

CHAPTER 1



Zen Perspectives on Calvino's Environmentalism

I live not in myself, but I become
Portion of that around me
— BYRON, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Holm oaks, magnolias, and poplars. Rabbits, pigeons, and cats. Forget-me-nots and fig trees. Geckoes and gorillas. Calvino's works are characteristically studded with plants and animals, which have often become recognisable *partes pro toto* of his most renowned books. Here, respectively: *Il barone rampante* (1957), where Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò climbs up a holm oak one day in his youth and then spends his entire life inhabiting an arboreal kingdom;¹ *Marcivaldo ovvero Le stagioni in città* (1963), collecting the adventures of an unskilled worker constantly looking for 'nature' in the midst of a grey industrial city, and at times encountering it in the form of domestic or feral animals;² *La speculazione edilizia* (1957), the story of an intellectual turned to property speculation at the expense, quite symbolically, of his mother's garden;³ and *Palomar*, where animals often prompt reflections on the role (and looked-for decentralisation) of the human within an intertwined cosmos.⁴

As Serenella Iovino remarks, Calvino followed closely the progression of the Anthropocene at the time of the Great Acceleration — in Italy commonly referred to as the 'economic boom', in the aftermath of the Second World War (2018: 68). Accordingly, Calvino offered a comprehensive narrative stratigraphy of this contested period, encompassing lithosphere (mainly addressed in *La speculazione edilizia* and *Le città invisibili*), atmosphere (*La nuvola di smog*), sociosphere (*Marcivaldo*), and biosphere (*La formica argentina*).⁵ When it comes to the biosphere, in Calvino's narrative, animals and plants often embody many of the problematic, if not outright violent, effects of the Anthropocene on multispecies ecosystems. One of the main threads recognisable in his stories and journalistic reflections is, however, a painstaking dedication to the search for a harmonic balance between human and non-human beings. As we will see in this chapter, most of the time this quest is not successful. Yet, it is also constantly renewed, as though epitomising Calvino's relationship with scientific knowledge — curious and tentacular even as it is never resolved in a definitive form.

If we accept the discursive validity of the category of the Anthropocene — which at the same time generates and outlasts its own alternatives — and if we agree to understand it as a cumulative process that has led, especially in the modern period,

to anthropogenic influences on the composition of the Earth, then the centuries-old Japanese tradition of gardening sits in a chronological and conceptual space that both predates and challenges the Anthropocene, representing a non-Western alternative to its ecological instability.⁶ This chapter reads Calvino's experience in a Japanese garden, as it is detailed in 'Il rovescio del sublime', as a plunge into a Foucauldian 'heterotopia' where numerous forms of life coexist and interact harmoniously, in opposition to the many instances where disequilibrium is depicted as seemingly inescapable in Calvino's previous output.⁷ The harmony in search of which we embark is, in its Japanese facet, neither definitive nor unquestionable, but rather dialectically open to further discussions — both by Calvino himself, in his mature production, and by our critical reading. To introduce a posthumanist vocabulary, the ethics of entanglement brought about by the reciprocity of naturecultural elements in Japanese gardens (including plants, stones, and waterfalls) illuminates the viability of a relational ontology within which different species, as well as different genders, are mutually defined and enriched, thus challenging Cartesian boundaries and toxic hierarchies.⁸

Many of Calvino's scientific and philosophical interests contribute to his development of a holistic understanding of the world, where the human being acts as a thing among things, as *natura naturata* — embracing a Spinozan approach to the body that overcomes a strict Cartesian separation between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.⁹ What specifically characterises Calvino's experience of Japanese gardens is that this awareness comes through direct contact with entanglements where species and conceptual boundaries are materially blurred; we will later see how Calvino's reflections on the deconstruction of species hierarchies can be developed further in ways that also challenge gender divides. Calvino's Japanese texts (and our interpretation of them) transform the alleged distance between self and surrounding environment into a cognitive and artistic resource: into a threshold that, if navigated with awareness, can reveal the trans-corporeal proximity of intermingled bodies of all kinds. Although very different from the dry stone walls, the vineyards, and the mule tracks of his childhood in the countryside around Sanremo, the little lakes, bridges, and paths that climb up and descend in the gardens Calvino visits in Japan embody the many abstract reflections on the environment he has developed throughout his career, which he had started developing precisely through contact with the material reality of green spaces and countryside landscapes. In Japan, his creativity and curiosity thus come full circle, including within the circle both real gardens and literary transpositions of human/other-than-human co-dependencies.

1.1. Cross-species (Dis)harmonies within Calvino's Trajectory

The non-anthropocentrism and non-dualism championed by posthumanist thought, in building new imaginaries around a universe of hybrids and distributed agencies, places itself 'outside any preexisting order or harmony' (Iovino 2014: 222). Calvino's literary imagination, from the early short stories to *Palomar*, with an obligatory passage through *Le cosmicomiche* (1965), can be viewed as fully involved in this posthumanist onto-epistemology.¹⁰ While recognising this proximity,

however, any comprehensive reading of Calvino's output cannot easily disregard the recurring notions of order and harmony. In fact, Calvino sought these two coordinates throughout his intellectual career, not so much on the assumption that they constitute ontological features of things but, more humbly, in the search for some possible balanced approximation to them: he often recognised the absence of an existential harmony with discomfort, while at the same time attempting to give it expression whenever possible. In this chapter, we will follow Calvino on this search, by analysing the most significant phases of a trajectory within which the Japanese experience represents a watershed space, where harmony appears to be materially and conceptually attainable.

As Calvino explains in an interview with Daniele Del Giudice in 1978, 'ogni illusione d'armonia nelle cose contingenti è mistificatoria' (S, 2830) [every illusion of harmony in contingent things is misleading], but this perceptual stumbling block is not passively absorbed, since the awareness of laceration inspires the desire for harmony:

perciò bisogna cercar[e l'armonia] su altri piani. Così sono arrivato al cosmo. Ma il cosmo non esiste, nemmeno per la scienza, è solo l'orizzonte di una coscienza extraindividuale, dove superare tutti gli sciovinismi di un'idea particolaristica dell'uomo, e raggiungere magari un'ottica non antropomorfa. (S, 2830–31)

[therefore, [harmony] has to be sought elsewhere. Following this route, I got to the cosmos. But the cosmos doesn't exist, not even for science; it is just the horizon of an extraindividual conscience, exceeding every chauvinistic and particularistic idea of the human, and perhaps conjuring a non-anthropomorphic perspective.]

Within a non-anthropocentric framework — where, as we will see, anthropomorphism can still find its legitimacy — a human perspective is led to acknowledge its entanglement with the other-than-human. As in Calvino's case, this perspective also aspires to a balanced relationship with other dwellers of a universe that is recognised to be merely 'formally diverse', but in essence 'ontologically one', as Deleuze would put it (1992: 67). Japanese gardens, at least in Calvino's reflections, instantiate with tangible effectiveness this holistic philosophical perspective. To appreciate its specificities, a detour through the evolution of Calvino's earlier works is in order.

