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Thresholds and Tortoises: Modernist Animality in Pirandello's Fiction

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Abstract

The present study provides a posthumanist reading of Pirandello's fiction, with the aim of highlighting the author's specifically modernist take on animality. The first half of the chapter illustrates Pirandello's awareness of a zoological continuum encompassing human and nonhuman beings; particular emphasis is placed on his innovative dialogue with the nineteenth-century tradition (Balzac), as well as on the typically modernist aspects of his posthumanist gaze – e.g. the sense of a “cosmic” detachment from human events, and the strategic use of thresholds (openings and epilogues) to undermine the anthropocentrism inherent to traditional narrative forms. The second half focuses on a specific case study, i.e. the role assigned to the tortoise in the short stories “Paura d'esser felice” and “La tartaruga”. In both texts, the protagonist's “becoming-tortoise” (Deleuze and Guattari) is instrumental to Pirandello's modernist critique of anthropocentrism.

Keywords

Pirandello, Modernism, Balzac, Tortoise, Deleuze and Guattari, zoomimesis.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, a growing number of studies investigated modernist literature in a posthumanist perspective (see for instance Wallace 2005, Alt 2010, Scott 2012, Rohman 2012, Ryan and West 2015). As is often pointed out, the modernist questioning of the humanistic paradigm is strongly related to the influence exerted by Darwinism between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. As Carrie Rohman writes in *Stalking the Subject*, literary modernism cannot be understood without considering animality as the fundamental place in which the construction and complication of identity happen. The spectre of the animal deeply threatens the sovereignty of Western consciousness, thus interfering with the ideological discourse of psychoanalysis – i.e. Freud's unitary model of the unconscious, as opposed to the multiplicity of the ‘becoming animal’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980 – but also with that of imperialism, both of which are based on the rejection of animality. In other words, through the animal, modernist writers are

not only confronted with the post-Darwinist crisis of anthropocentrism, but can also critically reflect on the creation of imperialistic “otherness” and on the arbitrariness of linguistic and cultural norms.

Nonetheless, the posthumanist dimension of Italian modernism still remains virtually unexplored, with the exception of few recent studies on Federigo Tozzi (Amberson 2014) and Luigi Pirandello (Driscoll 2017).¹ By focusing on the role of animality in Pirandello’s fiction, the present contribution aims to set the basis for a broader systematic analysis of early twentieth-century Italian literature from a posthumanist standpoint. In order to achieve this, we will combine two complementary perspectives: on a diachronic level, Pirandello’s framing of animality will be compared to Realist and Decadent precedents (i.e. Balzac and d’Annunzio respectively), with a view to highlighting Pirandello’s modernist distortion of nineteenth-century conventions; on a synchronic level, we will point out a series of significant convergences between Pirandello and other major representatives of Italian and international modernism, from Gadda and Tozzi to Musil and Woolf. Particular attention will be paid to two aspects: 1) The first half of this chapter (sections 2-3) will investigate Pirandello’s awareness of animality as a continuum encompassing both the human and the non-human, which in turn determines a drastic rethinking of conventional narrative forms; 2) The second half (sections 4-6) will be centred on the analysis of one particular case study, namely Pirandello’s representation of the “becoming-tortoise” in the short stories “Pauro d’esser felice” [Fear of being happy] (1925) and “La tartaruga” [The tortoise] (1936). In both cases, we aim to demonstrate that a posthumanist reading of Pirandello can be doubly productive – on the one hand, focusing on the relation between human and non-human beings can shed new light on previously undetected aspects of Pirandello’s modernism; on the other, a closer look at Pirandello’s specific case can help us better understand some key features of modernist posthumanism at large.

2. Posthuman Comedy: Pirandello, Balzac, and the Continuum of Nature

The near-total absence of posthumanist readings of Pirandello’s work (with the sole exception of Driscoll 2017) is indeed quite striking, especially considering the ubiquitous presence of non-human animals in his fiction. Zangrilli’s *Bestiario pirandelliano* (2001), the only systematic study on the topic, provides an exhaustive and extremely useful inventory of animal occurrences, but does not really engage in an organic critical reflection on the author’s framing of animality. In the following pages we will therefore aim to bridge this gap by setting the basis for a systematic analysis of Pirandello’s fiction in the light of posthumanism. Pirandello’s “Avvertenza sugli scrupoli della fantasia” [A Warning on the Scruples of the Imagination], first published as a postscript to the 1921 edition of *Il fu Mattia Pascal* [The Late Mattia Pascal], provides an ideal starting point for our analysis: “In Natural History there is a Kingdom which is studied by Zoology,

since it is inhabited by animals. *Among the animals inhabiting it, man is also included.* And the zoologist may talk of man and say, for example, that man is not a quadruped but a biped, and that he does not have a tail like the monkey, the donkey, or the peacock has” (Pirandello 1973, I, p.580, our translation; italics added).² Pirandello’s reference to zoology is most likely derived from Balzac’s famous preface to *La Comédie Humaine* [The Human Comedy], 1842:

