nk_o suggests she wants to make tagliatelle for everyone in the point, and suddenly “the concept of space and, properly speaking, space itself, and time, and universal gravitation, and the gravitating universe, making possible billions and billions of suns, and of planets, and fields of wheat, and Mrs Ph(i)Nk_os scattered through the continents of the planets...”¹²⁹ (48) was set into motion.

¹²⁸ “Tutto il materiale che sarebbe poi servito a formare l’universo, smontato e concentrato in maniera che non riuscivi a riconoscere quel che in seguito sarebbe andato a far parte dell’astronomia (come la nebulosa d’Andromeda) da quel che era destinato alla geografia (per esempio i Vosigi) o alla chimica (come certi isotopi del berillio).” (56)

¹²⁹ “...dando inizio nello stesso momento al concetto di spazio, e allo spazio propriamente detto, e al tempo, e alla gravitazione universale, e all’universo gravitante, rendendo possibili miliardi di miliardi di

In an essay titled “Naïve Physics and Cosmic Perspective-Taking in Dante’s *Commedia* and Calvino’s *Cosmicomiche*,” Marco Caracciolo argues that new technologies only go so far in introducing us to ideas that move beyond our human sensorium. The gap left by these technologies can be filled by creative literature. Caracciolo writes, “we can look at an image of blood cells produced by an electron microscope, or at the photograph of the Butterfly Nebula taken by the Hubble space telescope, but these objects remain too distant from human-scale phenomena to be apprehended in a fully embodied way” (35). Luigi Ghirri’s essay on the Apollo 11 moon landing arrived at similar conclusions: we cannot grasp the entirety of Earth as seen from the Moon because of the limits of our human bodies. Caracciolo continues: “literary fiction can attempt to restore this lost bodily texture by immersing us—through emotional responses, visual imagery, and kinesthetic feelings—in realities that fall beyond the range of our perceptual apparatus” (35). Caracciolo points to “All At One Point” as a prime example of literature acting as a bridge between the human and the nonhuman, the imaginable and the unfathomable. Nodding to Calvino’s incorporation of familiar objects into the spaceless scene (like Mrs. Ph(i)Nk’s bed) helps ground our experience in an otherwise totally unrelatable existence. According to Caracciolo, this process “‘eases’ readers into what is otherwise a physically unimaginable situation, bringing them closer to realities that, by definition, cannot be experienced” (39). This is where virtual space collides with the posthuman cyborg: try as he might, Qfwfq cannot describe the extremely cramped nothingness into which he was packed. He must

soli, e di pianeti, e di campi di grano, e di signore Ph(i)Nk sparse per i continenti dei pianeti che impastano con le braccia unte e generose infarinate, e lei da quel momento perduta, e noi a ripiangerla.” (60)

bring in the metaphor of the body to reconcile this failure. In the same way an informational bit is and is not, Qfwfq is both all matter to ever exist and a segmented, fully realized piece of that matter. The other characters fracture into their own identities and chemical makeups after the point has expanded. But they all long to return to the time when there was no separation between beings, and when bodies were shared as one. Like in “Blood, Sea,” this is only possible in a prehistoric world, and as I argue, in a posthuman, virtual one. Through information technologies and the manipulation of computer bits, we can experience bodiless realities that creatively push against our sensory limitations. Interacting with physical space, like visiting a library to conduct research for example, is becoming less a limiting factor in the digital age. Increasingly, the computer body is redefining what it means to live embodied experiences. Like Qfwfq, we are moving toward a hybrid state of existence: on one side of the threshold, we are human beings (and control human bodies), and on the other we possess intangible bodies through digital interfaces.

“The Spiral” also traces this trajectory from bodiless, abstract information to fully formed individual entity. It is the last tale in the original *Cosmicomics* from 1965. In the introduction of this vignette Qfwfq confronts once again the nature of his bodiless existence: “Form? I didn’t have any; that is, I didn’t know I had one, or rather I didn’t know you *could* have one”¹³⁰ (137, emphasis original). He comments that as a mollusk, he “had no eyes, no head, no part of the body that was different from any other part”¹³¹ (137), and

¹³⁰ “Forma non ne avevo, cioè non sapevo d’averne, ossia non sapevo che si potesse averne una.” (169)

¹³¹ “Non avevo né occhi né testa né nessuna parte del corpo che fosse differente da nessun’altra parte” (169-170)

already from the opening monologue we are reminded again of Caracciolo's naïve physics and Hayles' virtual bodies. Just as an existence without space confounds human perception, so too does this featureless form that lacks sensory organs and individualizing features. Qfwfq has no concept of a body because there was no "other" mollusk to which he could compare himself. He then makes explicit that "since I had no form I could feel all possible forms in myself...In short, there were no limitations to my thoughts, which weren't thoughts, after all, because I had no brain to think them; every cell on its own thought every thinkable thing *all at once*, not through images, since we had no images of any kind at our disposal"¹³² (138, emphasis mine). Just as a computer can instantly process millions of informational bits, Qfwfq could instantly think all things at once. Qfwfq's ability to process everything instantaneously is embedded in these prehuman and posthuman forms. Like in "Blood, Sea," the water acts as an extension of the self and serves as a "source of information," which brings Qfwfq "edible substances which I absorbed through all my surface" (139). Through the information in the water arrive signals of "the others," apparently female, despite the fact that "each individual was identical with every other individual" (140). Soon, Qfwfq begins to copulate with these others and eventually falls in love. But once more, this love is marked by Qfwfq as purer than what is possible to us as embodied human beings. Qfwfq claims he "received a quantity of information about her,

¹³² "Ma dato che non avevo forma mi sentivo dentro tutte le forme possibili, e tutti i gesti e le smorfie e le possibilità di far rumori, anche sconvenienti. Insomma, non avevo limiti ai miei pensieri, che poi non erano pensieri perché non avevo un cervello in cui pensarli, e ogni cellula pensava per conto suo tutto il pensabile tutto in una volta, non attraverso immagini, che non ne avevamo a disposizione di nessun genere, ma semplicemente in quel modo indeterminato di sentirsi lì che non escludeva nessun modo di sentirsi lì in un altro modo." (170)

more than you can imagine: not the superficial, generic information you get now, seeing and smelling and touching and hearing a voice, but essential information”¹³³ (141). This essential information, Qfwfq suggests, is not afforded to us through our limited human faculties. We cannot transcend these limitations, and thus suffer from their superficiality. In Qfwfq’s discomfort with the limitations of the body he eventually develops, his nostalgia for the total freedom of his original, formless existence returns again: “life was beautiful in those days” (138). The story continues with Qfwfq’s love inspiring desire in him to differentiate himself from the others. From this desire he develops a vibrant shell and turns that stored, potential information into a tangible body. This concludes the first part of the story.

