CALVINO'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE ANIMAL:
ANTHROPOMORPHISM, COGNITION AND ETHICS IN *PALOMAR*

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Summary: This article examines the importance of the portrayal of animals in *Palomar*, Italo Calvino's last major work of fiction. The discussion moves from some observations on the representation of animals in fiction, to a reflection on the ethical issues which emerge once the "question of the animal" is confronted in its full complexity. It is argued that this is precisely the question that Calvino's work addresses. Mr Palomar's trajectory is marked at key junctures by encounters with animals. A close reading of the passages which describe these encounters reveals not only Palomar's cognitive impasse, but also that at the root of this impasse lies a fundamental ethical failure which the protagonist is incapable to acknowledge. Palomar's escapist strategies ultimately amount to a refusal of life itself and lead the author to liquidate his protagonist at the end of the narrative.

The representation of animals in literature has a long and venerable history. Animal characters are a defining feature of the fable, one of the oldest and most popular narrative genres, and continue to figure prominently in contemporary fantastic literature. Western poetry is almost unimaginable without animal metaphors and animal imagery. Even realistic fiction relies on animals to achieve a wide range of rhetorical effects, ranging from pathos, to bathos, and including the commonplace. Indeed, it is perhaps this ubiquity and familiarity that is responsible for the dearth of scholarship on the representation of animals in literature.¹

In today's social, political, and cultural context, it seems particularly urgent to put the question of the animal on the agenda. Steven Connors has recently noted that "the unignorability of ecological issues and the rise of environmental criticism across the disciplines of the humanities are bringing the question of animal to a new prominence" (2007, 578). And yet the picture which Connors draws of the philosophical reflection which has attempted to respond to this contemporary predicament is hardly

¹ Much has been written, of course, on the symbolic use of animals in literature but this body of scholarship does not address "the question of the animal," as will become clear in the ensuing discussion.

encouraging. The western philosophical tradition has been remarkably uninterested in developing a sustained reflection on animals which, as Agamben (2002) notes, are typically mobilized merely to provide a foil for a definition of what is essential about being human. Even when the turn to ethics in the 1990s resulted in an obsessive preoccupation with alterity, the end of the human, the emergence of the inhuman and the post-human, Western thinkers remained by and large “single-mindedly uninterested in the proximate otherness represented by the animal” (Connors 2007, 578). There are, however, some notable exceptions to this rather puzzling lack of interest in the question of the animal. Among the contemporary interventions, Connors notes the contribution to ethical philosophy by the “animal rights” theorists such as Peter Singer (1989), and is especially impressed by the late work of Jacques Derrida (2006) which in Connor’s view bridges the gap between the especially insensitive continental tradition and the somewhat more receptive Anglo-American philosophers. The fundamental link between Singer and Derrida is that they both consider the question of the animal central to the overcoming of the fallacies of “speciesism” and anthropocentrism in human thought and practice.

Connors’ otherwise impressive review of the scholarship suffers from an interesting lacuna, due perhaps to his philosophical background: a vast literature on animals does exist in cognitive science, though the tendency in this tradition has been to focus on the issue of animal intelligence rather than on ethics and, more specifically, the ethical issues raised by the encounter between humans and animals.² It should also be noted that in the few years since Connors’ review, the attention attracted by the question of the animal has continued to grow, with recent contributions in phenomenology (Painter and Lotz 2007), ethics (Cavalieri 2009), cultural studies (Roberts 2008), and political theory (Hudson 2008). And finally, the question of the animal is also emerging forcefully in the growing debate about a new humanism or post-humanism.³ In literary studies, however, the question of the animal is still struggling to find its place, though the recent conference at Cornell University on “The Literary Animal” (held on February 8-9, 2008) might herald a welcome change. Indeed, my proposal in this essay is that literature is precisely the type of discourse best suited to overcome some of the current limitations of the debate on animals. Literature

² A recent contribution to this area is the volume *Rational Animals?* (2007) edited by Susan Hurley and Matthew Nudds.

³ In this field, I should note the impressively wide-ranging contributions made by Roberto Marchesini, most recently in *Fondamenti di zooantropologia* (2005).

can complement rigorous theoretical understanding and empirical knowledge, as well as cognitive and ethical sensitivity, with an imaginative richness which can explore our experience of the animal and of animals in its full complexity. Throughout his career Calvino remained committed to the cognitive and ethical value of literature;⁴ and I will put this commitment to the test in relation to a question—that of the anima—that has so far been marginal in the vast the scholarship on the Italian author but which in my view goes to the heart of his project as a writer and an intellectual.⁵

1.0 Calvino's Animals

As both Dini (2002) and Ross (2003) point out, Calvino's work is densely populated with animals. They appear regularly in the Ligurian landscape which provides the setting for Calvino's early fiction, and indeed often figure in titles, most notably in *Ultimo viene in corvo*⁶ and in *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*⁷—the first two book-length works published by the Italian author. Such a numerous and varied menagerie is a key component in the lively mix of realistic and fantastic elements which the critics immediately recognised as Calvino's hallmark (Dini 36). That Calvino's fantastic vein was rooted in his interest in the fable became clearer and more explicit in

⁴ An insistence on the cognitive and ethical function of literature is the red thread that runs through all of Calvino's essays, now collected in two essential volumes (Saggi, 1995).

⁵ Silvia Ross's illuminating article "Calvino and Animals: The Multiple Functions of Marcovaldo's Poisonous Rabbit" is a welcome exception to this silence. Her ecocritical approach, however, is quite different from mine. On the other hand, Andrea Dini's "Calvino e Walt Disney: iconografia della bestia" focuses on the author's zoocentric aesthetic rather than on the issues of cognition, ethics and alterity which are central to this discussion.

⁶ The title of the first collection of short stories published by Calvino comes from the eponymous short story which concludes the original volume. In English, only a selection of these short stories was published in 1983 under the title *Adam, One Afternoon*, which was taken from another short story in the volume, presumably on the ground that this title would be more appealing to an English audience. The short story "The Crow Comes Last" was included in the English volume, not surprisingly given its literary merit and importance.