The idea originated in a comparison between Humanity and Animality [...]. The Animal takes its external form, or the differences in its form, from the environment in which it is obliged to develop. Zoological species are the result of these differences. [...] I perceived that in this respect society resembled nature. For does not society modify Man, according to the conditions in which he lives and acts, into men as manifold as the species in Zoology? (Balzac 2008, p. xli)

Even though Pirandello’s strong admiration for Balzac was openly confirmed by his son Stefano, the intertextual relationship between the two is still largely unexplored, with most critical attention focusing on *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* in relation to Balzac’s “Colonel Chabert.”³ However, moving back to the parallel between Balzac’s preface and Pirandello’s postscript, it is worth noting that the latter also introduces a significant variation. Balzac simply established a “comparison” between Humanity and Animality, and subsumed them under the categories of “society” and “nature” respectively; in his “Avvertenza,” instead, Pirandello explicitly places “man” among the many animal species that can be scrutinized by Zoology. Humanity is not compared to Animality anymore; it is fully embedded within the latter. To be entirely fair to Balzac, the idea of humankind being part of an animal continuum is not entirely absent from the *Comédie* either: “There is but one Animal. The Creator works on a single model for every organized being,” including human beings of course (Balzac 2008, p. xlii). Although Balzac’s preface explicitly mentions Leibniz, this is actually a good example of Spinozian monism – i.e. the idea of the fundamental unity of nature, identified by Rosi Braidotti as a defining feature of the posthumanist gaze (Braidotti 2013, pp. 59-60). Nevertheless, as will be argued in the present study, Pirandello develops this idea in a more consistent way, thereby promoting a modernist rethinking of the anthropocentrism inherent to traditional narrative forms.

Balzac’s influence is particularly visible in one of the most typical manifestations of Pirandello’s critique of anthropocentrism – namely his euphoric celebration of the infinite variety of nature, as opposed to the levelling “marsina stretta” [tight waistcoat] of social conventions. This

awareness of the physiological diversity of all living creatures is well exemplified by a passage from Pirandello's programmatic essay *L'Umorismo* (1908):

We can easily notice how and to what degree the physiognomy of one person differs from that of all others. [...] Let us imagine a large forest with many families of trees: oaks, maples, beeches, planes, pines, etc. At first glance, we can summarily identify the various families [...]. But then we should consider that, within each family, each tree differs from all the other trees, each trunk, branch or shrub differs from all the other trunks, branches or shrubs; indeed, in such an immense foliage, we could not even find two leaves that are identical. (Pirandello 2006, p. 806; our translation)⁴

Notably, a very similar image can be found in Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, and more precisely in *Séraphita* (1834): "You will never find in nature two identical objects: you know that it is impossible to find two identical leaves on the same tree, or two identical examples of the same species of tree" (Balzac 1976, XI, p. 820; our translation).

Pirandello's interest in the posthuman potential underlying Balzac's fiction is further confirmed by another example of euphoric immersion into nature's variety, namely the final pages of *Uno, nessuno e centomila* [One, No One and One Hundred Thousand], 1921: "I am this tree. Tree, cloud; tomorrow, book or breeze; the book I read, the breeze I drink in. Living wholly without, a vagabond. [...] I am dying every instant, and being born anew and without memories: alive and whole, not in myself anymore, but in everything outside" (Pirandello 1973, II, pp. 901-902; o.t.).⁵ Vitangelo Moscarda's abandonment to nature's fluid continuum is remarkably similar to an episode from Balzac's *La peau de chagrin* [The Magic Skin, 1831], when protagonist Raphaël de Valentin decides to pursue an ascetic life in the bucolic landscape of Auvergne: "[Raphaël] would spend whole days in this way, like a plant in the sun, or a hare in its form. He minutely noted the progress of everything working around him in the water, on the earth, or in the air. He had fancifully blended his life with the life of the crags; he had deliberately planted himself there" (Balzac 2008, pp. 264-265). It should be stressed, though, that while Raphaël's escape is just an episode within an ultimately anthropocentric narrative, Vitangelo's fusion with nature coincides with what Greimas would call the "sanction" phase – the epilogue, which plays of course a crucial role when it comes to reconstructing the axiological or ideological hierarchies underlying the story.⁶ As already suggested with regard to "Avvertenza," Pirandello seems to be directly influenced by Balzac's latent posthumanism, while at the same time developing it into a more radical awareness of humankind's "enmeshment" with nature (Morton 2010).

In the following section, the focus will shift from Pirandello's dialogue with 19th-century realism to a more typically modernist feature of his posthumanism, namely the narrator's cosmic detachment from human life at large.