As the story continues, we find Qfwfq time-travelling to a present-day urban center and Calvino following the same narrative patterns present in “Blood, Sea” and “All At One Point.” In the second part of the story, Qfwfq sees a material affinity with the variety of forms populating this world: “I feel as if, in making the shell, I had also made the rest” (146), then concludes part III by claiming responsibility for creating the entire post-mollusk world. What runs common throughout all three of these stories, including “The Spiral,” is the literary tactic of defamiliarization that challenges the normalcies of an embodied existence and subverts our understanding of the world as experienced by humans. As Qfwfq oscillates between a formless being of a distant past and a human being in the

¹³³ “Eppure attraverso quel tanto di suo inconfondibile che restava in soluzione nell’acqua marina e che le onde mi mettevano a disposizione, ricevevo una quantità d’informazioni su di lei che non potete immaginare: non le informazioni superficiali e generiche che si hanno adesso a vedere e a odorare e a toccare e a sentire la voce, ma informazioni dell’essenziale, sulle quali potevo poi lavorare lungamente d’immaginazione.” (173)

contemporary era, he draws attention to the billions of informational bits that make up not just our species, but all matter on the planet, and by extension the universe. The result is that these stories read as scientific creation myths, and echo the pop-astronomy catchphrase that we are ‘made up of star stuff.’ These stories also remind us that the body is in contention in posthuman discourse: our bodies, the bodies of the nonhuman creatures with whom we share space, the bodies of the inorganic machines that dictate global commerce and command our daily lives, and even the hybrid planetary bodies to which we are ultimately bound. Posthumanism is an affront to the ways these bodies are defined, manipulated and exploited.

Other stories in *Le cosmicomiche* invoke similar readings and conclusions. Qfwfq’s exploration of asexual reproduction in the Priscilla trilogy, especially in the first story “Mitosis,” further confuses boundaries of the body and the self. What happens, subjectively, to the body of a cell when it divides? Qfwfq argues that the original cell moves beyond the self and intrinsically creates the “other” when it reproduces:

...outside of me there was this void that wasn’t me, which perhaps could become me because ‘me’ was the only word I knew, the only word I could have declined, a void that could become me, however, wasn’t me at that moment and basically never would be: it was the discovery of something else that wasn’t yet something but anyhow wasn’t me, or rather wasn’t me at that moment in that point and therefore was something else...”¹³⁴ (213)

¹³⁴ “però avevo questa contentezza che al di fuori di me ci fosse questo vuoto che non era me, che magari avrebbe potuto essere me perché me era l'unica parola che conoscevo, l'unica parola che avrei saputo declinare, un vuoto che avrebbe potuto essere me però in quel momento non lo era e in fondo non lo sarebbe mai stato, era la scoperta di qualcos'altro...”

Once again, we sense Calvino's anxieties about the body present in Qfwfq's ramblings in this passage, as well as the irony at play in trying to understand this paradox. In later stories of *Le cosmicomiche*, the boundaries between self and body are confused further when, in "The Night Driver," the subjects are reduced to the form of the cars they drive. The body is moved into a space of total abstraction in "Nothing and Not Much" when Qfwfq attempts to describe how he was nothingness at the origins of the universe. At the beginning, he states, "the particles, or rather the ingredients with which the particles would later be made, existed in the *virtual sense*" (376, emphasis mine). All of these stories point to the ultimate common ancestor of our species, which are the prime elements that composes our bodies. They underscore the posthuman ethical stance that argues that humans are chemically and historically connected to nonhuman organic life and inorganic material. As Franklin Ginn reminds us in *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, "posthumanism places the human in a continuum with other animals, connected through both lines of descent and contemporary ecological relations" (1). Qfwfq's fully realized form in "The Spiral" as a mollusk also helps transition us to the question of the animal and the organic world in *Le cosmicomiche*.

Part II: *Being Animal*

Qfwfq not only confronts the boundaries of the body in *Le cosmicomiche*, but he also acts out the lived experiences of various nonhuman animals throughout the stories and gives voice to other modes of living on this planet, thereby transcending the observatory mode of the previous works in question. Instead of speculating about the animal, like

Palomar does while watching the blackbirds or Marcovaldo does while imitating city cats, Qfwfq carries out the posthuman desire to move beyond the human by literally becoming the nonhuman animal. Unlike in *Marcovaldo* or *Palomar*, however, the creatures present in *Le cosmicomiche* are often ancient or invented lifeforms that predate the Anthropocene. The world in which these animals live is also significantly different from the contemporary world of the previous books: Calvino employs a lexicon full of geological terms when describing Qfwfq's settings that emphasize the planet's natural physical makeup. Our planet, in many instances in these stories, is in its infancy. Volcanic fires and deadly atmospheric gasses often frame Qfwfq's adventures. As a result, the world itself becomes an organic living entity in the background of these stories. When compared to *Marcovaldo* and *Palomar*, the tone of these fables becomes more cautionary because of these chaotic settings. The central idea I want to put forward in this section can be summarized as follows: prehuman realities warn of posthuman futures. The scientific creation theories that inspired these stories also intrinsically hint at scientific apocalypses. Select stories in *Le cosmicomiche* make clear how arbitrary life on the planet is, and also suggest that life can just as quickly (and arbitrarily) be removed from the planet, too. When zooming out to the cosmic scale, Calvino's posthumanism is made clearer and more poignant: these stories acknowledge and accept the inevitability of total planetary destruction in ways that the previous two books never addressed. Nonetheless, Calvino's optimism and his desire to see man reach his fully realized potential, as outlined in "Cybernetics and Ghosts," remains a constant undertone of the stories.

We can start with the story “The Dinosaurs” to outline this idea. In this tale, Qfwfq is the last surviving dinosaur on the planet and lives amidst a new, undefined species referred to only as “The New Ones.” The story opens with a description of the extinction event that destroyed the dinosaurs in the “period of the great death” (93), which left Qfwfq without a home or family. He claims to have survived “ambushes, epidemics, starvation, frost” (94) for millions of years. Soon, a new species arrives. Qfwfq must prove himself to this new group and endure trials for their acceptance. They do not believe he is a dinosaur and instead refer to him only as “The Ugly One,” which emphasizes his foreignness to the other creatures and increases his feelings of isolation from the group. When the new species unearths a full set of dinosaur bones, Qfwfq becomes territorial of his long-dead ancestors and steals the bones for himself. Qfwfq laments that The New Ones only feel pity toward the dinosaurs for their extinction. To this sentiment he retorts: “If ever a species had had a rich, full evolution, a long and happy reign, that species was ours. Our extinction had been a grandiose epilogue, worthy of our past”¹³⁵ (107). The more The New Ones try to deduce about the dinosaurs, the more Qfwfq feels they have misunderstood everything. The takeaway lesson becomes clear in the final paragraphs of the story. In a somber reflection on the fate of his own kind, the dinosaur Qfwfq sees that “the more the dinosaurs disappear, the more they extend their dominion, and over forests far more vast than those that cover the continents: in the labyrinth of the survivors’ thoughts”¹³⁶ (110). He anticipates that the

¹³⁵ “Se mai specie aveva avuto un’evoluzione piena e ricca, un regno lungo e felice, quelli eravamo stati noi. La nostra estinzione era stata un epilogo grandioso, degno del nostro passato” (234)

¹³⁶ “ora sapevo che i Dinosauri quanto più scompaiono tanto più estendono il loro dominio, e su foreste ben più sterminate di quelle che coprono i continenti: nell’intrico dei pensieri di chi resta.” (236-237)

dinosaurs' legacy will continue in the minds of the "New Ones, and by those who would come after the New Ones, and those who would come even after them"¹³⁷ (110). The story concludes with Qfwfq catching a train and disappearing into a crowd.