1.1.1. *Literature as Natural Philosophy: Towards a Theoretical and Creative Holism*

Mario Calvino, Italo's father, was an agronomist; Eva Mameli, his mother, a botanist. Together, they conducted research on exotic floriculture, fruit growing, and genetics in Cuba, where Italo was born in 1923, and then in Sanremo, where they returned in 1925 and established a renowned Experimental Floriculture Station at Villa Meridiana.¹¹ 'La strada di San Giovanni' (1962), published posthumously in a collection of short stories by the same title (1990), is the text where Calvino deals most closely with his relationship with this familiar (especially paternal) legacy, as well as with the Ligurian landscape. Pierpaolo Antonello underlines the sense of indifference, if not outright hostility, with which young Italo first looks

at this landscape, which from the garden at Villa Meridiana extends through the countryside around San Giovanni Battista, and more broadly represents Calvino's first exposure to the world of science (1995: 214). In this father-son dynamic, Calvino reclaims his alienation from the surrounding environment in order to mark the eccentricity of his own interests, shifting from the vegetal realm to 'un'altra vegetazione, quella delle frasi scritte' (AC, 5) [a different vegetation, that of written words].

It is in his 'frasi scritte', his 'written words', that Calvino elaborates on the fertile potential of his scientific background, in a process of creative distancing that allows him to question the unintended deleterious consequences of his parents' scientific rationalism.¹² I am thinking, in particular, about *La formica argentina* (1952), the story of a family whose house and entire village on the Riviera happens to sit at the edge of the Mediterranean megacolony of the highly infesting Argentine ant. 'È il racconto più realistico che io abbia scritto in vita mia' [It is the most realistic story I have written in my life], Calvino wrote to Cesare Cases in 1958; 'descrivere con assoluta esattezza la situazione della invasione delle formiche argentine nelle coltivazioni a San Remo e in buona parte della Riviera di Ponente all'epoca della mia infanzia, anni Venti e Trenta' (L, 1511) [it describes with absolute exactness the situation that came about because of the invasion of the Argentine ants into the cultivated areas of San Remo and a large swathe of the Western Riviera during my childhood, in the Twenties and Thirties (Calvino 2013b: 529)]. Domenico Scarpa (1999: 128) and Silvio Perrella (2010: 45) advance the hypothesis that the ants arrived in the Riviera piggybacking on the exotic plants that Mario Calvino collected during his activities in Cuba, Mexico, and Brazil, which he brought with him on his return to Italy in 1925. Iovino carefully endorses this theory, and adds: 'if proven true, this would be sadly ironic for a man, an agriculturalist, who had invested so much of his energy in innovating the Riviera's plantation systems in a way that would preserve botanical variety and what we now call "biodiversity"' (2021: 10).

However commendable his opposition to monocultures, Mario Calvino fully participated in what Timothy Morton calls 'agrilogistics': the logistics inherited from the Mesopotamian agricultural mode and its logical structure, based on a fundamental hierarchical separation between human and non-human beings (2016). 'The thin, rigid life-non-life boundary established by the functioning of agrilogistic software is a key component of the world this functioning has created', Morton explains (2019: 46). There is certainly a fundamental qualitative difference between a monocultural, extractivist exploitation of the environment (that of industrial agriculture), and an impassioned research approach to fruits and flowers (that of Mario Calvino). But Paola Govoni invites us to keep in mind the institutional connection between Mario Calvino's studies on subtropical agriculture and the Istituto Coloniale Fascista, which speaks of an underlying extractivism of the worst kind even in Mario's academic research.¹³

More generally, if we are to relax the life-non-life boundary and the default utilitarianism encoded into agrilogistics, then the problematic rationalism and implicit hierarchisation of reality associated with scientific discourses and practices must be challenged. By declaring the need to distance himself from the scientific

ambience which he imbibed in Sanremo and, at the same time, by experimenting in his books with the many ways in which scientific theories and Linnean taxonomies can be subverted and enriched from within, Calvino outlines the difficult, yet necessary path towards a rational relativisation of rationalism. As Ted Geier maintains, 'Calvino is not precisely a deep ecologist', but his 'fascination with the malleability of human form to become food for ants or fungal receptors [as in *Marcovaldo*] shows a levelling of species difference that retains divisions but does not privilege positions or hierarchise members' (2013: 69).¹⁴ In this process, as we will see below, Calvino's reflections on Zen meditation represent a significant milestone in his work and thought, the ecological significance of which has been underestimated to date.

In later years, studies such as Bruno Latour's cardinal work on the history of pasteurisation, understood as a system of alliances between microbes, scientists, and even journals (1988), would bring about a new awareness of the range of beings co-habiting the world, and of the imbrication of science in these human/non-human alliances.¹⁵ But already in *La formica argentina*, indirectly and almost intuitively, Calvino reflects on the consequences of an idea and practice of science oblivious to its radical interconnection with the environment it purports to investigate objectively. The sense of anguish and frustration emanating from the ant invasion is key to the full development of this awareness. In a network of lines that enlase, this anguish is only appeased by reflecting on the harmonic patterns created by the sand at the bottom of the sea — the same sand that, in the garden of Ryōan-ji described in 'L'aiola di sabbia' in *Palomar*, will suggest a sense of possible harmony between heterogeneous beings. At the end of *La formica argentina*, the protagonists momentarily leave their home and walk towards the harbour, and a relaxing image of sea and sand finally replaces the discomfort caused by the ants: 'Mia moglie disse: — Qui non c'è formiche. Io dissi: — E c'è un bel fresco: si sta bene. [...] Io pensavo alle distanze d'acqua così, agli infiniti granelli di sabbia sottile giù nel fondo, dove la corrente posa gusci bianchi di conchiglie puliti dalle onde' (RR1, 482) [My wife said: 'There are no ants here.' I replied: 'And there's a fresh wind; it's pleasant.' [...] I thought of the expanses of water like this, of the infinite grains of soft sand down there at the bottom of the sea where the currents leave white shells washed clean by the waves (Calvino 1971: 180–81)].