⁷ Calvino's first novel was originally translated 1956 by Archibald Colquhoun and appeared in English under the title *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*. Colquhoun's uneven work was much improved by Martin McLaughlin's 1998 revision which was published under the adjusted title *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*.

the 1950s, when he accepted to carry out for Einaudi the ambitious project of collecting and retelling (essentially rewriting into “standard Italian”) a wide selection of Italian folktales. The detailed introduction to the two-volume work eventually published in 1958 contained the famous phrase “le fiabe sono vere” (RR, *Fiabe italiane*, 1: XVIII), a rather provocative formulation (we were still in the “age of neorealism,” as Lucia Re would say) which confirmed his commitment to maintaining a productive tension between realism and fantasy.⁸

While Calvino did not often dwell on the significance of these early experiences, one of the clear common denominators of all his literary production—however varied, experimental and even restless from a strict generic perspective—is the reliance on narrative patterns derived from the fable, noteworthy, among these, the insistent presence of animals. In the chivalric trilogy of the 1950s, in the humorous cosmic and urban tales of the 60s, in the elaborate combinatorial games of the 70s, in the metafiction of the 80s, in sum, throughout his oeuvre animals appear, often as characters and not infrequently as protagonists. The argument explored in this discussion is that these insistent animal presences cannot be reduced to a mere aesthetic element, rooted in the author’s personal fondness for the fable. Rather they should be seen as a privileged vehicle for the exploration of some of Calvino’s key preoccupations. The reflection on the cognitive function of literature and the ethico-political role of the intellectual originate from and lead back to a face to face with animals.

2.0 From Animals to the Animal: A Clarification

Animals may appear in literary texts in a number of different ways. In the fable, which the OED defines as “a short story designed to convey a useful

⁸ In view of what follows, it is useful to note that for Calvino one of the central characteristics of the world of the fable was: “soprattutto la sostanza unitaria del tutto, uomini bestie piante cose, l’infinita possibilità di metamorfosi di ciò che esiste” (RR, *Fiabe italiane*, 1: XVIII). Is this the “*continuum* uomo-bestia” which Dini (2002, 40) sees operating in Calvino’s own work? It certainly is, in Calvino’s view, the fable’s way of positing a world and resolving the issue of that world’s intelligibility. But we should be careful in attributing this solution to Calvino’s own fiction which, even at its most fable-like (e.g., *Marcovaldo: Ovvero e le stagioni in città*, RR, 1: 1065-182), is still much more than a straightforward fable. It seems more prudent to maintain that for Calvino the fable is the starting point in a problematisation of the human and the animal, a “continuum” which on closer inspection may turn out to be a complex and fluid network of proximity and distance.

lesson, especially one in which animals or inanimate things are the speakers or actors," animals are characters and, usually, the protagonists of the tale. The use of animal characters in this genre is a more or less straightforward case of anthropomorphism and allegory, they are made to represent human types and attributes (the fox is cunning, the cat is curious, doves represent love, etc.). The effect of the simple fable is not to problematise these rhetorical devices but rather to emphasize the readability and comprehensibility of the world, thus legitimating the validity of the lesson imparted—the moral of the tale. All that we need to know about foxes is that they are cunning; they are perfectly comprehensible as such and there is nothing more to know about them. Certainly, we do not need to know what foxes are for themselves, whether and how they project themselves into a world and whether and how we humans may figure in that world. In what I have termed the simple fable, animals appear, but the question of the animal does not.

In a realistic narrative, the situation is more complex. Here animals can make an appearance merely as a kind of animate furnishings of the fictional world. This would be a case of detail realism: in everyday experience we encounter kitchens with dishes left to dry on the rack beside the sink and with dogs and cats sleeping on mats and sofas. In this case as well, animals are present but the question of the animal is not. However, given the significance that animals can have in human lives, their presences in mimetic fictional texts tends to draw attention. As a result, even in realistic narratives, animals are often promoted to the category of character. Then, anthropomorphism and symbolic meaning become involved in the representation of animals and, moreover, no longer in the straightforward way of the fable but in an almost necessarily problematic way: in a fable a fox is cunning and nothing more, but in a realistic short story a fox may or may not be cunning and is also necessarily something more than an allegory of a human trait—even in D.H. Lawrence's famous short story, the fox is more than a "mere" embodiment of human sexual desire. In sum, in the character of the fox we confront the mimetic representation of a sentient being, and then the question of the animal is raised.

Noting that the representation of animals in realistic texts tends to raise the question of the animal does not imply that the same question cannot be explored by fantastic genres other than the (simple) fable. The most obvious case in point is Science Fiction: one of the recurrent central themes of this genre is precisely the encounter with other beings, animal and otherwise. The point here is not to develop a precise taxonomy of what given genres can or cannot do—a task I have always considered useless

(Bolongaro 1992)—but rather to establish a very basic genealogy of how we can move from the representation of animals to the representation of the question of the animal. Clearly the question of the animal can emerge only when animals are represented, but also, and just as clearly, only when the techniques put into play in the representation of the animal (anthropomorphism, allegory, symbolism) are problematised, as in the works by Calvino in general and, especially, the one on which this essay will focus.

3.0 The Animal and the Crises of the Post-War Italian Intellectual

In his ground-breaking book *Le capre di Bikini*, Gian Carlo Ferretti was the first to draw attention to the importance of animals in Calvino's work. Ferretti's aim is to expose and trace through the years Calvino's "vena oscura" (1989, 156-57), a kind of sad puzzlement which grows stronger in the 1970s and 1980s but is already present in the earlier decades. In order to vindicate his claim, Ferretti points to a 1947 text written by Calvino on the occasion of the US atomic experiment on Bikini Island. In his mid-twenties at the time, Calvino, ends the article with these considerations:

Vi siete mai chiesti che cos'avranno pensato le capre, a Binkini? e i gatti nelle case bombardate? e i cani in zona di guerra? e i pesci allo scoppio dei siluri? Come avranno giudicato noi uomini in quei momenti, nella loro logica che pure esiste, tanto più elementare, tanto più — stavo per dire — umana?