In this story, Calvino uses the figure of a dinosaur to indirectly undermine human exceptionalism and remind us that our species is not the first, nor the last, to have thrived on this planet. Dinosaurs exist in the zeitgeist as prehistoric monsters that dominated the food chain and inhabited all ecosystems of the planet. We understand them as a diverse group of beasts complete with pacific grazers and apex predators. Our fascination with them comes from both their entertainment value in pop culture and the discovery of their bones as proof of an earth older than what has been suggested by various religious texts. They are the supreme symbols of a prehuman time. By giving voice and agency to a dinosaur in this tale, Calvino nudges readers to empathize with Qfwfq's state of vulnerability and isolation. What was once a confident and powerful creature has become disempowered and neutralized in the context of a shifted natural environment. Through Qfwfq, Calvino implicitly suggests that we, too, are prone to similar cataclysmic extinction events. In "The Dinosaurs" I am reminded of Rosi Braidotti's claim in *The Posthuman* that "as a brand of vital materialism, posthuman theory contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the 'exceptionalism' of the Human as a transcendental category" (66). I argue that Calvino departs from the same premise in choosing a dinosaur as his protagonist for this story. In the same way we find dinosaur bones scattered all throughout

¹³⁷ "Adesso, cancellato anche il nome, li aspettava il diventare una cosa sola con gli stampi muti e anonimi del pensiero, attraverso i quali prendono forma e sostanza le cose pensate: dai Nuovi, e da coloro che sarebbero venuti dopo i Nuovi, e da quelli che verranno dopo ancora." (237)

the planet, we can also easily imagine remnants of our species being discovered millennia into the future by an unknown intelligent lifeform. Like Qfwfq, we risk being bound to the “labyrinth of the survivors’ thoughts,” (110) and (mis)understood only through the artifacts we leave behind. Reflecting on a prehistoric sentient life form and bringing them into a contemporary world, as seen in the final sentence of the tale when Qfwfq boards a train, also reminds us of the same ideas from the prior section. Namely, that despite centuries of difference in development and evolution, we are nonetheless materially and terrestrially connected to the dinosaurs. We are birthed from the same organic compounds and inevitably bound to the same deaths. Our species is no more invulnerable from a fate similar to the one that removed Qfwfq’s kin from this Earth. “The Dinosaurs,” in this way, can be read as a scientific destruction myth. The epigraph to this tale points at how mysterious, and ultimately random, the death of the Dinosaurs was: “The causes of the rapid extinction of the Dinosaur remain mysterious...By its end all the Dinosaurs were dead” (93). Its scientific tone, written with a wry matter-of-factness, reinforces how arbitrary their existence was. I put forward that this, too, could be an epithet for our own species.

Le cosmicomiche also provide creation myths of our species, echoing Ginn’s claim that posthumanism sees our common ancestry with nonhuman life as a shift away from humanism’s admiration for anthro-exceptionalism. In “The Aquatic Uncle” Qfwfq time-travels back to the end of the “water period” when “those who decided to make the great move were growing more and more numerous” (69). In this story, Qfwfq’s great-uncle sticks out from the rest of the group because he is a stubborn fish who refuses to evolve and migrate to land. When Qfwfq’s family comes together for an annual reunion, the great-

uncle resists all talk of land life and further embraces his aquatic origins: “It just wasn’t possible to make him accept a reality different from his own” (71). Soon, Qfwfq falls in love with a terrestrial creature called Lll. She is distinct because her family “had finally become convinced they had never lived anywhere else, one of those families who, by now, even laid their eggs on dry terrain, protected by a hard shell” (73). The story comes to a climax when Qfwfq brings Lll back home to meet the family. Worried about her great-uncle’s prejudices, Qfwfq is hesitant to introduce the two, but after doing so, he loses Lll’s affection to the old-school lifestyle of the great-uncle. The story concludes with Lll disappearing back into the ocean with the aquatic uncle. In this moment Qfwfq reflects on the superiority of all other species that have lived and evolved on the planet. I would like to quote these last phrases of the story at length because they once again emphasize the biodiversity of the planet and the relative insignificance of human life in relation to the species listed. In this section, we suppose Qfwfq is now speaking from the perspective of a human being. We identify with his insecurities and limitations. But Calvino concludes the tale with a hint of optimism that matches the posthumanist urge to resist nihilism and instead make life better for our species and those with whom we share space:

I went on my way, in the midst of the world’s transformations, being transformed myself. Every now and then, among the many forms of living beings, I encountered one who ‘was somebody’ more than I was: one who announced the future, the duck-billed platypus who nurses its young, just hatched from the egg; or I might encounter another who bore witness to a past beyond all return, a dinosaur who had survived into the beginning of the Cenozoic, or else – a crocodile – part of the past that had discovered a way to remain immobile through the centuries. They all had something, I know, that made them somehow superior to me, sublime, something

that made me, compared to them, mediocre. And yet I wouldn't have traded places with any of them.¹³⁸ (81-82)

The crux of “The Aquatic Uncle” as a creation fable is evolution: the separation between the great-uncle and Qfwfq is a resistance to adapt to a changing ecosystem. Like in “The Dinosaurs,” Calvino is using the figure of a prehistoric, nonhuman animal to remind us of our biological origins and create a bridge between species that spans millennia. The great-uncle’s penchant for the oceans and dismissal of land creatures marks a refusal to adapt to a changing environment, which he sees as a “limited phenomenon” (77). His arrogance is reflective of our own resistance to the climate crises we continue to perpetuate, with many committing to outright denial of their effects. His nostalgia for a safer past, one void of the land creatures, and his retreat back into the waters is emblematic of our own behaviors when faced with environmental challenges or the influx of species who are not like us. Qfwfq, however, recognizes the faults in this limited perspective. He shifts his focus, as seen in the concluding paragraph above, to the processes and products of evolution: there are no species exempt from its powerful grasp. The moral of this posthuman fable, as mirrored in “The Dinosaur,” is that we must see beyond the boundaries of our own presence here on the planet and understand that we are part of an ongoing

¹³⁸ “Continuai la mia strada, in mezzo alle trasformazioni del mondo, anch’io trasformandomi. Ogni tanto, tra le tante forme degli esseri viventi, incontravo qualcuno che era uno più di quanto io non lo fossi: uno che annunciava il futuro, ornitorinco che allatta il piccolo uscito dall’uovo, giraffa allampanata in mezzo alla vegetazione ancora bassa; o uno che testimoniava un passato senza ritorno, dinosauro superstite dopo ch’era cominciato il Cenozoico, oppure – coccodrillo – un passato che aveva trovato il modo di conservarsi immobile nei secoli. Tutti costoro avevano qualcosa, lo so, che li rendeva in qualche modo superiori a me, sublimi, e che rendeva me, in confronto a loro, mediocre. Eppure non mi sarei cambiato con nessuno di loro.” (212-213)

evolutionary chain that works outside of our control. The planet is indifferent to the great-uncle's preferences and will continue to change regardless of his stubbornness.

This story also leans into science as a potential way to explain the appearance of human beings on Earth. The theory that introduces "The Aquatic Uncle" claims that the origin of our species can be traced back to this pivotal moment when fish moved onto the muddy banks and began to walk on their fins. In "Calvino post-umano" Serenella Iovino wittily describes this recurring motif in *Le cosmicomiche* as a "darwinismo cosmologico, una biografia evolutiva collettiva del mondo, in cui Qfwfq è e diviene un'infinità di cose, a indicare la permeabilità e la parentela materiale che uniscono tutto ciò che esiste" (131). Iovino's assessment of *Le cosmicomiche* as a cosmic Darwinism makes its appearance in this story and reinforces the claim that we are materially and genetically bound to ancient life. The animals of whom Qfwfq is envious are part of him, and thus are part of us. Posthumanism recognizes this same interchangeability between humans and nonhumans at the organic level just as it appears here in "The Aquatic Uncle." Just as Qfwfq feels inferior to these creatures, posthumanism downplays the superiority complexes in human meaning-making. Qfwfq does not see himself as a transcendental species, but "mediocre" (81), and reminds us that we are nevertheless animals ourselves.