Many of Calvino's early short stories revolve around 'la ricerca e la difficoltà d'un'armonia naturale, con le cose e con gli uomini' (L, 556) [the research and complexity of a natural harmony, with things and with men], as Calvino wrote in a letter to Elio Vittorini on 5 September 1958. Objective correlatives of this impossible harmony are often gardens and plants, for a long time still removed from the peaceful atmosphere Calvino will later experience in Zen gardens. 'Il giardino incantato' (1948), for example, mirrors the two protagonists' anxiety and fear of being expelled from a forbidden space that, while representing one of the first examples of an Eden-like peace, is hardly unproblematically welcoming: 'C'erano grandi agavi grige, verso mare, con raggere di aculei impenetrabili. [...] Tutto era così bello: volte strette e altissime di foglie ricurve d'eucalipto e ritagli di cielo; restava solo quell'ansia dentro' (RR1, 169) [There were big gray aloes down by the

sea, surrounded by dense, impenetrable nettles [...] Everything was so beautiful: sharp bends in the path and high, curling eucalyptus leaves and patches of sky. But there was always the worrying thought]. By the same token, in 'Il bosco degli animali' (1948), natural spaces change reflecting human fears (RR1, 280–87); the abandoned garden described in 'I figli poltroni' (1948) epitomises the lack of vitality of the lazy sons of the title (RR1, 198); while in 'Gli avanguardisti a Mentone' (1953) an agave, whose leaves are cut through by the passage of several invaders, symbolises the violence of the Italian military advance (RR1, 514).

Calvino's works of the 1950s and 1960s go on to illustrate forms of alienation prevailing over an organic balance between the human and other-than-human, with recurring references to the sense of distress that ensues.¹⁶ Even *Il barone rampante*, rightly considered to be Calvino's most successful testament to a coexistence between plants and human beings that is no longer, invites us to make a few distinctions. When Cosimo, the protagonist, is young, he breaks away from his aristocratic family by creating his own domestic space in the trees, and bending branches and leaves to his human needs (RR1, 621–22). His behaviour is not predatory or aggressive towards the arboreal environment, which he rather 'helps' to accommodate his needs and elsewhere protects via engineering projects (RR1, 658), but the baron is still far from welcoming serenely the counter-influence of plants over himself. For example, one day he is sitting beneath the pavilion of leaves of a fig tree and starts feeling saturated by their smell and sticky liquid; almost afraid of becoming a fig himself, he grows uneasy and moves away in the direction of other trees (RR1, 619). After all, Cosimo takes active part throughout his life in the European Enlightenment, the main philosophical and political antecedent of a misconceived faith in the scientific knowledge of a superior, 'civilised humanity' in which the Anthropocene is steeped.¹⁷ In this light, his experience of estrangement brought about by too close a proximity to a plant is doomed to engender discomfort. Significantly, it is only when the baron gets old and his mind loses clarity of thought that his body begins to bear some marks of the environment he has long been living within: 'Cosimo era ormai un vecchietto rattrappito, gambe arcuate e braccia lunghe come una scimmia [...]. La faccia era cotta dal sole, rugosa come una castagna' (RR1, 768) [He was getting to be a shrivelled old man, with bandy legs and long monkey-like arms [...]. His face was baked by the sun, creased as a chestnut (Calvino 1977b: 208)].

Even stronger, although also intellectually fruitful, is the unease Calvino identifies in the contact with animal others.¹⁸ Gian Carlo Ferretti has analysed how, in Calvino's essayistic and journalistic work, a long-standing awareness of the role of the animal gaze relativises and fundamentally challenges the centrality of the human (1989). In particular, in a number of 1946 articles for *L'Unità* — 'Le capre ci guardano', 'Soggezione di un cane', 'Il marxismo spiegato ai gatti', and 'Da Esopo a Disney' — Calvino acknowledges the ethical need to understand human responsibilities through consideration of animal viewpoints. Such an understanding often implies a sense of 'soggezione' (S, 2132) [uneasiness], and 'un segreto rimorso del genere umano verso gli animali' (S, 2131) [a secret remorse of humankind towards animals]. It is through this self-conscious distress that Calvino productively

develops 'una concezione dell'uomo come non staccato dal resto della natura, [...] che [...] non abbassi l'uomo, ma gli dia una responsabilità maggiore, lo impegni a una moralità meno arbitraria' (S, 2133–34) [a conception of man that is not detached from the rest of nature, [...] that [...] does not downgrade man; on the contrary, it gives him even greater responsibility, it commits him to a less arbitrary morality].

A sense of responsibility and curiosity towards other living creatures, beyond the anthropocentric parochialism of scientific rationalism, is also one of the core features of the adventures of *Marcovaldo*. The titular character does not sit at the table of classical Humanism, with its self-appointed entitlement and superiority over other species, and is instead continually attracted by mushrooms by the roadside, plants that outgrow their vases, but also wasps, pigeons, and cows, among many other animals. A casualty of the (not too) 'slow violence' of unchecked industrialisation, pollution, and rampant urbanisation rooted precisely in a distorted Humanism, Marcovaldo is in this respect very similar to the plants and animals with which he becomes familiar.¹⁹ 'The more he struggles against the city's alienation from the natural world, the more Marcovaldo himself becomes an alien in the city, increasing his marginalization. [...] The nature Marcovaldo searches for is thus both craved and feared, hunted and haunted, threatened and threatening' (Iovino 2018: 75). It is in the negotiation of these polarities, in the oscillation between the awareness of a disequilibrium between species and their environment, on one hand, and the relentless search for a balanced alternative, on the other, that *Marcovaldo* illuminates both the limitations and potentialities of that naturecultural hybrid that is the industrial city.

A thread connecting Marcovaldo's adventures and Calvino's later Japanese perambulations is represented by the possibility of interspecies coexistence offered by the enclosed space of a garden. 'Il giardino dei gatti ostinati', the penultimate story of *Marcovaldo*, describes what French botanist and garden designer Gilles Clément would define as a 'jardin de résistance' (2010). The area these stubborn cats manage to subtract to the dominion of cement is untamed and chaotic, thus very different from the tamed, suspended order of Zen gardens. All the same, these two spaces have something ecologically relevant in common: they both embody a configuration of life 'which is no longer exclusively related to the human but heeds all the bonds that make life possible in a shared biocultural dimension' (Iovino 2021: 23). In the Japanese garden, this dimension will be at the same time more concrete and more abstract than in Marcovaldo's story: Calvino (and then Palomar) will have a first-hand experience of the material specificities of a Zen multispecies entanglement; and, consequently, he will extrapolate a philosophical lesson in coexistence and interpenetration of life forms, which is still only implicit in *Marcovaldo*.

I propose to read the oscillating approach to the 'natural' environment that animates Marcovaldo's urban adventures, driven by a hope for harmony that constantly renews itself by changing objective, as resonating with Calvino's own approach to science — more specifically, in his creative, many-sided challenge to scientific rationalism, the pitfalls of which he has long recognised. After abandoning his studies at the University of Turin's Agriculture Faculty in favour of English

Literature, thus symbolically breaking with his familial background, Calvino recurrently 'turned to science for inspiration and as a way of facing up to the crisis of modernity' (Pilz 2005: 193). The kind of scientific posture that never ceases to attract Calvino is one that only proposes provisional certainties, in opposition to unquestionable hierarchies and conceptualisations. In the attempt to decipher the multiplicity of reality through ever-changing theories and explanations, such a posture represents for Calvino an invaluable tool for exploring the possible harmonies connecting beings of all kinds, in continuity with literature and philosophy. It is in this context that, in the late 1960s, he proposes his view of 'literature as natural philosophy': 'l'opera letteraria come mappa del mondo e dello scibile, lo scrivere mosso da una spinta conoscitiva che è ora teologica ora speculativa ora stregonesca ora enciclopedica ora di filosofia naturale ora di osservazione trasfigurante e visionaria' (S, 233) [the literary work as a map of the world and of the knowable, of writing driven on by a thirst for knowledge that may by turns be theological, speculative, magical, encyclopedic, or may be concerned with natural philosophy or with transfiguring, visionary observation (Calvino 1986: 32)].