3. Cosmic Irony and Its Thresholds

Opposite to Vitangelo's ecstatic immersion into nature, Pirandello's posthumanism can also take an entirely different shape, which could be defined as "cosmic irony" – i.e. an absolute detachment from all things human, in compliance with the "filosofia del lontano" [philosophy of distance] underpinning his notion of *umorismo*. Not by chance, this attitude is particularly frequent in the works belonging to the properly "humoristic" phase of Pirandello's fiction, roughly spanning from 1904 to 1915 (Luperini 1999, p. 6). The most evident example is arguably the protagonist's monologue in the "Premessa seconda" [Second foreword] of *Il fu Mattia Pascal*:

"The Count woke up early, at 8:30 precisely"... "the Countess wore a lilac dress, richly decorated with lace at the throat"... "Teresina was starving to death"... "Lucretia suffered for love"... Good God! What do I care? Are we or are we not on an invisible spinning-top, whipped by a thread of sunlight, on a grain of crazed sand which turns and turns without ever knowing why? ... Copernicus, Don Eligio, Copernicus has ruined mankind beyond repair. By now we have all gradually adapted to the new idea of our infinite smallness, to considering ourselves less than nothing in the universe, with all our nice discoveries and inventions. What value then, can you expect any information to have, not only regarding our individual miseries but even regarding general calamities? Our stories, by now, are the stories of worms. (Pirandello 1973, I, p. 324; o.t.)⁷

By questioning the anthropocentrism underlying novelistic clichés and conventions ("the Count woke up at 8:30 precisely"), Pascal/Pirandello reframes human events within a much broader biological continuum, where the hierarchical relation between human calamities and the "lives of worms" cannot be taken for granted anymore. As prescribed by the "filosofia del lontano," the centrality of the human species is reconsidered from the scales of cosmic (Copernican) time and space. In this respect, Pirandello is a perfect example of a phenomenon that has already been described with regard to Joyce, Woolf and Eliot – i.e. modernism's "long-range aesthetics," its "attempts to picture human life from an estranging distance" (Tung 2016, p. 518).

Not by chance, the two key passages from Pirandello's fiction that have been discussed so far (from *Uno, nessuno e centomila* and *Il fu Mattia Pascal* respectively) both come from the thresholds of the text – the epilogue of *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, and the foreword of *Il fu Mattia Pascal*. Pirandello tends indeed to assign a special role to the liminal areas of the narrative; human stories are thereby placed within a defamiliarizing posthuman frame, which can only be temporarily overlooked while reading the story by virtue of a “distrazione provvidenziale” [providential distraction] (Pirandello 1973, I, p. 324).

This process is even more visible in the epilogues of Pirandello's *Novelle per un anno* [Short stories for a year], which are often characterized by a cosmic detachment from the human events narrated in the story. 13 texts out of 225 end with a reference to the moon or the stars, witnessing human affairs with sidereal indifference.⁸ Notably, 12 out of 13 occurrences date between 1900 and 1920, i.e. within the extended range of Pirandello's “humoristic” phase. The same applies to a similar kind of epilogue, where the final close-up on a non-human animal invites us to reframe the story from a non-anthropocentric perspective: the larks in “Il vitalizio” [The Life Annuity] (1901), the fly in “La mosca” [The Fly] (1904) and “La mano del malato povero” [The Poor Sick Man's Hand] (1917), the spider in “Dal naso al cielo” [From the Nose to the Sky] (1907), the cat in “Il gatto, un cardellino e le stelle” [The Cat, a Finch and the Stars] (1917), and the crow in “Il corvo di Mizzaro” [The Crow of Mizzaro] (1919).

Pirandello's strategic use of narrative thresholds is also part of a broader phenomenon within international modernism; the “long-range aesthetics” typical of modernist fiction is, in fact, particularly evident when it comes to openings and endings. See, for instance, the meteorological incipit of Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* (1921-1942):

A barometric low hung over the Atlantic. It moved eastward toward a high-pressure area over Russia without as yet showing any inclination to bypass this high in a northerly direction. The isotherms and isotheres were functioning as they should. ... The rising and setting of the sun, the moon, the phases of the moon, of Venus, of the rings of Saturn, and many other significant phenomena were all in accordance with the forecasts in the astronomical yearbooks. The water vapor in the air was at its maximal state of tension, while the humidity was minimal. In a word that characterizes the facts fairly accurately, even if it is a bit old-fashioned: It was a fine day in August 1913. (Musil 1995, p. 3)

Just like in Pirandello's foreword, the reference to nonhuman spatial scales projects a sense of cosmic irony onto conventional, anthropocentric novelistic formulas, such as Musil's "It was a fine day in August 1913." Similarly, Italian modernist Carlo Emilio Gadda uses the incipit as a way to locate human events within the framework of "eternity" or "natural history" (cf. Savettieri 2001 and Benedetti 1995 respectively); with regard to endings, the best parallel is probably with the final page of Italo Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience* (1923), with its memorable apocalyptic fantasy – "There will be a tremendous explosion, but no one will hear it, causing the earth to return to its nebulous state and go wandering through the heavens, free at last from parasites and disease" (Svevo 2003, pp. 436-437).⁹ This does not mean, however, that the role of nonhuman agencies is confined by Pirandello to the thresholds of the text; as will be shown in the following pages, non-human animals are often assigned with a *central* narrative function in Pirandello's fiction.