"The Origin of the Birds" also reads as a scientific creation myth, but one that incorporates elements of fantasy typical of fable-making into the narrative. In this tale, Qfwfq witnesses the first bird to ever exist: "I see an unknown animal singing on a branch. He had wings feet tail claws spurs feathers plumes fins quills beak teeth crop horns crest wattles and a star on his forehead. It was a bird; you've realized that already, but I didn't;

they had never been seen before” (167-168). Qfwfq becomes curious of the bird and follows it to another continent which is populated by hundreds of other species of birds. The catch here is that this continent is full of the discarded species, “the rejected forms, unusable, lost” (171), creatures that were not fit enough to survive on the planet of non-monsters. On the Continent of the Birds, Qfwfq is imprisoned and sentenced to judgment by the Queen of the Birds. During the night, Qfwfq experiences a momentary epiphany that comes to him in a flash. The brief paragraph detailing Qfwfq’s epiphany can be used as the thesis statement of the entire *Le cosmicomiche*, and it aligns with the arguments I have outlined thus far:

For a fraction of a second between the loss of everything I knew before and the gain of everything I would know afterwards, I managed to embrace in a single thought the world of things as they were and of things as they could have been, and I realized that *a single system included all*. The world of birds, of monsters, of Or’s beauty was the same as the one where I had always lived, which none of us had understood wholly.¹³⁹ (177, emphasis mine)

The separation between Qfwfq’s world of fully realized creatures and the world of the rejected beings that evolution discarded is momentarily united in this single thought. In this paragraph I see the same themes present in Calvino’s essay on “Lightness”; all matter can be reduced to the smallest of bits which are combined infinitely and arbitrarily. This motif appears in “Cybernetics and Ghosts” as well, when Calvino posits that “the endless variety of living forms can be reduced to the combination of certain finite quantities” (10).

¹³⁹ “Per una frazione di secondo tra la perdita di tutto quel che sapevo prima e l’acquisto di tutto quel che avrei saputo dopo, riuscii ad abbracciare in un solo pensiero il mondo delle cose com’erano e quello delle cose come avrebbero potuto essere, e m’accorsi che un solo sistema comprendeva tutto. Il mondo degli uccelli, dei mostri, della bellezza d’Ora era lo stesso di quello in cui ero sempre vissuto e che nessuno di noi aveva capito fino in fondo.” (253)

The birds' appearance on Earth is reimagined as an isolated event in this story, but it nonetheless points to how evolution has operated since the first multicellular organisms took shape on the planet. Qfwfq understands that "a single system included all," that the difference between the birds and the dinosaurs and the humans is simply a different arrangement of the smallest atoms. There is an intrinsic element of randomness in this system, but it nonetheless contains *all* potential forms, past and future, in its structure. This is how *Le cosmicomiche* operate as posthuman creation myths. Through the multiform figure of Qfwfq, they lay bare the material makeup that unifies all life on the planet. Calvino's admiration in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* for Cyrano de Bergerac as "modern literature's first poet of atomism" (24) is made clear in these tales, and Qfwfq is the agent through which Calvino can explore all the creative potential of the atom. By anthropomorphizing the nonhuman animal (in this case, a monstrous bird), Calvino invites readers to empathize with nonhuman worlds and see that this single planetary system has included, and will include, all iterations of atomic potential. We are just as much part of this combinatorial process as the animals that populate these myths.

Finally, I would like to showcase a few more stories that reimagine the creation of the planet and allude to its future, inevitable destruction. Just as Calvino uses Qfwfq to trace the origin of species in *Le cosmicomiche*, he also sends Qfwfq to the formative moments of the planetary bodies as well. In these stories, the material world is antagonistic to Qfwfq's adventures and challenges his presence, reminding us that nature is far and beyond the greatest force of change on the planet. In the story "Without Colors" Calvino imagines life on Earth before the planet possessed an atmosphere. The epigraph at the

beginning of the story notes that due to this lack of atmosphere, light could not refract into the color spectrum, and thus everything would have appeared grayscale to the eye (much like the Moon does now). Qfwfq reminds readers that without an atmosphere, meteors could strike “like hail from all the points of space” (50) and “without any air to vibrate, we were all deaf and dumb” (50). Given that the planet could not insulate heat without an atmosphere, nights were “so cold you could freeze stiff” (50). Qfwfq laments that in this world without colors, objects were indistinguishable from one another: “you could barely make out a moving object, a meteor fragment as it rolled, or the serpentine yawning of a seismic chasm, or a lapillus being ejected from a volcano” (50). As the story continues, we are constantly reminded of how volatile and dangerous the natural processes of the planet can be. Despite his fable-esque immortality, Qfwfq is in constant danger of being struck by falling rocks or plummeting into giant chasms. There is a frequent recurrence of earthquakes that open crevasses across the ground and create new volcanic mountains. From one of those openings arises “an immense fluid bubble” that “was swelling around the Earth and completely enfolding it” (56), which slowly becomes a gaseous atmosphere. Due to the presence of this atmosphere, Qfwfq is able to see light refracted into the millions of visible colors for the first time. “All around, the world poured out colors, constantly new, pink clouds gathered in violet cumuli which unleashed gilded lightning...” (57). Calvino ends this story with a long, poetic description of a landscape full of organic life and the beautiful colors that make up our world. The grayscale world that enraptured Qfwfq’s love interest Ayl is no longer visible, much to her chagrin, and in its place is a vibrant and saturated world full of colors.

“Without Colors” is a creation myth that departs from what Kristi Siegel in “Italo Calvino’s *Cosmicomics*: Qfwfq’s Postmodern Autobiography” calls the “simple questions of childhood that have no answers” (43). As the title of her essay suggests, Siegel reads these stories as Calvino’s attempt to make sense of himself through the figure of Qfwfq: “Like ourselves, Qfwfq continuously and obsessively interprets his world in relation to himself” (44). She reads Qfwfq as “unmistakably human,” a character who “succumbs to a very human temptation to understand the world around him” (44). I would like to instead suggest a reversal of this reading here. Rather than an attempt to humanize the prehuman in order to make sense of our contemporary circumstances, I posit that Calvino uses Qfwfq to underscore human limitations and how those limitations affect our understanding of the world. “Without Colors” is an affront to what is visible, the primary way through which we make meaning. Calvino’s long and poetic description at the end of the story is a subtle criticism about how we determine what is beautiful from our surroundings. Our aesthetic preferences, though, are rooted in terrific planetary processes. Framing this delicate description of “scarlet poppies” and “canary-yellow fields” (59) is a cataclysm of destructive events. Even this beautiful vista appears “so trivial to me, so banal, so false” (59) to Qfwfq, who in the end feels trapped by the colorful world. His nostalgia for the pre-atmospheric Earth concludes the story and once again points to Qfwfq’s dissatisfaction with the eventual future from which he narrates. Like I have argued prior, Qfwfq is *not* longing to be human: he dislikes the limitations of the embodied experience and sees how trivial human existence is. Qfwfq’s monologue at the beginning of the story details how he was content before all the complications ushered in by the atmosphere and the colors. In

the grayscale world, he could “go for miles and miles at top speed” among a landscape of “uninterrupted horizons” (49). Calvino’s repeated waxing nostalgic through Qfwfq of a prehuman existence does not point to the work as a postmodern autobiography, but rather renders it a posthuman fantasy of escaping the boundaries of our limited world through the prospect of literary invention and scientific advancement. The deadpan indifference that characterizes the scientific hypotheses from which Calvino departs to create these tales marks the ultimate point of desire. That so many of the Cosmicomic stories carry a somber tone is the realization that we cannot experience these realities per se, but must rely on the imagination and digital technologies to move beyond the human. Only in the virtual space (in this case, the book) can we approximate ourselves to a pre-atmospheric world without colors or inhabit a single point without space.