Sì noi dobbiamo una spiegazione agli animali, se non una riparazione. (*Saggi*, 2: 2131-32)

These are arresting formulations. In Ferretti's view, they disclose a dismay at the darker potential of human reason and action which will gradually deepen as Calvino matures, forcing the author to engage in a relentless corps-à-corps with feelings of defeat and failure. More suggestive than ultimately persuasive, Ferretti's thesis has the great merit of putting on the table the question of alterity and of the animal.

The citation from the early article makes clear that for Calvino animals are neither transparent rhetorical devices, nor mere furnishings of the human world. Animals confront us, hold us to account, place us under an obligation. We shall see how Levinas can help us understand the significance of this encounter in which the ethical dimension, i.e., the obligation to another sentient life, precedes and orients the cognitive dimension, i.e., the explanation we must give, the meaning we are called to produce.⁹

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas's life-long project, articulated in key works such as *Totalité et infini* (1990) and *Alterité et transcendence* (1995), was to vindicate the primacy

It is also important to note that the passage also presents the encounter with the animal as anticipating human language. Calvino's goats are silent, at least silent-for-us, and their silence lends a special poignancy to their judgement. But why? Because the silence of the animals is not interpreted as a "dumbness" which confirms our superiority, but rather signifies the irreducibility of the animal's alterity. The animals' demand for meaning remains clear and unyielding precisely because they cannot be co-opted into language, dragged into the meanders of a human logic haunted by violence and sophistry—that deadly labyrinth of words which Calvino will never cease to challenge. And yet, simultaneously, the animals call us to language, force us to confront its perils in the constantly renewed effort to speak honestly about what we know and value. From this perspective, animals emerge as our most relentless interlocutors, the beings who test the limits of our understanding, sensibility and language.

Finally, we should note how the animals in this passage are indeed anthropomorphised but only in order to bring them within the compass of human concerns. Anthropomorphisation in this case is not an appropriation but rather the minimal and necessary step for the recognition of an otherness which we would otherwise be unable to perceive at all. Calvino's anthropomorphism is therefore anti-anthropocentric: it does not reinstall human centrality but on the contrary allows humans to see beyond their own narrow horizon as a species. In this light, we can begin to see the nexus between the strategy of anthropomorphism and ethics: it is through anthropomorphism that the other emerges on the horizon and then the question of alterity can be raised. Calvino's representation of the encounter with the animal will revolve around the exploration of this seeming paradox: we have to posit a likeness between the human and the other in order to recognize the other's irreducible alterity. The early passage cited by Ferretti reveals the basic configuration of the representation of the animal in Calvino, a configuration which will grow richer in his fictional texts and especially in the last work which Calvino himself sent to press: *Palomar*.¹⁰

of ethics and of our obligation to the other. As discussed by Connors, Levinas' reflections on animals are generally disappointing, and he was notably reluctant to grant that animals have a "face" in the philosophical sense he developed. Nonetheless, Levinassian concepts have been convincingly applied to the question of the animal by ecological thinkers such as John Llewelyn (1991a, 1991b).

¹⁰ *Palomar* is now anthologized in *Romanzi e racconti*, vol. 2. The excellent translations by William Weaver was published in English in 1985 under the title *Mr Palomar*.

4.0 Palomar, Language, and the Animal

Like all of the works from Calvino's maturity, *Palomar* is elaborately structured. Three main parts—"Le vacanze di Palomar," "Palomar in città" and "I silenzi di Palomar"—are further subdivided in three sections which themselves contain three texts. Clearly, three is the key number and there are many thematic lines governed by a logic of three. For our purposes, it is worth noting that animals play a key role three sections of *Palomar*, namely: "Palomar in giardino," "Palomar sul terrazzo" and "Palomar allo zoo."¹¹ In accordance with the scheme operative throughout the book, each of these sections contain three short texts. However, in "Palomar in giardino" and "Palomar sul terrazzo" only two of the chapters deal primarily with animals, while in "Palomar allo zoo" all the chapters focus, not surprisingly given the background, on animals. Therefore, the total number of texts in which animals play a central role is seven, one more or two less than a multiple of three. Within such a self-consciously elaborate structure, this "imperfect" number suggests that the issues raised by this theme are not fully resolved by the narrative.

From a methodological perspective, the seven texts which I am about to examine, constitute an itinerary consistent with the theories of reading and practices of writing espoused by Calvino in the 1970s and evident in works such as *Le città invisibili* (1972) and *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1973). In fact, there is a kind of crescendo in the way these chapters of *Palomar* develop Calvino's reflections on the question of the animal: an experience and an argument are emerging with some difficulty and slowly gaining momentum. My discussion follows this line of development and attempts to draw out its implications on the issues of language, cognition and ethics.

The first episode in Calvino's encounter with the animal in *Palomar* is entitled "Gli amori delle tartarughe." In this text, Palomar is cast in the role of a peeping-Tom: "È la stagione degli amori. Il signor Palomar, non visto, spia" (RR, 2: 888). Within commas, the phrase "non visto" immediately establishes the ironic distance between the protagonist and the authorial voice which subtly undermines the otherwise clinical discourse about the mating ritual of a pair of tortoises. As in the case of the earlier chapter entitled "Il seno nudo"—the episode in which Palomar's repeated attempts to

¹¹ These sections belong to the first and second part of the book. In the third and final part, Palomar's progressive flight into abstraction is underscored by the absence of animals. As we shall see, such flight has a direct parallel in Palomar's flight from the zoo.

strike a proper attitude end up chasing a topless woman off the beach—the reader is alerted to the fact that more may be at stake than detached observation. Palomar's largely unacknowledged struggle with his own body and sexuality is in fact the subterranean force which drives the character's reflections. The animals in this text are quickly anthropomorphised, and the interaction between them described in human terms:

La femmina sembra resista all'attacco, o almeno oppone un'immobilità un po' inerte. Il maschio è più attivo; si direbbe più giovane.
[...] a ogni colpo emette un ansito, quasi un grido. [...]
Ora lei gli sfugge, lui la rincorre. Non che lei sia più veloce né molto decisa a scappare ... (RR, 2: 888)

Palomar's description of what he sees is informed by an interpretation guided by the all-too-human stereotypes of male/active and female/passive sexual behaviour. However, we should note the timidity that marks Palomar's thinking: "sembra," "o almeno," "un po'," "si direbbe," "quasi." These hesitations permeate the language and eventually lead to the explicit articulation of the limits of Palomar's ability to understand: "Quali siano le sensazioni di due tartarughe che s'accoppiano, il signor Palomar non riesce a immaginarselo" (RR, 2: 889). With the acknowledgment of these limits (of anthropomorphism?) comes the possibility of a dialectical overcoming. But is Palomar ready?