4. Pirandello's modernist tortoise

The following sections will focus on the tortoise as a recurring presence in Pirandello's fiction, with particular regard to the short stories "Paura d'esser felice" [Fear of being happy] (1925) and "La tartaruga" [The tortoise] (1936). In order to fully understand the role assigned to this animal in Pirandello's specific case, it is first of all necessary to reflect on the broader significance of the tortoise in European culture between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. In this panorama, in which the animal begins to embody the post-Darwinian crisis of anthropocentrism, the tortoise and the turtle are in fact often seen in modern literature as a "salvific" antithesis of technological advancement (Gasparotto 2012, p. 28). This idea is best exemplified by the famous *flânerie* described by Walter Benjamin in his essay on Baudelaire:

Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The *flâneurs* liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace. But this attitude did not prevail; Taylor, who popularised the watchword "Down with dawdling!" carried the day.

(Benjamin 1983, p. 850)

According to Caroline Pollentier, the physical slowness of the animal together with its "urban status [...] as a commodified good and social signifier," made Benjamin describe "tortoise-walking as a characteristic habit of the flâneur" and as a "dandy display of elegance" (Pollentier 2010, p. 21). Starting from Benjamin's "symbiotic, rhythmical representation of tortoise-walking"

(Pollentier 2010, p. 22), which presents the tortoise as still operating on a “human-centered, figurative level,” (Pollentier 2010, p. 24), she imagines Virginia Woolf’s scenario of the *flânerie* as transforming into “a more radical experience of deterritorialization, destabilizing the very distinction between thinking subject and commodified animal” (Pollentier 2010, p. 24). Emphasizing the “ambivalence of the tortoise figure” (Pollentier 2010, p. 24), Woolf’s aesthetic experience of the *flânerie* can be rethought as an “anti-essentialist experience of ‘becoming animal’” (Pollentier 2010, pp. 20-21). Pollentier analyzes the tortoise as represented by Virginia Woolf in her London essays – in her 1927 essay “Street-Haunting: A London Adventure” Woolf focuses on the image of the tortoise’s shell as representing the “self-withdrawn human subject” to conclude that “flânerie metaphorically begins when the shell cracks open” (Pollentier 2010, p. 23); in “Oxford Street Tide” (1932) the tortoise becomes a “‘material-semiotic’ actor” with both its referential status of domestic animal and its figurative presence (Pollentier 2010, p. 20), thus opening *flânerie* to its utopian potential.

Deleuze and Guattari, on whose work Pollentier bases her discussion of the utopian potential of the tortoise, borrow their anti-dialectical concept of “becoming-animal” from a cycle of poems on the tortoise written in 1921 by D. H. Lawrence, in which the author does not refer to “becoming-tortoise” as a sentimental or domestic relationship, but rather as the “anomalous”¹⁰ – something that cannot be identified with a species or an individual but “contains only affects, and includes neither familiar feelings nor subjectivities, specific nor significant characteristics,” since “tender feelings are as foreign to it as human classifications” (Deleuze and Guattari quoted in Bryden 2007, p. 77).¹¹ In other words, Lawrence’s poetic tortoises “agglomerate on the page as intensities of movement, stasis, or desire” (Bryden 2007, p. 77). Thus, the anomalous embodied by the tortoise also becomes the “contemplative” perspective *par excellence*, through which Woolf observes the modernism of the metropolis of London; as a result, the animal gaze defamiliarizes and relativizes the anthropocentric paradigm, and transforms the city from consumeristic into utopian (Pollentier 2010, pp. 25, 27).

In the Italian context, the “becoming-tortoise” envisioned by Woolf and Lawrence is preceded by (or runs parallel to) imperialist forms of literary representation, which reject animality in order to reinstall the sovereignty of humanity – Gabriele d’Annunzio’s fetish tortoise is arguably the most famous example. The poet gave gold miniatures of his tortoise to friends and public figures such as Tazio Nuvolari and Benito Mussolini; it served the poet as a social badge, playing into d’Annunzio’s idea of human and male superiority as opposed to the inherent animality of the feminine being (Gasparotto 2012, p. 22). From this perspective, the solitary “contemplativeness” attributed to the animal does not open up to the ontological experience of the anomalous in the

Deleuzian sense of the word. Its image is rather used by the poet for self-fashioning purposes, including for instance the legitimization of his own withdrawal from political life: the Latin motto “intra me maneo” [I remain within myself], together with the image of a tortoise inside its shell, are on an engraved plate that the *Vate* sent to Mussolini in 1935. The same applies to the embalmed domestic turtle in the dining room of the Vittoriale, donated to d’Annunzio by Marquise Luisa Casati who had brought her home from one of her frequent trips to exotic countries (Castagnola 2014, p. 209). The animal allegedly died of indigestion, and was then used as a warning against greed (Panté 2009, pp. 145-146).

In contrast to d’Annunzio, the tortoise fulfils a very different role in Italian modernism; in particular, several works by Tozzi and Pirandello feature a process of “becoming-tortoise” both as the threshold of the anomalous (Deleuze and Guattari) and of relational mimesis (Marchesini 2014). In Tozzi, the animal is predominantly seen as the sacrificial victim of the human violence pervading the Tuscan countryside; at the same time, in a typically modernist fashion, the animal is also an alienating and uncanny presence triggering various unpredictable responses (Amberson 2014, pp. 21-22). The tortoise that appears at the end of a fragment in the 1917 collection *Bestie* [*Beasts*] establishes an ethical equivalence between human and non-human animals, based on their shared capacity for suffering:

Why, then, was I suffering there [in Siena]? Why hadn’t my soul ever wanted to stay there? Maybe that tortoise of mine knew it, which I managed to keep inside the house one night, and I couldn’t find any more the morning after. (Tozzi 1993, p. 601; o.t.)¹²

By leaving, the tortoise is seemingly released from its domestic dimension and opens up to the transformative experience of the anomalous; however, this interpretation is undermined by the blurred boundaries between the real animal and the metaphorical one. Laying bare how being escapes meaning, Tozzi’s tortoise is a perfect example of the “exorbitant potential” of the animal in Driscoll’s description of that “which is not exhausted by –and more often than not escapes – the philosophical and conceptual gestures that accompany it” (Driscoll 2017, p. 286).