Where “Without Colors” and “All At One Point” detail significant moments of creation, the story “As Long as the Sun Lasts” looks at a distant, posthuman future to remind us of the total annihilation that is guaranteed by the lifecycle of stars. In the story, Qfwfq’s grandparents Eggg and Ggge hop between stars and seek refuge for their retirement. When paired together (egge, ggge), their palindromic names, like Qfwfq’s, are also suggestive of the perpetual infinity they are caught up in. They long for a planet with an atmosphere, some animals and plants, and a decent temperate climate. The story indicates that they were around at the beginning of the universe and observed how stars took shape, burned through their gasses, then eventually collapsed. As a result, the Colonel Eggg is very familiar with stars. He is a caricature of an astronomer who can deduce the qualities of stars from a single glance: “all he needs is a glance and he’s worked it all out:

what star it is, what its spectrum is, how much it weighs, what it burns, whether it acts as a magnet or spews out stuff, and how far away the stuff that is spewed out stops, and how many light-years away there might be another star” (343). Like astronomers, he relies totally on what is visible in order to deduce patterns from the stars. Because of this expertise, he is paranoid of being caught in a supernova. In an offhand comment, he reminds the reader that “‘Barely five million millennia will go by and the Sun will swell up until it swallows Mercury, Venus and Earth, and a series of cataclysms will start all over again, one after the other, at tremendous speed’” (345). As such, we should “‘try to enjoy this small amount of peace that we have left’” (345). At this point, Calvino leans into his ironic stylings to remind us of our temporary existence: “He won’t be able to forget even for an instant that everything around him is temporary, temporary but always repeated, a mosaic of protons, electrons, neutrons, that will fragment and come together again indefinitely”¹⁴⁰ (346). The story ends with Ggge and Eggg departing from Earth into the desolate void of space in search of a better star that can promise a longer lifespan for their holiday.

Just like the aforementioned tales, this story comically subverts human exceptionalism by leaning into the indifference of scientific knowledge and unfathomably large time scales. Calvino implies here that the cosmic events that formed the planets will be the same cosmic events that destroy them, and by extension, all of the organic life on Earth. The same conclusions appear in other stories of *Le cosmicomiche* as well, albeit with

¹⁴⁰ “senza poter dimenticare nemmeno per un attimo che tutto quel che lo circonda è provvisorio, provvisorio ma sempre ripetuto, un mosaico di protoni elettroni neutroni da scomporre e ricomporre all’infinito” (164)

a much more cynical tone. In “Nothing and Not Much,” for example, Qfwfq concludes the story with a totally distanced and detached view of existence:

Everything space and time contains is no more than that little that was generated from nothingness, the little that is and that might very well not be, or be even smaller, even more meagre and perishable. And if we prefer not to speak of it, whether for good or for ill, it is because the only thing we could say is this: poor, frail universe, born of nothing, all we are and do resembles you. (383)

Calvino repeatedly uses the cosmic timeline to mark the relatively brief presence of human life on Earth. “As Long as the Sun Lasts” and the quote above use a time scale that is unimaginable to human perception (billions of years) to reduce our presence on the planet to relative microseconds. Time is intrinsically beyond human control. In “Implosion,” Qfwfq reminds us that “time is a catastrophe, perpetual and irreversible” (386). Calvino returns to the figure of the mollusk in “Shells and Time” to once again undermine humanity’s brief presence on Earth: “We mollusks, who first had the intention of lasting, have given our kingdom, time, to the most volatile race of inhabitants of the temporary, namely humanity” (362). Qfwfq’s tone in this story is combative and accusatory: he claims that humans have misused the invention of time just to create “a discourse *about you*” (363, emphasis original). And in “Solar Storm,” Qfwfq challenges human hubris by criticizing the assumption that the Sun is a nourishing and protective entity. Instead, he claims

What we call the Sun is nothing but a continuous detonation of gas, an explosion that’s been lasting for five billion years and still hasn’t stopped spewing up stuff; it’s a typhoon of fire, shapeless and lawless, threatening constant aggression, totally unpredictable. And we’re inside it: *it’s not true that we are here and the Sun is there*; it’s all a constant whirlpool of concentric currents with no intervals between them. (349, emphasis mine)

This totalizing view of the universe in *Le cosmicomiche* renders it a violent, aggressive, and morphic “place” that is hostile beyond human comprehension. If we are not destroyed by the geological processes that ongoingly shape the surface of our Earth, Calvino reminds us that we will eventually succumb to time or the explosion of the Sun. As much as *Le cosmicomiche* contain creation myths that celebrate the miracle of life, they also provide apocalyptic tales that assure its destruction. These stories specifically point to the most literal definition of posthumanism: that which comes *after* the human. While it may be tempting to throw in the towel and give up hope in face of these facts, Calvino nonetheless instills in these tales an optimistic outlook. After all, just like *Marcovaldo* and *Palomar*, they are lighthearted and comical stories that resist the fall into helpless nihilism. Instead, the fables often remind us that life is not a passive accident in the background of cosmic events, but an active force that makes meaning out of those events. Posthumanism, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, takes the same stance. In the words of Felice Cimatti in “Posthumanism and Animality,” being human “requires working on it” (112). Being (post)human is an active choice, a verb, one that resists surrender to the cosmic totality in which we float. With this idea in mind, I would like to transition to the final section of this chapter that highlights the stories that provide the most direct call-to-action to preserve life on our planet.

Part III – Posthuman Ecology and The Moon

Although *Le cosmicomiche* often take place in prehuman and posthuman eras, certain stories are grounded in a contemporary world and focus on urgent climate problems

that continue to plague our planet in the 21st century. In these stories, the ‘now’ is just as important to Qfwfq as the apocalyptic future and the nostalgic past. However, the ‘now’ from which Calvino writes is also burdened by myriad problems threatening human survival. At risk is the quality and preservation of human and nonhuman life on the planet. Calvino uses the body of the Moon to make light of these environmental issues. In keeping with the ecocritical subtheme of this dissertation, I would like to analyze three stories that directly involve the Moon as a central subject. I argue that the Moon in Calvino’s stories acts not as an ineffable and pure entity (like the Romantics, and especially Leopardi, saw her), but rather as a contaminated symbol of warning. The Earth-Moon system in *Le cosmicomiche* is a relationship of mirrors: Calvino puts forth that the Moon was once part of Earth and, simultaneously, that the Earth could one day resemble the Moon. Rather than an idealized form of an unreachable nature, the Moon becomes a dire and desolate world that reflects our relationship with consumer waste and ruinous production. In these stories, the Moon is a living, organic entity that is sickened by the degradation of an industrialized Earth. Like in previous tales of *Le cosmicomiche*, the fantastical elements of these stories hyperbolize our neglect of the natural world.