The main feature of this interdisciplinary endeavour, inspired by a premodern approach to knowledge as opposed to modern Cartesianism, is the ability to reflect (and reflect on) the substantive unity of everything. In other words, different disciplines must cooperate and intermingle, given that their own objects are part of a holistic, indivisible entanglement. Already in some of his earlier works, Calvino gives form to this human/non-human continuity through incisive descriptions of characters such as the apple-faced boy in 'Ultimo viene il corvo' (RR1, 266), the gardener Libereso in 'Un pomeriggio, Adamo' (RR1, 151), or — bearing in mind the distinctions detailed above — Cosimo in *Il barone rampante* (Antonello 1998: 112). He also reflects on 'l'infinita possibilità di metamorfosi di ciò che esiste' [the infinite possibilities of mutation] and the blurring distinction between 'uomini bestie piante cose' (Calvino 1993a: xv) [men, beasts, plants, things (Calvino 1980: XIX)] implied in the folkloric repertoire of fairy tales, legends, and myths, when writing his introduction to the *Fiabe italiane* (1956). But it is certainly in *Le cosmicomiche*, where Calvino employs all the potentialities of fantastic literature vis-à-vis mythical and scientific thought, that the creation of a transdisciplinary cosmology brings together a 'holistic approach to knowledge' and the 'quest for reintegration of humanity and nature' (Pilz 2005: 200; 194).²⁰

When Kathryn Hume analyses Calvino's imagination 'as a Cartesian cogito pitted against some form of cosmos in flux', she also acknowledges the 'slight but persistent possibility of Vision-with-a-capital-V: holistic, mystic, or significant vision as opposed to mere seeing' (1992a: 2; 39). The *coincidentia oppositorum* underpinning the cosmicomic tales (that is, the ideal dissolution of every form of ontological distinction among beings), is characterised by three main features that make this experiment crucial for Calvino's subsequent development, and at the same time partially divergent from his Japanese reflections, despite their similar focus on the interconnection of all things. First (and this is an element of similarity to Calvino's Japanese texts), the supposed continuity between human, other beings, and matter takes on a somewhat mystic vein. Appropriately, as Claudia Nocentini

notes, the cosmicomic text 'Tutto in un punto' was quoted by Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy, in her *World as Lover, World as Self* (1991), as an example of a fruitful meditation on the interdependency between humans and their environment (2009: 162–63). In more recent years, subjective mystical experiences have been gradually included within material-ecocritical discourses, as themselves part of physical interactions and bodily transformations.²¹ It is in this movement towards forms of ecomysticism uniting the immaterial and the material, as well as the human and other-than-human, that Calvino's holistic Visions acquire significance.²²

Second, 'Tutto in un punto' and many other stories in the cosmicomic project refer to a primordial state. The main character, Qfwfq, if read through a psychoanalytic lens, is like the child who 'does not differentiate between itself and the mother [...] or the blanket [...] or the pillow [...]. Its libidinal flow is directed towards the complete assimilation of everything which is experienced as pleasurable, and there are no recognized boundaries' (Silverman 1983: 155).²³ Qfwfq could also be considered as a Freudian 'oceanic self', which has yet to become a proper subject; crucially, the 'oceanic' experience has itself been connected to mystic, especially Buddhist experiences (Epstein 1995: 391). The playful mechanism through which this imagination is expressed results precisely from the 'prematurity' of what is imagined: the reader is confronted with the paradox of a world which is spoken of in human terms, even prior to contemplating the human as a possibility (Iovino 2007: 116).²⁴

At the base of the mystic and primordial character of *Le cosmicomiche*, unlike Calvino's Japanese experiences, lies a mental dimension. The interconnection between human and nature, which *Le cosmicomiche* trace as the origin of the cosmos, is completely imaginary, although inspired by scientific laws (Ferretti 1989: 101). Antonello observes that the mind is the main actor in these logical performances, even if it is never directly represented: the cosmicomic space is completely mental, but negatively so (1998: 120–21). Based upon this mechanism, non-anthropocentric values take on anthropomorphic forms and thus contribute to a 'naturalisation of humankind', as opposed to a humanisation of 'nature' (Porro 2007: 64). Calvino refers to his inescapable anthropomorphic perspective in an interview from 1968:

Ricordiamo che anni fa Robbe-Grillet aveva pronunciato una requisitoria serrata contro l'antropomorfismo, contro lo scrittore che continua a umanizzare il paesaggio [...]. Invece io questo *antropomorfismo* l'ho accettato e rivendicato in pieno come procedimento letterario fondamentale. (S, 233–34, emphasis in the text)

[Let's not forget that a few years ago Robbe-Grillet articulated a stringent reprimand about anthropomorphism, against writers who kept humanising the landscape [...]. I, on the other hand, have accepted and strongly vindicated this *anthropomorphism* as an absolutely fundamental literary procedure.]

A remarkably similar stance has later been advanced by Jane Bennett, the champion of the vibrancy and vitality of matter: 'an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances', because 'in revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between

material forms in “nature” and those in “culture”, anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphism’ (2010: 99). While inescapably human, the cosmicomic fantasy paves the way towards a non-anthropocentric anthropomorphism ‘that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings [...] but with variously composed materialities that form confederations’ (Bennett 2010: 99). Such considerations are the perfect preparation for analysis of Calvino’s experience in Kyoto gardens, the purpose of which will be to demonstrate the extent to which a directly embodied phenomenology of human/non-human material entanglements has meaningfully enriched this holistic philosophical perspective, beyond any primordial or mental reduction.²⁵

1.1.2. Calvino’s View of Japanese Entanglements

Whereas an imaginative dimension prevails in a fantastic creation like *Le cosmicomiche*, when it comes to an existing space such as a Japanese garden, Calvino has the opportunity to relate in all its tangibility to ‘la sostanza unitaria del tutto’ (Calvino 1993a: xv) [the unifying element in everything (Calvino 1980: XIX)]. It is, however, more accurate to talk of Japanese gardens, plural: the garden of Sentō Imperial Palace described in ‘Il rovescio del sublime’ is a strolling garden divided into a North Pond and a South Pond area; the garden of Katsura Imperial Villa, mentioned in ‘I mille giardini’, similarly features a central pond around which visitors walk; Ryōan-ji is perhaps the best example of *karesansui*, or the Japanese rock garden, as Calvino reflects in ‘La luna corre dietro alla luna’, and in ‘L’aiola di sabbia’ in *Palomar*; while Ginkaku-ji, again referred to in ‘La luna corre dietro alla luna’, combines a moss garden and a dry sand garden. However different their shapes and materials, all these spaces tend to rely upon limited natural elements conducive to quiet reflection on the place of the human within a broader network of life.