The “act of becoming an animal,” or “zoomimesis,” is taken instead to an extreme level in two short stories from Pirandello’s *Novelle per un anno* –“Paura d’esser felice” (1925) [Fear of Being Happy] from the collection *Donna Mimma*, and “La tartaruga” (1936) [The Tortoise] from *Una giornata*. In both stories the tortoise is introduced in the act of climbing the steps – a threshold in Deleuzian terms –, while being scrutinized by the human gaze. In “Paura d’esser felice,” the

animal's stubborn efforts are ascribed by the observer to a desire or "ontological intentionality" (Marchesini 2014, p. xix) attributed to the animal itself: "I wonder what great delights it imagines it can find in that [dining] room, since it has persisted in these efforts for so many years" (Pirandello 1984, p.69).¹³ In "La tartaruga," instead, the animal's movements are interpreted in a superstitious (anthropocentric) light by a friend of the protagonist's:

Strange as it may seem, there are people in the United States who believe that tortoises bring luck, although even in the United States no tortoise has been found to be aware of its magic power. Mr Myshkow – for instance – has a friend who firmly believes in tortoises as soothsayers. His friend speculates on the Exchange and every morning – before giving his orders – he places a tortoise on the carpet of his drawing-room and watches: if the animal begins to move he is convinced that there will be a rally on the Exchange; if – on the other hand – the animal hides its head and refuses to move, he is equally convinced that a slump is in sight. Incredible: but more incredible is that he has always been right.

(Pirandello 1975, p. 214)¹⁴

In "Paura d'esser felice," the tortoise's stubborn resistance to human help is interpreted as an ethical act of prudence. In "La tartaruga" the animal is considered as a mere lucky charm, with no autonomous existence; this assumption, however, is ironically questioned by the narrator at the beginning of the quotation, highlighting the non-coincidence between human superstition and the non-human "exorbitance" of the animal (who is of course unaware of being invested with this alleged "power"). In the following sections we will further investigate how Pirandello undermines the anthropocentric gaze on the tortoise, by contrasting it with a process of "zoomimesis" on the part of human characters.

5. The tortoise and the grasshopper: "Paura d'esser felice"

Before getting married, Fabio Feroni – the protagonist of "Paura d'esser felice" – used to take a vivid and loving interest in the natural life around him. One of his favourite pastimes consisted in observing an old tortoise struggling to climb the three steps leading from the terrace to the dining room, while at the same time refusing any human assistance; whenever Feroni tried to help the tortoise by lifting and placing it on the first step, the animal would withdraw in its shell like a stone and slowly turn around, as if begging to descend the steps once again (Pirandello 1994, II, p. 1489). The animal's resistance inspires Feroni's metalinguistic reflection on the expression "Che

bestia!” [What an animal!] when referring to an animal instead of to a man:

What followed from this observation? That in calling a man an animal, you do animals a very great injustice, because you take for stupidity what instead is their integrity or instinctual prudence. You call a man who doesn't accept help, an animal, because it doesn't seem right to praise a man for what is appropriate in animals. (Pirandello 1984, p. 70)¹⁵

From this moment on, Feroni becomes aware of the relativity of the animal-human dichotomy, thus opening up to the possibility of “becoming-tortoise.” He seems to be influenced by the anomalous behaviour of the tortoise, and replicates it in his defence strategy against the whims of fate. Notably, Feroni refers to the unpredictability of fate through an animal metaphor: unexpected events are like “the sudden spring of a grasshopper” (Pirandello 1984, p. 72),¹⁶ repeatedly leaving the protagonist “belly up – just like that tortoise there” (p. 70).¹⁷ In other words, Feroni sets out to become a tortoise, in order to shield himself from the sudden springs of the grasshopper.

At the same time, Feroni is overwhelmed by the affective nature of the anomalous, as described by Deleuze and Guattari in their analysis of the “becoming-tortoise.” He is incapable to dominate the process of mimesis in which he is captured, and he resorts to what can be called with Derrida a final act of “carnophallogocentrism” (Derrida 2008, p. 104) by swallowing the grasshopper:

All of a sudden, whether it was because of a mouse, or a small current of air, or a cockroach on his bare feet, the fact is that Fabio Feroni let out a cry, jumped up, and bucked, and then took hold of his belly with both hands, shouting that the grasshopper was there; it was there, there inside his stomach! He began sashing about dashing about throughout the house, dressed only in his nightshirt. Then he ran down the stairs and outside through the deserted street into the night, screaming and laughing, while a dishevelled Dretta shouted for help from the window. (Pirandello 1984, p. 75)¹⁸

The epilogue is deeply ambivalent: does Feroni's euphoric madness result from the suspension of post-Darwinist anxiety, with the grasshopper finally being subordinated to human supremacy? Or on the contrary, does the human body's literal assimilation of otherness result in an ecstatic, truly

posthuman epiphany? The ultimate outcome of Feroni's zoomimesis remains uncertain, and open to interpretation.