The story “The Mushroom Moon” begins with an epigraph of Sir George Darwin’s hypothesis stating that the Moon formed by detaching itself from the Earth. Like in “Mitosis” in the Priscilla trilogy, this story is concerned with one body splitting into two and creating an “other” in the process. Included in this hypothesis is the theory that the continents formed in this division and that “without the Moon, the evolution of life on Earth would have been very different, if indeed it had happened at all” (297). Qfwfq claims that

in the pre-lunar times, “the surface of the globe was entirely covered by water, with no land visible” (298). Everyone’s life was simplified without the presence of mountains or vegetation. When the Moon splits off from the Earth, waves take form in the oceans and shipwreck Qfwfq. Although Qfwfq is worried at first, the character Inspector Oo reassures Qfwfq that together they will be able to take great advantage of life on the continents. Qfwfq senses that this reassurance carries perilous undertones. In true Calvino fashion, this danger is outlined in a long, exhaustive list of the future (read: current) cities that will develop on land as a result of this phenomenon:

He continued describing life as it would develop on the emerging lands: cities that would rise on stone foundations, roads travelled by camels, horses, carts, cats, caravans; and gold and silver mines, and forests of sandalwood and Molucca wood, and elephants, and pyramids, and towers, and clocks, and lightning-conductors, and tramways, cranes, lifts, skyscrapers, bunting and flags on national holidays, luminous signs in all sorts of colors on the theatre and cinema façades, reflecting on pearl necklaces on grand gala evenings.¹⁴¹ (304)

While the character Bm Bn is entranced by this eventual, hyper-developed future, as it will satisfy his “greed for possessions” (304), Qfwfq remains instead hopeless, because “every marvel” will be tainted by a “shiny, false, vulgar patina” (304). The story ends with Inspector Oo’s predictions coming true: the Moon emerges from the Earth and creates the continents and eventually the cities. In this world of “chinchilla fur,” “neon signs,” and “photographers’ flashes” (306) from which Qfwfq now narrates, he feels misplaced. The

¹⁴¹ “Continuava a descrivere la vita come si sarebbe sviluppata sulle terre emerse, le città dalle fondamenta di pietra che sarebbero sorte, le strade percorse da cammelli e cavalli e carri e gatti e carovane, e le miniere d’oro e d’argento, e le foreste di sandalo e di malacca, e gli elefanti, e le piramidi, e le torri, e gli orologi, e i parafulmini, e i tramway, le gru, gli ascensori, i grattacieli, i festoni e le bandiere nei giorni delle feste nazionali, le scritte luminose d’ogni colore sulle facciate dei teatri e dei cinematografi che avrebbero riverberato sulle perle delle collane nelle notti di gran gala.” (43)

final paragraph of the story details his longing to return to the cold, deserted Moon, which he feels is his true home.

Qfwfq's sadness is onset by living in the human-centric, hyperdeveloped and postindustrial world. The loss in "The Mushroom Moon" is the same loss permeating throughout the vignettes of *Marcovaldo*, namely, the impossibility of returning to the preindustrial world in which Qfwfq could live off the earth and spend his days fishing in the sea. The Moon is the reminder of this loss. It is a symbol of an untouched natural world that is contrasted by the artificiality of the consumer goods listed in the long paragraph quoted above. In the final remarks of the story, Qfwfq's disappointment with civilization is made clear when he refers to the Earth as "this poor pomp of ours" (306) that stays balanced in space due to the presence of the devoid Moon. This marks another clever twist of irony: Qfwfq sees more potential for life on the lifeless satellite than on the planet in which it has fully manifested. He remarks: "I know that I am in debt to the Moon for everything I have on Earth, indebted to what is not here for everything that is" (306). But once again, this "everything" is dulled by a "shiny, vulgar, false patina" (304). Calvino's anxieties about the proliferation of artificial products and terraformed land is implicit in this story. That Qfwfq longs for the cold desert of the Moon is indicative of our broken relationship with our "things."

This same relationship between corrupt Earth and unclean Moon reappears in "The Soft Moon." In this story once again, Qfwfq witnesses the Moon rip apart from the Earth and grow into a satellite. He notes at the beginning that the Moon "was something incompatible, extraneous" (158) that stood in contrast to "all the things in our life, our good

things of plastic, of nylon, chrome-plated steel, ducotone, synthetic resins, plexiglass, aluminum, vinyl, formica, zinc, asphalt, asbestos, cement” (158). Like in “The Mushroom Moon,” Calvino draws attention in list form to these technologically advanced, manufactured materials to create the contrast between the twin bodies. Unlike in the previous story, however, this moon is much more sinuous and, for lack of a better term, “earthy” in composition. It has “green veins that ran over it” (159) and is of a texture similar to “dead viscera” (160). At a certain point, due to the pull of Earth’s gravity, the Moon begins to jet a waxlike excrescence that “had almost the appearance of a mushroom” (162). The more the planetary bodies lock in the dance of gravity, the more this Soft Moon excretes its slimy tentacles over the world. Soon, each celestial body begins trading materials with one another: metallic fragments of buildings are drawn into the Moon’s orbit and soft meteorites from the Moon fall to the ground on Earth. Repeatedly, Calvino’s description of this moon is made analogous to organic material: the meteorites are compared to “something like a mud of mucus...a kind of vegetal parasite...or else like a serum...or else a pancreas cut in pieces” (164). In contrast, the Moon inherits a “thick mass of rubble and shards and fragments, shiny, sharp, clean” (165). The story concludes with the central moral: Qfwfq states that the Earth is desperately trying to recreate the “primitive terrestrial crust of plastic and cement and metal and glass and animal and imitation leather” (165), but with today’s materials, deemed “products of a corrupt Earth” (165), they will never find success. This is because “our material of the old days – the great reason and

proof of terrestrial superiority – *was inferior goods not made to last*, which can no longer be used even as scrap”¹⁴² (165-166, emphasis mine). This concludes the story.

“Soft Moon” in Kerstin Pilz’s reading is another “satire of humanity’s belief in its superiority” (36), in which the surface of the Moon provokes “disorientation and disgust rather than reassurance” (37). Its menacing presence as it looms over Manhattan at the beginning of the story gives it the same monstrous qualities as a tropical storm or tornado. Qfwfq witnesses it “becoming a thing” (158) and is appalled by the “the myriad of pores” and “tumefactions of the surface” (160). As he looks to his lover Sibyl for help, she is quick to dismiss the Moon as a real threat. She leans into her scientific background to make sense of the new phenomenon and undermines its danger to the Earth. Returning again to Pilz’s analysis, Sibyl “confidently denies that there might be any peril attached to it, since this would contradict all scientific predictions...the story reveals science to be bound to a pre-Copernican mentality that makes it incapable of dealing with nature competently” (37). Sure enough, in the story the Moon defies Sibyl’s predictions and breaks “the scales of the Earth’s armor” previously deemed “unbreakable” (163). In this story I see the same volatile power that was present in the prehuman, formative myths from the previous sections. Calvino reminds readers that the forces of nature are far beyond the control of human ingenuity. The planetary bodies have total levelling power and disregard any illusion of invincibility or progress. Furthermore, Calvino’s critique of the “inferior goods, not made to last, which can no longer be used even as scrap” (165) that pollute the Moon point to

¹⁴² “A andarci, avremmo solo la delusione d’apprendere che anche il nostro materiale d’allora – la grande ragione e prova della superiorità terrestre – era roba scadente, di breve durata, che non serve più neanche da rottame.” (59)

humanity's irresponsible mishandling of natural materials. Not even our most precious goods can withstand long-term exposure to the elements. In contrast, the Moon's "lunar discharge, rotten with chlorophyll and gastric juices and dew and nitrogenous gases and cream and tears" is omnipresent and indestructible on the Earth. Qfwfq laments that for an "incalculable amount of time" they will be "condemned to sink" (165) into the sinew. All the waste on Calvino's Moon highlights that, if given the option logistically, we would likely dispose of our waste in space. The NASA spaceflight quoted in the beginning of this chapter infamously left an American flag on the Moon during their visit, and it is understood that the footprints of the astronauts remain intact on the lunar surface due to lack of wind. In some ways, we have already contaminated our nearest celestial neighbor with what Calvino may have called "inferior goods."