That Calvino was ready for such a leap cannot be doubted. He had been reflecting on the difference between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism since the *Cosmicomics* of 1960s, and had come to the conclusion that while the former is an essential literary and cognitive strategy, which allows us to entertain otherness and establish some tentative channels of communication with it, the latter is a cognitively reductive and ethically violent strategy, which seeks to judge other beings according to human concepts and values (*Saggi*, 1: 233-34; see also Pilz's discussion in *Mapping Complexity*, 27-30). In other words, anthropomorphism is capable of recognizing and reaching out to otherness, thus ultimately problematising the human, while anthropocentrism remains locked in the logic of sameness. From this perspective, Palomar's anthropomorphic interpretations of the tortoises' behaviour has reached the point where the human can recognize the animal otherness and from there take a radically new turn. Unfortunately, Palomar is not ready and the dialectical leap does not take place:

Le osserva con un'attenzione fredda, come se si trattasse di due macchine: due tartarughe elettroniche programmate per accoppiarsi. Cos'è l'eros se

al posto della pelle ci sono piastre d'osso e scaglie di corno? Ma anche quello che noi chiamiamo eros non è forse un programma delle nostre macchine corporee [...] (*RR*, 2: 889)

In a typical moment of repressed panic before an unknown territory, Palomar retreats into his lifeless lucubrations. His mind leaps to the inorganic and dissects the situation according to a binary logic (organic/inorganic, complexity/simplicity, etc.) capable of relentless conjecture but incapable of any definitive insight. In the end, an us/them dichotomy is re-established and with it a boundary of indeterminacy which in a final twist is projected onto the other, i.e., onto the tortoises themselves: "Capiranno meglio se stesse, le tartarughe?" (*RR*, 2: 890). And yet the question is ambiguous. Does it mean: do tortoises understand themselves better than we understand them or better than we understand ourselves? Probably the latter, but the ambiguity runs deeper. Does the question reaffirm the primacy of the human perspective and thus an anthropocentric stance, or does it return, after the detour into the inorganic, to the threshold of insight? Can we humans perhaps learn from the tortoises to understand ourselves better? These questions can barely be asked, certainly not answered.

The second text of the section "Palomar in giardino" is entitled "Il fischio del merlo" and presents Palomar's encounter with a pair of blackbirds. The first third of the narrative, however, is occupied by a description of Palomar's attitude towards birds in general. The reader who remembers "L'origine degli uccelli" (*RR*, 2: 236-47), the cosmicomic in which Qfwfq experiences a fleeting epiphany in the embrace of the bird queen, will be alert to the special significance of birds in Calvino's bestiary. Palomar's reflections on birds expose once again the character's limitations: "A una classificazione meno generica il signor Palomar non arriva: non è di coloro che sanno, ascoltando un verso, riconoscere a che uccello appartiene. Sente questa sua ignoranza come una colpa" (*RR*, 2: 891-92). Palomar responds to his feeling of guilt by deploying the binary reasoning which is his hallmark: "Al culto della precisione nomenclatoria e classificatoria, Palomar aveva preferito l'inseguimento continuo d'una precisione insicura nel definire il modulato, il cangiante, il composito [...] Ora egli farebbe la scelta opposta, e seguendo il filo dei pensieri risvegliato dal canto degli uccelli la sua vita gli appare un seguito d'occasioni mancate" (*RR*, 2: 892). Guilt is defused in regret and melancholy, the birds have disappeared, as Palomar's self-referential and self-absorbed discourse reclaims its centrality. Then, the blackbirds appear.

"Tra tutti i versi degli uccelli si distacca il fischio del merlo, incon-

fondibile da ogni altro" (*RR*, 2: 892). The whistle cuts through Palomar's tergiversations, forcing recognition. It is important to note that, as with the tortoises, it is a male/female couple which confronts Palomar. The link between the animal and sexuality is confirmed. This time, however, the focus of Palomar's reflections is not the body but rather oral communication. The whistle becomes a language. The anthropomorphisation is utterly explicit but also no longer imposed on a passive object of observation, rather it is the animals themselves who invite it:

Non tarda a scorgerli [the blackbirds]: camminano sul prato come se la loro vera vocazione fosse di bipedi terrestri, e si divertissero a stabilire analogie con l'uomo.

Il fischio dei merli ha questo di speciale: è identico a un fischio umano [...]

Dopo un po' il fischio è ripetuto [...] se è un dialogo, ogni battuta arriva dopo una lunga riflessione. [...]

Oppure tutto il dialogo consiste nel dire all'altro "io sto qui," e la lunghezza delle pause aggiunge alla frase il significato di un "ancora," [...] e se fosse nella pausa e non nel fischio il significato del messaggio? Se fosse nel silenzio che i merli si parlano? [...]

Ma i dialoghi umani sono forse qualcosa di diverso? (*RR*, 2: 892-93).

The development of the argument follows, as always in Palomar, a binary logic. Male and female, human and bird, voice and silence are the key dichotomies in a reasoning that runs along the always perilous line of analogy, of similarity and difference. The peril, as we have seen in the episode of the tortoise, is to tergiversate, i.e., to allow the binary logic to become self-referential, turning one's back to the phenomenon which occasioned the reflection. Then human thought folds upon itself, falling back into a blind anthropocentrism. But here Palomar is being more careful. By attributing to the blackbirds a voice, and hypothesizing a language, Palomar is giving the animals agency. Now the analogy moves not from the human to the animal but the other way around from the animal to the human: it is by attempting to interpret the birds' behaviour that Palomar comes to reflect on the role of silence in human communication. Anthropomorphism becomes as a method of cognition.