6. "I'm in luck! I'm in luck!": Myshkow and the tortoise

In "La tartaruga," the role of the animal gradually changes from being a material lucky charm into an exorbitant presence transforming the protagonist's mind-set. The deep affinity between Mr Myshkow and the tortoise is already suggested at the beginning of the story, when he seems to be the only one sympathizing with the animal while his children (John and Helen) have fun torturing it:

With the toe of his shoe John turns it over onto its shell and immediately we see the little creature lash out with its little paws and painfully thrust about with its head in an attempt to get itself back into its natural position. Helen watches all this happen and then, without her eyes becoming any the less old-looking, sniggers. It's like the noise a rusty pulley makes as the bucket hurtles madly down into the depths of a well. As you'll have observed, there's no respect on the part of the children for the good luck that tortoises are supposed to bring you. On the contrary, they have made it blindingly clear to us that both of them tolerate its presence only on condition that it allows itself to be considered by them as an extremely stupid toy to be treated thus – that's to say, kicked about with the toe of your shoe. Mr. Myshkow finds this very saddening. (Pirandello 1975, p. 216)¹⁹

While John and Helen's sadism is already in league with the violence of society ("the cold, coarse derision of those two children," Pirandello 1975, p. 219),²⁰ Myshkow's sympathetic attitude reflects his extraneousness to it. The children reject the animal's otherness by violently targeting it, and Mrs Myshkow uses the animal as a pretext to get rid of her husband. Myshkow, instead, gets prepared for the process of "becoming-tortoise" in three stages – firstly through bodily experience, secondly through *flânerie*, and thirdly through the epiphany of zoomimesis.

When Myshkow holds the tortoise in his hand for the first time, "his sturdy, full-blooded springy little body is trembling all over. Maybe it's pleasure he's shuddering with; maybe there's a touch of horror too" (Pirandello 1975, p. 221).²¹ This mixed feeling of alienation and recognition marks the start of the hybridizing process with the nonhuman other. One morning, while staring at his own body while taking a bath, Myshkow wonders "why his own body has necessarily to be the one that it is, and not another quite different one" (p. 217);²² upon reflecting on his improbable relationship with the cold and unaffectionate Mrs Myshkow, he even asks himself whether his

children would have been different if he had carried them in his womb (Pirandello 1994, III, p. 2349). His profound kinship with the tortoise becomes a way for Myshkow to interrogate the borders of the human as well as those between genders, as is often the case with posthumanist narratives (cf. Amberson and Past 2014, p. 8). The second stage of Myshkow's "becoming-tortoise," instead, coincides with his inconclusive *flânerie* around New York, punctuated by the intermittent physical presence of the tortoise in his hand: "As he walks along he forgets that he's got the tortoise in his hand. Then he remembers" (Pirandello 1975, p. 220).²³ Following his wife's threats to leave the house if the tortoise stayed, Myshkow's original intention was to bring the pet back to the shop where he bought it. He then considers abandoning it on the back seat of a taxi, but at the end he suddenly changes his mind – he decides to keep the tortoise in his house, thus causing Mrs Myshkow to leave. As soon as she disappears uttering her contempt towards the animal, the tortoise "suddenly unsheathes its four little paws, its tail and its head, and, swaying from side to side – you'd almost swear it was dancing – moves about the drawing room" (Pirandello 1975, p. 222).²⁴

At this point, roles are reversed. The tortoise is no longer a lucky charm at the service of anthropocentric superstition, as it was at the beginning of the story – on the contrary, it drastically changes Myshkow's very idea of luck as part of a posthumanist epiphany:

Mr. Myshkow can scarcely refrain from rejoicing — but only rather half-heartedly. He applauds very quietly. He gets the feeling, as he looks at the tortoise, that it's telling him something. Only he's... well, he's not really convinced that... "I'm in luck! I'm in luck!"
(Pirandello 1975, p. 222)²⁵

The final close-up on a non-human animal invites the reader to adopt a non-anthropocentric perspective on the very meaning of luck, which is now liberated from its exchange value. As Marchesini put it: "Postulating a dialogic role for the heterospecific, we recognize its epiphanic significance, an inescapable property to go beyond the phenomenal, becoming the herald of new existential dimensions" (Marchesini 2014, p. xxviii). Even more clearly than in "Paura d'esser felice," the process of "becoming-tortoise" is used in "La tartaruga" to illustrate the "exorbitant potential" of animality; in this respect, both of Pirandello's stories show a significant similarity to other modernist representations of the tortoise, from Woolf to D.H. Lawrence.