"The Daughters of the Moon" is the final story in which the Moon is explicitly linked to ecologically destructive behavior. In this tale, the Moon is characterized as old, decaying, and losing "flesh like a bone that's been gnawed" (307). Like in "Soft Moon," Qfwfq narrates from a fictionalized, "new" Manhattan in which "every object was instantly thrown away and substituted with another new and perfect replacement" (308). In contrast to this world of new, shiny products was the garish, old Moon, which looked "more and more like a comb losing its teeth" (308). Much like the final story "Santa's Children" in *Marcovaldo* and the vignette of the city of Leonia in *Invisible Cities*, this story focuses directly on single-use consumerism as a destructive and self-indulgent habit. Here, the Moon reflects light back onto the shoppers and reminds them that "every new thing, each product we had just bought, could become worn out, fade away, deteriorate" (309) like the

Moon. Because the Moon served no real purpose and provided only a “depressing sight” (309) to the shoppers, they desired only to do what they do best with it and throw it away. Soon, their wish is granted. The Moon makes its way to a city dump full of refrigerators, batteries, and old cars. Here, Calvino pauses and draws another parallel between the Earth and the Moon, emphasizing each other’s desolation:

They resembled each other: the decrepit Moon and that crust of the Earth that had been soldered into an amalgam of wreckage; the mountains of scrap metal formed a chain that closed in on itself like an amphitheater, whose shape was precisely that of a volcanic crater or a lunar sea. The Moon hung over this space *and it was as if the planet and its satellite were acting as mirror images of each other.*¹⁴³ (313, emphasis mine)

Still an eyesore to the citizens, the city decides to commission a giant crane to remove the satellite. With its violent and mechanized jaws, the crane tosses the Moon into the junkyard where it sits among other single-use objects. Then, as if animated by the refuse, the Moon rises from the wreckage and pulls along all the junk into the city streets. Acting as a parody of the Macy’s Day parade, the Moon moves through Manhattan like a balloon in defiance of “the god of Production” (317) whom the city worships on “Consumer Thanksgiving Day” (317). The central moral is then made clear: “The city had consumed itself at a stroke: it was a disposable city following the Moon on its last voyage” (318). The story ends with a bizarre image of Qfwfq becoming a young mammoth and galloping over the continent of buried cities, “obliterating all trace of everything that had been” (320).

¹⁴³ “S’assomigliavano, la Luna decrepita e quella crosta terrestre saldata in un conglomerato di rottami; le montagne di ferraglia formavano una catena che si richiudeva su se stessa come un anfiteatro, la cui forma era proprio quella d’un cratere vulcanico o d’un mare lunare. La Luna pendeva lì sopra ed era come se il pianeta e il satellite facessero l’uno da specchio all’altro” (70)

Qfwfq's return to a nature void of humans at the end of "Daughters of the Moon" makes the posthuman moral clear. The image of nonhuman life enduring long after humanity's brief stint with technology-driven consumerism reinforces my claim that prehuman realities signal posthuman futures. The Moon in this story acts as a premonition of this transformation. It is an animated agent that unearths the landfill and returns the waste back to its producers in the city, laying bare the fact that we are materially bound to this planet. Disposing of our consumer waste in the soil only temporarily hides the problem, and only now are we beginning to see how invisible threats contaminate entire ecosystems and food chains. In Italy specifically, illegal disposal of toxic waste by ecomafias is leading to increasing rates of pancreas and stomach cancers within the infamous "Triangle of Death" outside of Naples. This issue, however, is not bound solely to Italy, but is rapidly becoming a global one. Malaysia, for example, has recently begun to send waste back to the countries of origin after running out of legal spaces to dispose of their trash. Calvino's Moon embodies this push and pull of future geopolitics, and posthumanism encourages a criticism of these same pressing issues. As Norah Campbell, Aidan O'Driscoll, and Michael Saren write in "The Posthuman: The End and the Beginning of the Human," "The posthuman is the ethical and radical realization that the human only comes into existence by the work of nonhuman Others, both organic and technological" (91). Furthermore, "the posthuman might contribute to a debate about the most prevalent contemporary discourse of the relationship of the human to the nonhuman – that of sustainability" (92). Calvino was prescient in predicting the anxieties about sustainability and a growing pile of irrefutable waste. These are no longer issues left to those behind the scenes, but instead

occupy the mind of every consumer who participates in this type of quick commerce. The Moon's decay, death, and eventual organic rebirth in these Cosmicomic stories provide a glimpse of the most pressing realities of the 21st century. The stories warn that if all continues on this path, the Earth will endure a similar, painful metamorphosis.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I have analyzed select stories from *Le cosmicomiche* that showcase and provide new ways of imagining scientific hypotheses. I have suggested that through literary intervention, these hypotheses can be reinterpreted as posthuman creation and destruction myths. Calvino's language in many of these stories emphasizes the material makeup of our planet and highlight its magnificent creative (and destructive) power. Underlying these tales is a deep anxiety about the fragility of life on the planet: its formation and sustainability is in constant threat by these planetary and cosmic forces. I have also argued for a reading of Qfwfq as an informational bit. The character's ability to exist in bodiless forms is analogous to the virtual spaces we occupy through the terminals of digital technologies. Both Qfwfq and the informational bit are infinitely combinatorial, weightless, formless entities that generate new knowledge by occupying new embodied forms. Qfwfq's longing for a return to a prehuman, disembodied existence is growing more possible with rapid technological advancements in the new millennium. Posthuman theory embraces the concept of the cyborg as a hybrid creature that exists at the intersection between the organic and the virtual. Qfwfq explores similar conceptual spaces.

I would like to conclude with an image from the story ‘World Memory’ from *Le cosmicomiche* to solidify these claims. In this story, a character called Müller is appointed as the new director in charge of constructing a document center to house the history of the entire world. It is a technologically advanced archive that seeks to store all of history “along the lines of the individual memories in our brains” (366). Time is limited to construct this device, as there are “forecasts that the Earth will not be able to support life, or at least human life, for much longer” (366-367). The climax of the story arrives in the following paragraph:

What will the human race be at the moment of its extinction? A certain quantity of information about itself and the world, a finite quantity, given that it will no longer be able to propagate itself and grow. For a certain time, the universe enjoyed an excellent opportunity to gather and elaborate information; and to create it, to bring forth information there where in other circumstances there would have been no one to inform and nothing to inform them about: such was life on Earth, and above all human life, its memory, its inventions for communicating and remembering.¹⁴⁴ (368)

This passage makes explicit Calvino’s wariness about human exceptionalism and his growing concern about human life reaching an unsustainable critical mass. Posthuman theory anticipates these same concerns and recognizes that prehuman futures mirror posthuman realities. *Qfwfq*, a hybrid blend of scientific knowledge and literary invention, represents productive ways to confront these planetary challenges and make sense of the material makeup that unites all past and future lifeforms in the observable cosmos.