A doubt still lingers, however. Are Palomar's musings about the pair of blackbirds only a disguise, a clever but predetermined detour on the way to the real matter at hand, namely Palomar's problematic relationship to his wife and to women, as well as to other human beings in general? Undoubtedly! Palomar's silences are always pregnant with meaning, a

meaning that his thoughts often tend to mask.¹² Still, the encounter with blackbirds has yielded an authentic insight about language and silence, though one from which Palomar quickly retreats:

Il signor Palomar spera sempre che il silenzio contenga qualcosa di più di quello che il linguaggio può dire. Ma se il linguaggio fosse davvero il punto d'arrivo a cui tende tutto ciò che esiste? O se tutto ciò che esiste fosse linguaggio, già dal principio dei tempi? Qui il signor Palomar è ripreso dall'angoscia.

[...]

Continuano a fischiare e a interrogarsi perplessi, lui e i merli. (RR, 2: 895-96)

The ending of the chapter is indeed perplexing. There is a logical slip-page. The birds have taught Palomar and the reader that silence is a part of language not opposed to it. But in the first sentence of the citation, the binary opposition is fully reinstated: “saying” is reduced to *voicing* and thus opposed to silence. It is to this regression that the remainder of the passage owes its logic. If silence is eliminated, language is diminished and an anthropocentric perspective is re-established: the loquacious humans are the telos of being or, going even further, language alone constitutes being and the human (and animal) are merely epiphenomena—the encounter with the blackbirds loses its meaning in “the prison house of language” (Jameson 1972). Hence, the renewal of Palomar’s existential angst. However, this outcome is not determined by an inexorable limit to human understanding but rather by a short circuit in Palomar’s reasoning. Palomar refuses the dialectical leap that overcomes binaries and opens a new horizon. He returns to the anguish he knows rather than confront the uncharted territory beyond the dichotomies language vs. silence, human vs. animal. But, Calvino does not let his alter ego off the hook and forces Palomar to return again and again to the threshold he is so reluctant to cross.

The two texts in the section “Palomar sul terrazzo” represent a pause in Palomar’s confrontation with the animal, after all the terrace is a liminal location between earth and sky, human civilization and nature, inside and outside. It is the quiet before the storm, in which Calvino adds subtle touches to the representation of Palomar’s encounters with animals but nothing overly dramatic takes place. In “La pancia del gecko,” the protagonist and his wife study the familiar reptile resting on a glass pane. The play

¹² It is significant that the last part of Palomar, the one in which the character finally disintegrates, is entitled “I silenzi di Palomar.”

of light makes the skin of the gecko translucent allowing the human observers to perceive movement inside the belly of the animal. The body is once more in focus but this time Palomar's attention is drawn to consumption rather than reproduction. Initially, the gecko is portrayed as a link in an infernal chain of devouring:

Se ogni materia fosse trasparente [...] l'involucro che fascia i nostri corpi [...] apparirebbe come un inferno di stritolamenti e ingerimenti. Forse in questo momento un dio degli inferi [...] sta guardandoci dal basso, seguendo il ciclo del vivere e del morire, le vittime sbranate che si disfano nei ventri dei divoratori, finché alla loro volta un altro ventre non li inghiotte. (*RR*, 2: 923)

Then, the animal is described as an elaborate machine: "La segmentazione ad anelli di zampe e coda, la picchiettatura di minute piastre granulose sul capo e sul ventre danno al gecko un'apparenza di congegno meccanico; una macchina elaboratissima" (*RR*, 2: 923). The nightmarish organic vision and the cold mechanical image, however, are not set one against the other but simply placed side by side as if in anticipation of a synthesis that would reconcile them. But the synthesis does not come and the closure of the episode rests on an analogy between the gecko and the human world. The spectacle provided by the reptile's predations competes with the spectacle provided by the television. Palomar chooses the gecko but the grounds for this decision are ambiguous: "Resta a fissarlo. Non c'è tregua su cui si possa contare. Anche a riaccendere la televisione, non si fa che estendere la contemplazione dei massacri" (*RR*, 2: 924). But is there really no qualitative difference between the violence of the gecko and the human violence presented on TV? Not if we are both (humans and animals) merely elaborate machines. Yet Palomar has seen the gecko choose what to eat and Palomar has himself chosen to watch the gecko and not the TV, which is the only real machine in the episode. Also, the word "massacri," as well as the infernal vision evoked earlier, adumbrates an ethical horizon which Palomar is obviously reluctant to encompass. If massacres are at stake, then the gecko's behaviour and Palomar's clinical stance are not beyond accountability, though their ethical significance remains unexplored—another element beyond the threshold.

In "L'invasione degli storni," Palomar is confronted for the first time with an animal multitude: flocks of starlings crowding the Rome sky as they prepare for their southern migration. This encounter presents Palomar with a special cognitive problem. The challenge is not how to interpret animal behaviour, but actually to observe it. Palomar's eyes are overwhelmed by the

complexity of the flock: a cloud of birds moving in random patterns (an oxymoron in itself), an entity always on the edge of collapsing and yet identifiable as it fluctuates between implosion and dispersion. Unable to fix his eyes on a definitive shape, Palomar feels: “una vertigine che lo prende alla bocca dello stomaco” (*RR*, 2: 927). The perceptual crisis produces a malaise which, however, has also a deeper existential basis. From the beginning of the chapter, Palomar has insisted on the unpleasantness of the starlings: “Di notte dormono sugli alberi della città, e chi parcheggia la macchina sul Lungotevere, al mattino è obbligato a lavarla da cima a fondo” (*RR*, 2: 925); and on the uneasiness that the sight of them causes him: “Rassicurante visione, il passaggio degli uccelli migratori, associato nella nostra memoria ancestrale all’armonico susseguirsi delle stagioni; invece il signor Palomar sente come un senso d’apprensione” (*RR*, 2: 926). The birds do not fit well in modern human civilization and Palomar, the (high)modern intellectual who is an advanced product of such civilization, cannot understand them, indeed can barely describe what he sees. Palomar’s predicament signals his alienation from nature.