The article ‘Il rovescio del sublime’ offers productive material in this respect, illuminating the notion of non-anthropocentric humanism that will be further expanded in *Palomar*. In this text of *Collezione di sabbia*, natural elements of the garden of Sentō Imperial Palace are repeatedly described through images that recall human actions: for example, ‘un greto di ciottoli levigati e tondeggianti, grigio-chiari e grigio-scuri, [...] continuano sotto l’acqua verde del laghetto come godendo della sua trasparenza’ (S, 579) [a bed of smoothed, round stones, bright grey and dark grey in colour, which continue beneath the green water of the little lake as though revelling in its transparency (Calvino 2013a: 165)]. The use of conditional comparisons introduced by ‘as though’ ‘presents an added hesitation in the attempt to find a rhythm that expresses the relationship between human and nonhuman’ (Ryan 2015: 295). A rhythm which is finally harmonious, for ‘[il] vero spirito del giardino giapponese’ [the true spirit of Japanese gardens] demands that ‘mai un elemento prend[a] il sopravvento su un altro’ (S, 575) [no element ever takes precedence over another (Calvino 2013a: 162)].

Following this anthropomorphic logic, specific elements of the garden (such as its waterfalls) are also presented in gendered terms, mirroring stereotypical

role patterns: 'di cascate d'acqua il giardino Sento ne ha due: una maschio e una femmina (Odaki e Medaki), la prima a picco tra le rocce, la seconda che mormora saltellando tra gradini di sassi in una crepa del prato' (S, 575) [The Sentō garden has two waterfalls as well: a male and female waterfall (Odaki and Medaki), the first high over the rocks, the second one murmuring as it rushes between steps made of little stones in a gap in the lawn (Calvino 2013a: 161–62)]. We will see shortly how, beyond this apparent reinforcement of clichéd differentiations along gender lines (male as decisive and female as vaguely vacuous), Calvino's emerging posthumanism will in fact allow for a problematisation of such divisions. Key in this context are the affordances of the 'as though' towards opposite forms of influence or identification — in this case, from natural forms back to human beings: 'Molte vecchie in Giappone sono ingobbite e contorte come per una parentela con gli alberi nani coltivati in vaso secondo l'antica arte del *bonsai*. [...] La maggioranza dei giardinieri sono donne [...], non si capisce se vecchie o giovani ma già nodose e contorte come per un adattamento ambientale' (S, 574) [Many old women in Japan are hunchbacked and twisted as if related to the dwarf trees cultivated in pots according to the ancient art of *bonsai*. [...] The majority of the gardeners are women [...], it is impossible to say if they are young or old, but they are already knotted and contorted, as though adapting to the environment (Calvino 2013a: 161)].

By making use of personifying verbs, Calvino introduces further details of the harmonious interrelation between human senses and surrounding landscape — and the musical reference to harmony is particularly appropriate here: 'non è con un atto di sfacciata prepotenza cromatica che gli aceri s'impongono alla vista: se l'occhio viene calamitato da loro come inseguendo il motivo d'una musica è per la leggerezza delle foglie stellate, come sospese attorno ai rami sottili' (S, 573) [But it is not with an act of outrageous chromatic arrogance that the maples impose themselves on one's view: if the eye is drawn towards them as though lured by a musical motif, it is because of the lightness of their starry leaves, which seem suspended around their thin branches (Calvino 2013a: 160)]. Natural elements here acquire their own agency, which is even able to influence the outward appearance, actions, and attitudes of human beings. This reciprocal interrelation, as we will see below, reflects the Buddhist view of life as resounding through every single being.

Calvino does not abstain from acknowledging the degree of artificiality needed to develop a rounded awareness of this mutuality, thus opening to an additional dialectical dyad connecting artificiality and authenticity:

C'è una cosa che mi sembra di cominciare a capire, qui a Kyoto: attraverso i giardini, più che attraverso i templi e i palazzi. La costruzione d'una natura padroneggiabile dalla mente perché la mente possa ricevere a sua volta ritmo e proporzione dalla natura: così potrebbe definirsi l'intento che ha portato a comporre questi giardini. Tutto qui deve sembrare spontaneo e per questo tutto è calcolato. (S, 574)

[There is one thing I seem to be starting to understand here in Kyoto: something I've learned through the gardens more than through the temples and palaces. The construction of a nature that can be mastered by the mind so that the mind can in turn receive a sense of rhythm and proportion from

nature: that is how one could define the intention that has led to the layout of these gardens. Everything here has to seem spontaneous and for that reason everything is calculated. (Calvino 2013a: 161)]

In a 1979 television interview, Calvino declared his interest in the mosaic in which human beings are entangled, in the arabesques of the rug into which they are woven, while inevitably remaining human (SNiA, 245, n. 6). In the Sentō Imperial Garden described in 'Il rovescio del sublime', only a few years earlier, he reflects along similar lines on one of the most specific human features, that is the ability to use rational calculations to dismiss human centrality altogether, and to recognise a non-hierarchical mutuality with other forms of life. The traditions of Japanese Buddhism and literature, in which life has largely represented an all-encompassing category including both vegetal and animal (and human) beings on the same level, invite us to interrogate Calvino's accounts of his Japanese travels as key factors in the passage from the fantastic posthumanism of the cosmicomic tales to the philosophical and poetical posthumanism of *Palomar*.

A further element to consider, in the triangulation between Calvino's oeuvre, his posthumanism, and his contact with certain aspects of Japanese culture, is the conceptual affinity between the role of Japan and the relevance of sciences in Calvino's trajectory. Antonello states that sciences, with their rational structures, represent for Calvino an attempt to reduce his own contradictions, a promise of precarious stability through which to placate his own anxiety, 'intellectual agoraphobia', and angst in front of a destabilised and destabilising reality (1995: 210–11). As I have argued elsewhere, Calvino's encounter with Zen praxis (of which many of the gardens he visited in Japan are an expression) also acts as an alternative to a creeping sense of nervous tension emanating from things, towards a harmonious fusion of opposites (Dellacasa 2022). On one hand, we have science's ability to weave geometrical formulae into thermodynamic dissipation and chaos (Antonello 1995: 212);²⁶ on the other hand, there is the Japanese garden's magnification of the vitality of matter through reduction of its natural dynamism to ordered structures, and the consequent ability to mirror 'il paesaggio della mente del saggio, liberata da ogni passione e ogni nevrosi' (S, 577) [the landscape of the wise man's mind, free from all passions and neuroses (Calvino 2013a: 164)]. Both processes verge on paradox, but at the same time offer what seems to be the most effective way out of the sense of nervous tension and anxiety that, arising from an uneven attitude towards dialectical oppositions, animate most of Calvino's works.²⁷