¹⁴⁴ “Cosa sarà il genere umano al momento dell’estinzione? Una certa quantità d’informazione su se stesso e sul mondo, una quantità finita, dato che non potrà più rinnovarsi e aumentare. Per un certo tempo, l’universo ha avuto una particolare occasione di raccogliere ed elaborare informazione; e di crearla, di far saltar fuori informazione là dove non ci sarebbe stato niente da informare di niente, questo è stata la vita sulla terra e soprattutto il genere umano, la sua memoria, le sue invenzioni per comunicare e ricordare.” (272)

Conclusion

This dissertation has provided a critical analysis of three works by Italian writer Italo Calvino through the lens of posthumanism. I have argued that the books in question (*Marcovaldo*, *Palomar*, and *Le cosmicomiche*) serve as hallmarks of many of the tenets of this new wave of philosophical inquiry. More specifically, I have shown how these books challenge anthropocentrism by championing the perspectives of myriad nonhuman animals and by emphasizing the material interconnectedness of all life on the planet. The urban locales in which these stories take place are hybrid spaces where human and nonhuman life overlap and blend together. The prehuman settings of *Le cosmicomiche* also underscore this relationship by connecting ancient planetary life to contemporary civilization via the transformational figure of Qfwfq. The plot events in these semi-fictional places highlight the drift from symbiotic to exploitative in the human-nonhuman dichotomy. The growing threats of mechanized industrialization, globalization, and consumer capitalism render these stories specific to the 20th century. The posthuman desire to preserve nonhuman life and combat climate change caused by human activity welcomes an ecocritical reading of these texts. Furthermore, I have argued that these stories can be considered posthuman fables: they are discreet in their moral signaling and make use of lighthearted protagonists who gently sway readers without overtly berating them. In Calvino's characters live an optimism that is greatly needed in an era defined by doom-and-gloom narratives about survivability. By giving agency to animal life, by challenging economic activity that proliferates toxic waste, and by moving away from anthropocentric

exceptionalism in favor of new nonhuman perspectives, I argue that Calvino's texts can be helpful in understanding and expanding posthuman theory.

To conclude, I would like to return to the seminal letter that Calvino wrote to Sebastiano Timpanaro in July 1970 "on the end of the world" (383). In this passage, Calvino resists human exceptionalism by subverting the significance of our dominance over nature. Calvino invites us instead to consider humanity as the primary way that nature has had of understanding itself:

In other words, if the objective of man is the humanization of nature, the total mastery of the forces of matter etc., this objective will be reached only when it is understood that these are rhetorical formulae and that in reality it is the memory of matter that organizes itself through man. We must understand that man is a 'space' of matter where certain processes of specialization take place provisionally which will be later redistributed throughout all that exists, that is to say when we finally understand or re-understand that it is in the work of the universe that man must of necessity collaborate.¹⁴⁵ (385)

I find this letter, and this passage specifically, a profound insight into Calvino's posthuman perspective. He makes clear here that humanity's endowed sense of self-importance is flawed, and that we must instead understand ourselves as an intelligent manifestation of matter that has the ability to make sense of itself. In this same letter he resists the "claim for the eternity of the human species or universal humanization," which he calls "rubbish"¹⁴⁶ (385), and instead reminds us that it is in the "work of the universe that man must of

¹⁴⁵ "Cioè se il fine dell'uomo è l'umanizzazione della natura, la conquista totale delle forze della materia ecc. questo fine si raggiungerà soltanto quando si sarà compreso che queste sono formule retoriche e che in realtà è la memoria della materia che organizza se stessa attraverso l'uomo, che l'uomo è un "luogo" della materia dove provvisoriamente avvengono certi processi di specializzazione che si ridistribuiranno poi in tutto ciò che esiste cioè quando si sarà compreso o ricompreso che è al lavoro dell'universo che l'uomo necessariamente collabora." (1083)

¹⁴⁶ "Ora io non vorrei che questo mio discorso suonasse come una rivendicazione di eternità della storia umana, di umanizzazione universale o altre balle." (1082)

necessity collaborate.” As I stated before, posthumanism takes the same ethical stance: it is the realization that we are guests and not hosts on the planet we inhabit and in the universe it exists. I especially enjoy Calvino’s call “to collaborate” with the universe (read: nature), as it reinforces posthumanism’s optimistic and affirmative ethos. It also reminds us of what is, ultimately, in charge.

As we move through the 21st century with the heavy inheritance of the previous century’s socioenvironmental problems, I look to Calvino’s characters as role models and as guides. Marcovaldo, Palomar, Qfwfq – even Marco Polo, Cosimo, and Pin – all represent the jovial desire to build, preserve, and make endure. I am also reminded of another letter, this time to John Woodhouse from 1968, in which Calvino expresses his disdain for turning authors into cults of personalities. He encourages us instead to focus on the literary text as the primary point of interest and the endeavor to be taken seriously. Calvino acknowledges that “authors exist and are necessary” but, more importantly, “literature is made up of works, genres, schools, discussions, problems, collective work in order to solve certain problems” (357). In literature we find the inspiration and encouragement to live better lives and become better people. We also find what Karen Pinkus may poetically call “hope,” that sentiment both effervescent and invigorating. She writes: “hope, whatever else it may mean, certainly requires a leap of imagination, a way of thinking otherwise about the future” (115). Calvino’s stories certainly provide imaginative new ways to think about the future. They give us ideas of how to *be* and *work* in the future – that future for Calvino which is now our present – and the future of a planet that seems increasingly and unstoppably at risk of falling apart. Beyond Calvino, I also look to other 20th century

intellectuals and artists in the Italian tradition for hope. The photography and essays of Luigi Ghirri, the travel journals of Gianni Celati, and the documentary films and poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini all advocate for the same nonhuman life present in Calvino's stories. Their art has helped shape my understanding of the environmental humanities in Italy and has bolstered the syllabus of a course I recently taught on eco-urbanism. Their work exceeds the scope of this dissertation, but it nonetheless addresses and explores the same issues I have brought forward here. Celati's firsthand account of living through the fallout of the Chernobyl disaster was particularly poignant in its similarities to dealing with an invisible, life-threatening virus over the past year. Atomic radiation and COVID-19 have made clear that our bodies are fragile to threats infinitely small, threats that can traverse the globe in relatively short moments, threats that are inorganic in their molecular composition and nonliving in their nature. Nonetheless, we resist, and we endure, as the journey toward a posthuman future continues into the next millennium. With this image in mind, I am reminded of Marco Polo's last monologue in the final pages of *Invisible Cities*:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.¹⁴⁷ (165)

¹⁴⁷ "L'inferno dei viventi non è qualcosa che sarà; se ce n'è uno, è quello che è già qui, l'inferno che abitiamo tutti i giorni, che formiamo stando insieme. Due modi ci sono per non soffrirne. Il primo riesce facile a molti: accettare l'inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e apprendimento continui: cercare e saper riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio" (160)

Calvino notably resisted the reading of this passage as the book's central moral. Perhaps instead we can use it as the final epigraph of this dissertation, which has gently encouraged me to persevere through the inferno of a pandemic, to fortify my admiration for nonhuman life, and to continue to hope.

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