Yet, even a perceptual impasse can yield insight. Palomar’s antidote to the vertigo that the flock produces in him is to discuss his findings with other people: “Le osservazioni sugli uccelli si susseguono e si moltiplicano a un ritmo tale che per riordinarle nella mente il signor Palomar sente il bisogno di comunicarle agli amici” (*RR*, 2: 928). Observation becomes a collective project: Palomar and his friends attempt to capture the complexity of the phenomenon by deploying a multiplicity of perspectives. The new method makes some cognitive gains which are hampered, however, by Palomar’s hurry to return to his own direct observation: “Non sono mai telefonate lunghe [between Palomar and his friends about the birds’ behaviour], anche perché Palomar è impaziente di tornare sul terrazzo come avesse paura di perdere qualche fase decisiva” (*RR*, 2: 929). Calvino’s protagonist cannot overcome his loneliness and individualism—his alienation from society as well as from nature. The flock is a sublime (in the Kantian sense) and thus troubling natural image of the power and perils of collective action. Once again, Palomar is brought by the animal on the threshold of an epiphany about the collective component of cognition and the complex ethical and political issues that such recognition raises. Once again, however, he withdraws and chooses, as his way out, individualism and private anguish. That this is not the path to insight and knowledge is suggested by the ending of the chapter. The darkness gradually engulfs the scene and the sublime starlings are reduced to “scacazzanti piccioni cittadini” (*RR*, 2: 929)—vestigial birds, mere images in Palomar’s mind since

from his high terrace in the darkness he can see nothing at all.

As the title suggests, it is in the section "Palomar allo zoo" that the question of the animal comes fully to centre stage, though the opening scene is rather subdued. "La corsa delle giraffe," the first chapter in this section, is the shortest text in the whole book and one of the least remarkable. In terms of our discussions, familiar themes re-emerge: Palomar's binary logic ("armonia" vs. "disarmonia," "uniformità" vs. "discontinuità"); his descriptions of living things as machines: "La giraffa sembra un meccanismo costruito mettendo insieme pezzi provenienti da macchine eterogenee ma che pur tuttavia funziona perfettamente" (*RR*, 2: 940); his constant teetering on the edge of psychological distress ("angoscia" and "malincuore"). The last of these elements, however, deserves closer attention.

So far, Palomar has attributed his distress to external causes: something in the field of the character's perception resists his cognitive strategies. When Palomar cannot understand, he feels defeated, disconnected, even guilty/ashamed for his inadequacy. The encounters with animals have been a catalyst for this kind of humbling experience. Through a variety of techniques, such as irony and paralogism, the authorial voice has also begun to suggest that Palomar's inadequacy is less purely intellectual than emotional. Palomar's constant retreat into elaborate (and often faulty) reasoning when faced with troubling perceptions, his insistent use of the machine as a model to explain behaviour, etc., all bear witness to a discomfort with psychology and interiority.¹³ Palomar's fascination with animals seems to lie precisely in the fact that their behaviour might be more easily understood by eschewing psychology and reducing action to pure instinctual response to a given stimulus. And yet at every turn Palomar has encountered complexities which escape this simple logic, thus his growing apprehension, and his unease before the animal.

Here, in front of the giraffes and at the thought of the penguins, Palomar finally acknowledges that the issue is not simply a failure to master conceptually a system that is too complex, but also a failure to confront the issue of motives, intentions, passions—the inner subjective world which informs his clinical gaze:

Il signor Palomar, cui i pinguini danno angoscia la segue [his daughter, who has grown bored of looking at the giraffes] a malincuore, e si

¹³ The post-structuralist polemic against positing a sphere of interiority need not detain us in this context. Suffice it to say that here interiority stands for no more and no less than the space of subjectivity from which an ethical project becomes thinkable.

domanda il perché del suo interesse per le giraffe. Forse perché il mondo intorno a lui si muove in modo disarmonico ed egli spera sempre di scoprirvi un disegno, una costante. Forse perché lui stesso sente di procedere spinto da moti della mente non coordinati, che sembrano non aver niente a che fare l'uno con l'altro e che è sempre più difficile far quadrare in un qualsiasi modello d'armonia interiore. (RR, 2: 941)

This passage concludes the chapter and rewards careful reading. As usual, Palomar attempts to avoid confronting his unease. It is the thought of going to see the penguins which causes him distress, but he steers his reasoning away from them and back to the giraffes which interest him but do not upset him. Palomar, then, offers two possible explanations for his fascination with the long-necked African quadrupeds. The first is a typical reflection on order/disorder in the cosmos. Not much is new here except that Palomar is now at least willing to admit explicitly his own motives, hopes and desires. Palomar does not celebrate the lack of order in the surface of the real but rather experiences it as a constant challenge to find a deeper order—a decidedly high-modernist rather than postmodernist stance.¹⁴ The second explanation, however, is much more interesting because it reveals an inner chaos or, at least, a lack of mastery and control over oneself which Palomar has been at some pain to paper over with his cerebral meditations. The most captivating suggestion of all is that some animals may be more likely than others to trigger an incontrollable response: though allegedly about the giraffes, the character's reflections are occasioned by the thought of the penguins. The difference between the two is one of size, obviously, but also of shape and, most importantly, of posture: The giraffe's long neck towers over humans, putting its face at a distance which permits disengaged observation. Not so the penguins which, on the ground, are only too easy to anthropomorphise as clumsy, benign and childlike. What happens when the animal looks back? When eye-contact sets off the experience which Levinas has described under the category of "the face" (*Totalité et infini*, 203-77)?¹⁵ Though Palomar is

¹⁴ It should be made clear that Palomar's stance is not Calvino's, indeed the divergence between the author and his alter ego is central to my argument. Accordingly, Palomar's high-modernist orientation does not in itself resolve the much debated issue of Calvino's relationship with postmodernism – cf. Francese (1997) vs. Markey (1999).