Indeed, Calvino has often admitted his inability to take the side of words as opposed to silence (S, 1869), lightness against weight (S, 642), quickness against lingering (S, 668). In his work, the constant tension between opposing forces seems to be as creatively fruitful as it is inescapable — and, as we saw in the previous section, similar dynamics involve the difficult but unavoidable interaction with other-than-human beings. This dialectic relates over a long period to an ontological reality that Calvino addresses *ab extra*, 'from outside', thereby struggling to cope with the neuroticism that such a relentless confrontation with irreducible, ostensibly dichotomous choices engenders. In this context, animals and plants are

long perceived as separate entities to try and get acquainted with, but implicitly presupposing an impossible harmonisation. Conversely, Calvino's encounter with Zen Buddhism (as well as his creative exploration of the complexity of science in *Le cosmicomiche*)²⁸ allows him to conceive of dialectic as a praxis, as an inseparable confluence of theory and practice, epistemology and ontology, thus as something to be experienced *ab intra*, 'from within', and therefore more harmoniously. As a result, his view of other-than-human entities is also renewed, implying as it does the possibility of a real encounter with the human, of an interpenetration and radical reciprocity among beings, of which 'Il rovescio del sublime' offers an incisive example.

Another text where Calvino elaborates on his Japanese experience, although from a markedly literary point of view, is 'Sul tappeto di foglie illuminato dalla luna', the Japanese chapter of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. Here the entanglement does not involve human and other-than-human beings, but rather male and female perspectives, in a productive complication of an abstract 'mythology of the feminine' which predominates, by way of contrast, in *Le città invisibili* (1972) (Myk 2009: 223).²⁹ Calvino's narrative voice tends throughout his career to be a masculine voice, but 'its metaphors for everything that is pursued and unattainable are invariably feminine in form' (Jeannet 2000: 169). Teresa de Lauretis also maintains that, in many of Calvino's texts, 'desire is founded in absence, in the tension-towards rather than the attainment of the object of love' (1987: 71). If the union with the female object of love (or, more generally, object of metaphor) is generally deferred, the resulting view of the female tends to be mostly deficient in agency, unable to reciprocate or enrich the masculine standpoint. While acknowledging the general validity of such critiques, I would argue that 'Sul tappeto di foglie illuminato dalla luna' constitutes a substantial exception, since it applies to the interaction between genders the posthumanist strategy of dialectical interrelation between allegedly opposite poles. As Robert Rushing suggests, Calvino may have offered more often than is usually recognised 'a commentary and implicit critique, rather than a naive or unconscious endorsement, of the construction of gender' (2006: 46).

'Sul tappeto di foglie' is set in an undefined and yet easily recognisable Japan and tells of shady sexual affairs and psychological connections. The plot is quite slim: the protagonist is involved in academic research in the library of Mr Okeda, whose taciturn and pensive traits seem to evoke the temperament of a Zen master.³⁰ As well as spending his days discussing perceptions with Mr Okeda, the main character eventually seduces Mr Okeda's daughter and has a sexual encounter with his wife. From the outset, the protagonist is prone to describe in detail every image and perception encountered and, in conversation with Mr Okeda, he compares his own experience to a novel, since both focus on the process of taming human perceptions (RR2, 812); as is typical in the meta-narrative context of *Se una notte*, this hypothetical novel mirrors precisely the chapter the reader is navigating. Soon, Mr Okeda's wife (Miyagi) and daughter (Makiko) make an appearance alongside the two men and, in order to express the sexual charge their presence entails, Calvino is compelled to confront his own discomfort in writing about sex, resulting

in a sequence that can be read as an elaborate play of parody and self-parody.³¹ The heavy descriptivism of the chapter soon turns from natural elements to the bodies and beauties of the two women, as the story acquires the distinctive erotic mark of several of Kawabata's or Tanizaki's books, as well as of the Japanese erotic prints Calvino describes in 'Eros e discontinuità' (S, 594). Whereas the main character's reflections revolve around sight and sound (RR2, 808; 811; 819), it is through the filter of his touch that Miyagi's and Makiko's bodies are introduced into the narrative: the shape and the texture of their breasts (RR2, 810; 816), and even of Mrs Miyagi's vagina (RR2, 817), are sketched by means of analytical and detached anatomical descriptions.

In the context of *Se una notte*, Calvino stages Japanese literature by highlighting one of its most characteristic themes (eroticism) and narrative paces (a rather slow and analytical one), both abundantly present in several of the novels on Calvino's own Japanese shelf. To name a few examples, a similar sexual and sentimental competition between a mother and her daughter can be found in Kawabata's *Thousand Cranes* (1952) and Tanizaki's *The Key* (1956), whereas the situation of a child witnessing a parent's extramarital affair is crucial in the development of the main character's deviant psyche in Mishima's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956). In an interview with Francine du Plessix Gray, published in *The New York Times* ('Visiting Italo Calvino', 21 June 1981), Calvino admits that, in his endeavour to compose a pastiche of novelistic styles, he most enjoyed writing those 'subnovels' that were the furthest away from his own style and experience, and specifically points to the Japanese erotic tale.

Crucially, while focusing on observing and interacting with the body of Mrs Miyagi, the enunciating self of 'Sul tappeto di foglie' realises more than once that he is scrutinised in turn not only by Mr Okeda (another male actor), but also by Ms Makiko:

la ragazza [...] ora veniva a vedere quale ostacolo m'avesse trattenuto [...] spalancava gli occhi seguendo i sussulti di sua madre e miei con attrazione e disgusto. Ma non era sola: al di là del corridoio, nel vano d'un'altra porta una figura d'uomo stava immobile in piedi. Non so da quanto tempo il signor Okeda era là. Guardava fissamente, non sua moglie e me, ma sua figlia che ci guardava. (RR2, 816–17)

[the girl [...] was now coming to see what obstacle had delayed me [...] her eyes widened, following her mother's and my starts with attraction and disgust. But she was not alone: beyond the corridor, in the opening of another door, a man's form was standing motionless. I have no idea how long Mr Okeda had been there. He was staring hard, not at his wife and me but at his daughter watching us. (Calvino 1981: 207–08)]

The observer turns out to be observed, in a network of perspectives in which the female gaze both decentres and challenges the male one, analogous to the human and other-than-human dialectic of Japanese gardens. By describing the intricate connection of female and male gazes, again in a Japan-related context, Calvino gestures towards a potential deconstruction of fixed gendered roles (the female body as passive object of observation and pleasure, the male gaze as implicitly neutral and

unchallenged). This is in line with Elio Baldi's view of 'the sheer omnipresence of women in Calvino's fiction, [...] in some cases serving as an affirmation of a male perspective, in other instances troubling or perplexing', but always indicating a relationship of mutual dependence between genders (2020: 213). These issues are further elaborated in *Palomar*, where Calvino's approach invites an investigation into the extent to which a dialectical interaction between beings, partially inspired by Zen gardens, functions to different degrees when applied to gender roles or to various forms of life.