7. Conclusion

In the first half of this chapter, we aimed to provide a general introduction to Pirandello's modernist gaze on animality. Building on a series of intertextual parallels with Balzac, we demonstrated how Pirandello deviates from the conventions of Realism by emphasizing the idea of a zoological continuum encompassing both human and non-human animals. This awareness has far-reaching narrative and thematic implications, ranging from the protagonist's ecstatic fusion with nature (*Uno, nessuno e centomila*) to a sense of cosmic detachment from all things human (mostly achieved at the beginning or at the end of the narrative); especially the latter outcome points to the instrumental role played by animality in the 'philosophy of distance' underlying Pirandello *umorismo*. Sections 5 to 7, instead, focused on the tortoise as a recurring figure in Pirandello's short fiction, exemplifying the author's reversal of the anthropocentric paradigm by way of representing forms of zoomimesis, or the act of "becoming animal".

In a diachronic perspective, both the introductory overview and the close-up on the tortoise attest to Pirandello's innovative dialogue with the nineteenth-century tradition: just like Balzac's anthropocentric comparison between Humanity and Animality in *The Human Comedy*, d'Annunzio's Decadent fascination with the tortoise can be seen as a significant precedent, which is at the same time overcome by Pirandello's modernist posthumanism. At the same time, in a synchronic perspective, we have set out to foreground a series of revealing similarities between Pirandello and other classics of Italian and European modernism – including for instance the systematic appearance of the posthumanist gaze in the narrative thresholds of the text (section 3), the use of cosmic imagery in compliance with a typically modernist "long-range aesthetics" (section 3), as well as the "becoming-tortoise" as a recurring example of modernist zoomimesis (sections 4-6). As illustrated by the analysis of Pirandello's specific case, the lens of posthumanism can be instrumental in reconsidering early twentieth-century Italian literature in the broader context of European modernism, thereby favouring a deeper understanding of modernism itself as a transnational phenomenon.

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¹ On the notion of modernism with regard to early 20th-century Italian literature, cf. for instance Donnarumma 2006, Baldi 2010, and Luperini and Tortora 2012.

² "C'è nella storia naturale un regno studiato dalla zoologia, perché popolato dagli animali. Tra i tanti animali che lo popolano è compreso anche l'uomo. E lo zoologo sì, può parlare dell'uomo e dire, per esempio, che non è un quadrupede ma un bipede, e che non ha la coda, vuoi come la scimmia, vuoi come l'asino, vuoi come il pavone."

³ For a discussion of Balzac's influence on Pirandello, cf. Nobili 13-16 and Dashwood.

⁴ "Noi tutti possiamo notar facilmente come e quanto la fisionomia dell'uno sia diversa da quella d'un altro. [...] Pensiamo a un gran bosco dove fossero parecchie famiglie di piante: querci, aceri, faggi, platani, pini, ecc. Sommariamente, a prima vista, noi distingueremo le varie famiglie [...]. Ma dobbiamo poi pensare che in ognuna di queste famiglie non solo un albero è diverso dall'altro, un tronco dall'altro, un ramo dall'altro, una fronda dall'altra, ma che, fra tutta quella incommensurabile moltitudine di foglie, non ve ne sono due, due sole, identiche tra loro."

⁵ "Sono quest'albero. Albero, nuvola; domani libro o vento: il libro che leggo, il vento che bevo. Tutto fuori, vagabondo. [...] Muoio ogni attimo, io, e rinasco nuovo e senza ricordi: vivo e intero, non più in me, ma in ogni cosa fuori."

⁶ We are referring to Greimas's "Canonical Narrative Schema", as presented in Greimas and Courtés 1982.

⁷ "— E va bene! *Il signor conte si levò per tempo, alle ore otto e mezzo precise... La signora contessa indossò un abito lilla con una ricca fioritura di merletti alla gola... Teresina si moriva di fame... Lucrezia spasimava d'amore... Oh, santo Dio! e che volete che me n'importi? Siamo o non siamo su un'invisibile trottolina, cui fa da ferza un fil di sole, su un granellino di sabbia impazzito che gira e gira e gira, senza saper perché [...]? Copernico, Copernico, don Eligio mio, ha rovinato l'umanità, irrimediabilmente. Ormai noi tutti ci siamo a poco a poco adattati alla nuova concezione dell'infinita nostra piccolezza, a considerarci anzi men che niente nell'Universo, con tutte le nostre belle scoperte e invenzioni; e che valore dunque volete che abbiano le notizie, non dico delle nostre miserie particolari, ma anche delle generali calamità? Storie di vermucci, ormai, le nostre."*

⁸ "Sole e ombra" [Sun and Shade] (1896), "Scialle nero" [The Black Shawl] (1900), "Prima notte" [The First Night] (1900), "Il fumo" [Smoke] (1904), "Il coppo" [The Fish Trap] (1912), "Ciàula scopre la luna" (1912), "Notte" [Night] (1912), "Male di luna" [Moonsickness] (1913), "De sé" [By Itself] (1913), "Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine!" (1915), "Il gatto, un cardellino e le stelle" [The Cat, a Finch and the Stars] (1917), "Un cavallo nella luna" [Horse in the Moon] (1918), "Cinci" [Cinci] (1932).