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas's life-long project, articulated in key works such as *Totalité et infini* (1990) and *Alterité et transcendance* (1995), was to vindicate the primacy of ethics and of our obligation to the other. As discussed by Connors, Levinas'

reluctant to contemplate it, we are about to find out.

In the second chapter in the "Palomar allo zoo," the protagonist encounters an albino gorilla. In clear contrast to all the previous texts, everything happens here through the face:

La maschera facciale è d'un roseo umano, lavorata dalle rughe [...] ogni tanto si volta verso la folla dei visitatori oltre il vetro [...] un lento sguardo carico di desolazione e pazienza e noia, uno sguardo che esprime tutta la rassegnazione a essere come si è [...] tutta la fatica di portarsi addosso la propria singolarità. (*RR*, 2: 942)

Here too, Palomar anthropomorphises the gorilla but the result is not a tergiversation but, on the contrary, the triggering of a vertiginous existential experience.¹⁶ The veil is torn away for a moment as Palomar confronts the irredeemable singularity which is central to every individual being experience of itself. Palomar sees the gorilla as struggling with a predicament which marks all sentient life. Meeting at last the animal's gaze, the character remains focused and his meditations lead him to a new insight into the importance of symbolization and language.

The gorilla is holding on tightly to a car tire and Palomar confidently attributes this to a primeval impulse to see this tire not merely as an object but as a sign in an emerging language: "Per 'Copito di Nieve' [...] il contatto col pneumatico [...] sembra essere qualcosa d'affettivo, di possessivo ed in qualche modo di simbolico. [...] Forse immedesimandosi in esso il gorilla è sul punto di raggiungere al fondo del silenzio le sorgenti da cui scaturisce il linguaggio" (*RR*, 2: 943-44). Note that silence and language are no longer opposite but rather dialectically related in this passage which portrays the albino gorilla on the threshold of the moment—the discovery of language—which produced humanity. There is continuity, then, between life forms, and it is in this continuity that Calvino ultimately grounds his commitment to anthropomorphism as a cognitive strategy. Admittedly, it is a grim continuity defined by the anguish and dismay that accompany the consciousness of being alive. And if, in his initial response to the gorilla, Palomar seemed to think that language and symbolization

reflections on animals are generally disappointing, and he was notably reluctant to grant that animals have a "face" in the philosophical sense he developed. Nonetheless, Levinassian concepts have been convincingly applied to the question of the animal by ecological thinkers such as John Llewelyn (1991a, 1991b).

¹⁶ The whiteness of the animal contributes to this disorientation and reminds us of the white page which haunts Calvino's autobiographical writings.

could alleviate the burden of singularity, the ending of the chapter raises serious doubts about the possibility of finding any solace to the predicament of self-consciousness. In the final words of Palomar, the movement of the analogy is not from the gorilla to the human, and from silence to speech, but rather from the human to the gorilla, and from speech to silence: “Come il gorilla ha il suo pneumatico [...] così io ho quest’immagine d’uno scimmione bianco. Tutti rigiriamo tra le mani un vecchio copertone vuoto mediante il quale vorremmo raggiungere il senso ultimo a cui le parole non giungono” (*RR*, 2: 944). In his face-to-face with the albino gorilla, Palomar discovers both the value but also the limits of language: the effort to overcome one’s anguish and dismay is a Sisyphian task.¹⁷ This means that the dialectic between speech and silence is never ending, and that just as the human is emerging in the animal so is the animal ineliminable in the human.

However, there is once again something crucial that Palomar does not notice, something that Palomar manages to repress: the gorilla is in a zoo. Early in the chapter, the words “prison” and “cage” do appear but the reality to which they point is then submerged by the flow of Palomar’s reflections on ontology: the cage and prison become “l’irriducibile sorda evidenza dei fatti che determinano la sua vita ...” (*RR*, 2: 944). The dismay at being alive may well be a predicament shared by all sentient life, but at the root of this predicament is an ethical and political question. The horizon keeps moving. Palomar has met the gaze of the animal and has crossed the boundary of disinterested incomprehension that he thought he could establish between the human and the animal. The gorilla’s face forced emotion to the surface. A shared experience of suffering emerged and with it the terrain for a possible dialogue. But this suffering remains abstract and metaphysical insofar as Palomar is not yet capable of considering the issues of power, and of taking responsibility for his actions and thoughts. That is the final threshold he needs to cross.

“L’ordine degli squamati” is the concluding chapter in the “Palomar allo zoo” section and the last stop on the itinerary undertaken by this discussion. Palomar is in the reptiles’ pavilion. As with the gorilla, face and eyes are central to the encounter:

[L]’occhio [dell’iguana] s’apre e si chiude, ed è quest’occhio «evoluto», dotato di sguardo, attenzione, di tristezza a dar l’idea che un altro

¹⁷ The figure of Sisyphus underscores the connection between this meditation and existentialist philosophy. Bertoni (1993) is one of the few critics to explore this aspect of Calvino’s work.

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... (*RR*, 2: 945)

[Le piccole iguane hanno] occhi chiari aperti intorno alla pupilla nera. (*RR*, 2: 946)

Sembrano [i coccodrilli] tutti addormentati, anche quelli che tengono gli occhi aperti, o forse tutti insonni in una desolazione attonita, anche a occhi chiusi. (*RR*, 2: 948)

All these presences lead Palomar to the most disquieting meditation yet: "Al di là del vetro d'ogni gabbia c'è il mondo di prima dell'uomo, o di dopo, a dimostrare che il mondo dell'uomo non è eterno e non è l'unico" (*RR*, 2: 947). At first, this realization leads Palomar to seek comfort in some characteristically sophisticated considerations, which attempt to reassert the centrality of the human world:

Ma dei mondi da cui l'uomo è escluso, ogni vetrina è un campioni minimo, strappato da una continuità naturale che potrebbe anche non essere mai esistita [...] Dunque ogni esemplare di questo bestiario antediluviano è tenuto in vita artificialmente, quasi fosse un'ipotesi della mente [...] un'argomentazione paradossale intesa a dimostrare che il solo mondo vero è il nostro... (*RR*, 2: 947)

The ellipsis at the end of the citation makes clear that Palomar himself finds it impossible to believe this faulty argument. Unable to reassure himself, he flees the pavilion: "Come se solo adesso l'odore dei rettili diventasse insostenibile, il signor Palomar sente d'improvviso il desiderio d'uscire all'aperto" (*RR*, 2: 947).