1.1.3. *The Remains of the Harmony: Dialectical Interactions in Palomar*

Recollecting the visual and reflective meandering of a pensive middle-aged man, *Palomar* represents, quite literally, an observatory through which the world looks at itself: 'Il mondo guarda il mondo' is the title of one of the texts, and Palomar is also the name of a centre for astronomical research in San Diego, California. Within this heterogeneous collection of texts partially already published elsewhere, Calvino addresses both gender and species issues. Here we will focus on 'Il seno nudo', with reference to male/female interactions, and refer variously to 'Il fischio del merlo', 'L'invasione degli storni', and 'La corsa delle giraffe' as far as interspecies dynamics are concerned. In each case, while recognising that irreversibly 'l'universo si disfa in una nube di calore' [the universe disintegrates into a cloud of heat] or 'precipita senza scampo in un vortice d'entropia' [it falls inevitably into a vortex of entropy], Calvino develops his interest in the 'zone d'ordine, porzioni d'esistente che tendono verso una forma, punti privilegiati da cui sembra di scorgere un disegno, una prospettiva' (S, 687–88) [areas of order, portions of the existent that tend toward a form, privileged points in which we seem to discern a design or perspective (Calvino 1988: 69)]. In the context of this quest, a particular significance can be attributed to 'L'aiola di sabbia', where Calvino elaborates on the harmonious 'disegno' of Ryōan-ji's Zen garden.

'Il seno nudo', the second of the twenty-seven short stories of *Palomar*, portrays the titular character reflecting on the socio-anthropological resonances of his reaction to the sight of a naked bosom while strolling along a lonely beach. Contrary to his will, his going back and forth in front of a topless woman and his repeated attempts to find an attitude that could be perceived by both parties as appropriate, in fact results in the bathing woman abandoning the beach, annoyed and indignant. Aided by a complex tangle of societal taboos and overthinking inclinations, the silent and asynchronous exchange of glances between Palomar and the woman is as difficult as it is horizontal.³² As in 'Sul tappeto di foglie illuminato dalla luna', Calvino describes here a self-questioning male viewpoint that is further challenged by the female perspective. At the same time, the exchange is far from offering a constructive example of a well-balanced interaction:

appena [Palomar] torna ad avvicinarsi, ecco che lei s'alza di scatto, si ricopre, sbuffa, s'allontana con scrollate infastidite delle spalle come sfuggisse alle insistenze moleste d'un satiro.

Il peso morto d'una tradizione di malcostume impedisce d'apprezzare nel

loro giusto merito le intenzioni più illuminate, conclude amaramente Palomar. (RR2, 882)

[the moment [Palomar] approaches again, she suddenly springs up, covers herself with an impatient huff, and goes off, shrugging in irritation, as if she were avoiding the tiresome insistence of a satyr.

The dead weight of an intolerant tradition prevents anyone's properly understanding the most enlightened intensions, Palomar bitterly concludes. (Calvino 1985b: 12)]

Perhaps because of the 'largely unacknowledged struggle with his own body and sexuality' (Bolongaro 2009: 113), Palomar is not easily capable of establishing an equal relationship with the female other. Yet he quickly goes from making a part of the female body the subject (or, better, the object) of his reflections to recognising an agency in that same female other who, by making visible her irritation and leaving the beach, soon acquires a subjectivity able to fundamentally reject the androcentric load of Palomar's point of view. Significantly, if initially she is motionless, attracting Palomar's 'mobile glance' while sunbathing (Baldi 2019: 81), at the end of the episode she gains her own physical and symbolic freedom of movement.

As far as his multiple encounters with non-human animals are concerned, Palomar more rarely experiences moments of mutual recognition, but never ceases to explore the 'various [...] creaturely modalities that decenter the Cartesian human and destabilize the human/animal barrier' (Rohman 2009: 63), despite the general sense of anguish these generate. A meaningful example of the possibility of a reciprocal exchange is represented by 'Il gorilla albino':

Quel viso dalle fattezze enormi, da gigante triste, ogni tanto si volta verso la folla dei visitatori oltre il vetro, a meno d'un metro da lui; un lento sguardo carico di desolazione e pazienza e noia, uno sguardo che esprime tutta la rassegnazione a essere come si è, unico esemplare al mondo d'una forma non scelta, non amata. (RR2, 942)

[Every now and then that face with its enormous features, a sad giant's turns upon the crowd of visitors beyond the glass, less than a meter away, a slow gaze charged with desolation and patience and boredom, a gaze that expresses all the resignation at being the way he is, sole exemplar in the world of a form not chosen, not loved. (Calvino 1985b: 81)]

Copito de Nieve (this is the name of the albino gorilla) spends most of the time holding a rubber tire. This attachment to a material object invites Palomar to recognise a continuity between their respective 'bisogno d'una cosa da tener stretta mentre tutto [...] sfugge' [need for something to hold tight while everything eludes [them]], in the attempt to 'placare l'angoscia dell'isolamento, della diversità' (RR2, 943) [allay the anguish of isolation, of difference (Calvino 1985b: 82)].

Palomar is riddled with similar references to a sentiment of 'angoscia' [anguish] originating from the encounter with animals: the same word recurs in 'Il fischio del merlo' (RR2, 895), whereas in 'L'invasione degli storni' there is 'come un senso d'apprensione' (RR2, 926) [something akin to apprehension (Calvino 1985b: 62)], and difficulty to 'far quadrare [moti della mente non coordinati] in un qualsiasi

modello d'armonia interiore' (RR2, 941) [fit [uncoordinated movements of the mind] into any pattern of inner harmony (Calvino 1985b: 80)] in 'La corsa delle giraffe'. At the same time, Palomar appears to be in search of a higher vision of life, capable of compensating and sublimating imbalance in an all-encompassing harmony. He experiences this harmony when the afternoon fades into the night and his human gaze is no longer needed to keep the moonlight alive (as in 'Luna di pomeriggio'), or when he acknowledges that we might feel comfortable in the universe if only we did not fall prey to a distrust of our senses ('L'occhio e i pianeti'). Palomar's positive mental attitude can thus be located in a shift of perspective on the same relationship with the natural environment that is able to cause him suffering. I would identify this shift in the Japanese text 'L'aiola di sabbia' and more precisely in a reflection prompted by looking at the Zen garden of Ryōan-ji:

tra umanità-sabbia e mondo-scoglio si intuisce un'armonia possibile come tra due armonie non omogenee: quella del non-umano in un equilibrio di forze che sembra non risponda a nessun disegno; quella delle strutture umane che aspira a una razionalità di composizione geometrica o musicale, mai definitiva... (RR2, 953)

[between mankind-sand and world-boulder there is a sense of possible harmony, as if between two nonhomogeneous harmonies: that of the nonhuman in a balance of forces that seems not to correspond to any pattern, and that of human structures, which aspires to the rationality of a geometrical or musical composition, never definitive... (Calvino 1985b: 94)]

Human and non-human are here conceived as capable of existing in harmony, provided that the balance is not defined permanently, but rather pertains to a dialectic without teleology, 'without the rush to pre-ordained synthesis' (Murphy 1995: xii).