⁹ "Ci sarà un'esplosione enorme che nessuno udrà e la Terra ritornata alla forma di nebulosa errerà nei cieli priva di parassiti e di malattie" (Svevo 2004, p. 1085).

¹⁰ The becoming-animal should not be understood as imitation or identification, but as an “alliance with the anomalous” (Vignola 122).

¹¹ Both the Deleuzian and post-humanist perspectives state that it is not possible to conceive a pure, let alone immutable, essence of the human being, as man is always caught in processes of trespassing and hybridization with animal “othernesses”. It is precisely in this sense that the becoming-animal transcends twentieth-century philosophical anthropology and allows us to think about how ethics can be made to take into account non-human entities, from animals to the environment and technology (Vignola 117-18).

¹² “Perché, dunque io vi [a Siena] soffrivo? Perché la mia anima non vi è mai voluta stare? Lo sapeva, forse, quella mia tartaruga che riuscii a tener chiusa in casa una sera, e la mattina dopo non la trovai più.”

¹³ ““Chi sa’, aveva pensato più volte il Feroni, ‘chi sa quali delizie s’immagina di trovare in quella saletta [da pranzo], se da tant’anni dura questa sua ostinazione”” (Pirandello 1994, II, p. 1488).

¹⁴ “Parrà strano, ma anche in America c’è chi crede che le tartarughe portino fortuna. Da che sia nata una tale credenza, non si sa. È certo però che loro, le tartarughe, non mostrano d’averne il minimo sospetto. Mister Myshkow ha un amico che ne è convintissimo. Giuoca in borsa ogni mattina, prima d’andare a giocare, mette la sua tartaruga davanti a uno scalino: se la tartaruga accenna di voler salire, è sicuro che i titoli che lui vuol giocare, saliranno; se ritira la testa e le zampe, resteranno fermi; se si volta e fa per andarsene, lui giuoca senz’altro a ribasso. E non ha mai sbagliato” (Pirandello 1994, III, p. 2346).

¹⁵ “Che seguiva da questa riflessione? Che, dicendo in questo senso bestia a un uomo, si viene a fare alle bestie una gravissima ingiuria, perché si viene a scambiare per stupidità quella che invece è probità in loro o prudenza istintiva. Bestia, si dice a un uomo che non accetta l’ajuto, perché non par lecito pregiare in un uomo quella che nelle bestie è probità” (Pirandello 1994, II, p. 1489).

¹⁶ “Scatto improvviso d’un saltamartino” (Pirandello 1994, II, p. 1490).

¹⁷ “Riverso a pancia all’aria – proprio come quella tartaruga lì” (Pirandello 1994, II, p. 1490).

¹⁸ “Tutt’a un tratto, o fosse un topo, o un soffio d’aria, o uno scarafaggio sui piedi nudi, il fatto è che Fabio Feroni diede un urlo, un balzo, un salto da montone, e s’afferrò con le due mani il ventre gridando che lo aveva lì, lì, il saltamartino, lì dentro, lì dentro lo stomaco! E dalli a springare, a springare in camicia per tutta la casa, poi giù per le scale e poi fuori, per la via deserta, nella notte, urlando, ridendo, mentre Dreetta scarmigliata gridava ajuto dalla finestra” (Pirandello 1994, II, p. 1495).

¹⁹ “Con la punta del piede John la rovescia sulla scaglia, e subito allora si vede la bestiola armeggiar con gli zampini e spinger col capo penosamente per tentar di rimettersi nella sua posizione naturale. Helen, a quella vista, senza punto alterare i suoi occhi da vecchia, sghignazza come una carrucola di pozzo arrugginita per la caduta precipitosa d’un secchio impazzito. Non c’è, come si vede, da parte dei ragazzi alcun rispetto della fortuna che le tartarughe sogliono portare. C’è al contrario la più lampante dimostrazione che tutti e due la sopporteranno solo a patto ch’essa si presti a esser considerata da loro come uno stupidissimo giocattolo da trattare così, con la punta del piede. Il che a Mister Myshkow dispiace moltissimo” (Pirandello 1994, III, p. 2347).

²⁰ “La derisione sguajatamente fredda di quei due figli” (Pirandello 1994, III, p. 2349).

²¹ “Freme in tutta l’elastica personcina pienotta e sanguigna per brividi, che sono forse di piacere, ma anche di ribrezzo un po’” (Pirandello 1994, III, p. 2346).

²² “Perché il proprio corpo debba essere necessariamente quello che è, e non un altro diverso” (Pirandello 1994, III, p. 2348).

²³ “Camminando, si dimenticava d’avere in mano la tartaruga, ma poi se ne sovviene” (Pirandello 1994, III, p. 2351).

²⁴ “Sfodera di scatto i quattro zampini, la coda e la testa e dondolando, quasi ballando, si muove per il salotto” (Pirandello 1994, III, p. 2352).

²⁵ “Mister Myshkow non può fare a meno di rallegrarsene, ma timidamente; batte le mani piano piano, e gli pare, guardandola, di dover riconoscere, ma senza esserne proprio convinto: – La fortuna! La fortuna!” (Pirandello 1994, III, p. 2353).