On his way out, however, Palomar runs into the crocodiles which cause him immediately to relapse into anxiety: "È una smisurata pazienza la loro, o una disperazione senza fine? Cosa aspettano, o cosa hanno smesso d'aspettare? [...] Palomar s'affretta a uscire dal padiglione dei rettili, che si può frequentare solo di tanto in tanto e di sfuggita" (*RR*, 2: 948). The return to binary oppositions, to questions that remain unanswered because they are designed to be unanswerable signals Palomar's final retreat. The alterity of the reptiles is too much for Palomar to confront.¹⁸ The albino gorilla could still be plotted in a dialectical narrative in which humanity continued to have, albeit problematically, a crucial role. But the reptiles destroy even this last vestige of anthropocentrism and relegate the human

¹⁸ On this point I agree with Ferretti (1989, 158), though he goes on to extend the character's views to Calvino himself, while I do not.

to merely one possibility, one node in the network of being. Palomar is cast adrift in a universe marked by irreducible alterity and yet an alterity which, exposing the upper limits of anthropomorphism, can still interpellate the human, hold the human to account. But Palomar cannot answer because there is no adequate “answer” other than in the recognition of, and active reaction to the violence, the physical violence, the physical domination which the zoo *embodies*. No matter how far Palomar’s reflections may be pushed by the encounter with animals, no matter how close his intellectual engagement with them might be, in the end he can keep them at bay because they are behind bars and glass panes, transparent but uncrossable barriers. It is the material logic of the situation which makes it possible for Palomar to reject fully embodied engagement and to retreat once more within himself. Palomar fails, and his failure is rooted in his inability to connect his thoughts to questions of body and power, of ethics and politics. The question of the animal reveals how damaged and diminished Palomar’s humanity is. Palomar shuts himself off in a complete and definitive panic under the gaze of the reptiles. And it is for this reason that at the end of *Palomar*, the protagonist is laconically and summarily executed by an author who wants nothing more to do with him.

Conclusion

The importance of Calvino’s meditation on the boundary between various forms of life is first of all to establish an unsettling proposition: the animal inhabits us, as does alterity. It is in this sense that *we are animals*. An equally crucial insight, however, is that the limit of the human must be understood in a new way, not as the result of a definitional practice capable of clear and stable differentiations, but rather as the limit of our ability to reach out to otherness, to acknowledge it, and to accept the ethical claim that, as Levinas teaches us, the other has on us. The limit of the human is the place of an ongoing struggle to open ourselves up to the recognition of and the responsibility for other beings whom/which we have not yet been able to identify, encounter and care for.¹⁹

¹⁹ The ethical horizon that Calvino is disclosing through his representation of the encounter with the animal certainly needs to be further theorized. For example, the duty to open oneself up to alterity must be consistent with the duty to exercise one’s critical thinking. I would suggest that such an undertaking would involve not only a more stringent confrontation with the work of Levinas and ecocritics such as Llewelyn, but also a dialogue with the feminist “ethics of care” (Donovan and Adams 2007).

In a letter to Franco Fortini dated November 5, 1971, Calvino imagines “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 essere umani ma in cui l'uomo si sia realizzato e risolto, un mondo di calcolatore elettronici e farfalle, non mi spaventa anzi mi rassicura” (*Lettere*, 1127). In this vision, Calvino sees the fundamental role of “the human” to be that of communication, linking, making it possible for computers and butterflies to meet and recognize each other in dialogue – a utopian vision which we can set against the dystopian reality articulated in the image of the dismayed goats on Bikini Island. Naturally, one of the places for the elaboration of this vision is literature which, however, must remain deeply critical of one of the very conditions for its existence: language, its sophistry, its obfuscations, its fragility, as well as its potential to imagine the new. A belated figure of the post-structural crisis or reason, Palomar struggles with a debased empiricism and nominalism which, under the cover of intellectual humility, dogmatically renounces dialectics and promotes a passive, contemplative, and finally impotent acceptance of the given. The encounter with the animal challenges Palomar to *become* rather than just to *be*. Unwilling and unable to meet this challenge, Palomar commits himself definitively to the inert and to death. There just is not enough life left in the relentlessly sophisticated Palomar for redemption. Clearly, Calvino grew pessimistic in his later years. The task of constantly reopening oneself and one's language to the world has become a heavy burden and demands radical and ruthless measures. Palomar is a dead branch which Calvino resolutely cuts off.

In the end, Calvino's reflection on the question of the animal invites us to envisage the essence of the human as an ever widening compass of understanding, and thoughtful practices toward all being, a utopian horizon that defines a positive potential for humanity at a time (his) and for a time (ours) in human history when it is hard to attribute anything positive, even if a mere potential, to our species. However, heedful of Bloch's admonition (1986), Calvino does not lose hope and provides an especially suggestive vision perhaps because it contemplates: “un mondo senza più esseri umani,” i.e., the extinguishment of the human, but neither in the hubristic terms often borrowed from Nietzsche, nor in the rather banal, remissive terms espoused by some post-modern thinking. Rather the human can have an end that is good, positive, constructive, and necessary. With the assistance of literary discourse, humanity can become the bridge between differences, and once that is done the time for humanity (and perhaps for literature) will be over. Then something new will begin for all life, indeed

for all being, organic and inorganic. This proposal goes well beyond most of the contemporary philosophical discussions of the question of the animal and indeed poses a challenge that all the human sciences would do well to meet.

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