The view of an open dialectic emanating from the Kyoto garden radiates across the entire book as a generative possibility of the interpenetration of apparently opposite coordinates — such as finitude and infinitude, micro and macro, horizontality and verticality, human and non-human. For example, in 'Il prato infinito', Palomar recognises the partiality of the descriptive method to which he is attracted and acknowledges with a certain equanimity the presence of infinity within the finitude of material things. In referring to 'l'universo forse finito ma innumerabile, instabile nei suoi confini, che apre entro di sé altri universi' (RR2, 900) [the universe perhaps finite but countless, unstable within its borders, which discloses other universes within itself (Calvino 1985b: 33)], Calvino indirectly illustrates an important lesson of Buddhism, which the poet Chandra Livia Candiani delineates by using the same image of the lawn: 'Si può andare a trovare un piccolissimo pezzo di prato, un pizzico di prato c'è sempre, anche in città. E guardare. A lungo. Si apre un universo minimo. Infinite vicende, mutamenti, arrivi, partenze, forme sempre più piccole man mano che lo sguardo si limita a vedere' (2021: 9) [You can go and look for a tiny patch of grass, you can always find a hint of grass, even in the city. And look. For long. A minimal universe opens up. Limitless events, changes, arrivals, departures, increasingly smaller forms as the gaze restricts itself to looking].

In 'Il prato infinito', but also in many other texts of *Palomar*, starting from the opening text 'Lettura di un'onda', the focus on microscopic corners of the world opens to cosmic reflections. In doing this, Calvino pays homage to Francis Ponge's method of identification with the objects described. Ponge's solidarity with, attention to, and respect for the humblest everyday objects recurs often in Calvino's essayistic reflections.³³ What is even more relevant, in light of this analysis, is that Ponge's posture is often referred to in contexts that evoke the analogous approach to things entailed in Buddhism and Japanese poetry. A common thread between these two benchmarks is the preference for a modality of description in which the subject identifies with the object, as opposed to a hierarchy whose assumed pinnacle is the human subject:

Il signor Palomar è quanto di più vicino si possa immaginare a un monaco, se vogliamo buddista, anche se è costruito tutto con procedimenti della nostra cultura e non con materiali orecchiati o presi in prestito. Lei [Fabrizia Ramondino] ha fatto il nome di Leiris [...]; è in quelle zone che si possono trovare dei precedenti a Palomar, per esempio le descrizioni di oggetti di Francis Ponge, un autore che io amo molto [...]. (SNiA, 560–61)

[Mr Palomar is as close as you can get to a monk, perhaps a Buddhist monk, even though he is imbued with elements of our culture and not with pick-up or borrowed materials. You [Fabrizia Ramondino] mentioned Leiris [...]; it is in that department that we can find some precedents for Palomar, for example in Francis Ponge's descriptions of objects — I love Francis Ponge.]

Palomar is embedded in Western culture, his musings mainly refer to an Occidental frame of reference, yet Calvino feels the need to connect his character's intellectual experiences to Buddhism, among many other cultural explorations he could have chosen from. Elsewhere, he also mentions the impact Japanese poetry has on his conceptualisation and consequent description of the world, again in continuity with Ponge's method:

Con la mia ricerca ho cercato di avvicinarmi di più all'esperienza di Francis Ponge, oppure all'esperienza della poesia americana degli Imagisti, soprattutto a William Carlos Williams e Marianne Moore. [...] Forse il mio progetto si collega, anche se da lontano, a certe cose della poesia orientale: penso al rapporto con la natura della letteratura giapponese. (SNiA, 611–12)

[With my research I tried to get close to the experience of Francis Ponge, or else to the experience of the American Imagist poetry, especially to William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore. [...] Perhaps my project is related, even if only slightly, to some elements of Eastern poetry: I am thinking about Japanese literature's relation with nature.]

By identifying with the objects upon which he reflects, Palomar dethrones himself from the position of subject at the pinnacle of a supposed universal hierarchy, and recognises instead that he is part of an interconnected universe belonging equally to human, animal, vegetal, and even mineral beings.

Within this cosmic view, Palomar often ruminates on celestial bodies. The geological depth of the Earth should have been originally explored by Mr Mohole,

Palomar's obverse and co-protagonist. But this second character was subsumed, in the process of creation, under the titular one; despite his fascination for surfaces, Palomar dialectically presupposes a drastic vertical movement that, from the bowels of the Earth, reaches the sky (Antonello 1995: 221). Through a recurring bird's-eye view, he gets closer and closer to a holistic vision, and to the tendency of Mahāyāna and Chan masters to locate themselves at the summit of things in order to attain the awareness of the interconnection of beings, as well as of beings and world (Faure 1987: 347). Brian Fitzgerald observes that, in texts such as 'Dal terrazzo' and 'L'invasione degli storni', Palomar adheres to a 'unifying vision' offered by the projection of imagination onto an animal standpoint (1994: 52). The viewpoint of birds is recognised as different from the human, while a potential homology of experience is imagined, linking the two perceptions in the construction of a holistic heuristic vision.

'L'invasione degli storni' also brings about the definition of form as 'a recognition of the subject in the object' (Fitzgerald 1994: 53): 'Finalmente una forma emerge dal confuso battere d'ali [degli storni], avanza, s'addensa: è una forma circolare, come una sfera, una bolla, il fumetto di qualcuno che sta pensando a un cielo pieno d'uccelli' (RR2, 927) [Finally a form emerges from the [starlings'] confused flutter of wings, advances, condenses: it is a circular shape, like a sphere, a bubble, the balloon-speech of someone who is thinking of a sky full of birds (Calvino 1985b: 64)]. As Fitzgerald puts it, 'the subject must go beyond itself into the object for either the object to reveal itself or the subject to reveal itself in the object. It may be that these two aspects of revealing are one and the same thing' (1994: 53). In other words, what emerges in the intertwined confusion of subject and object is a deeper comprehension of both, based on those specificities that only a mutual confrontation can reveal.

In the suggestive image of a flock of starlings in the shape of the thought of someone thinking about a flock of starlings, Calvino attains the 'poetic invention' that, in his own view, can lead us out of anthropocentric parochialism more effectively than any philosophical reflection (S, 649). Nevertheless, if we were to find a philosophical parallel, the most fitting would probably be Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), according to which it is more appropriate to say that the world perceives itself through the perception of a person, rather than that a person perceives the world (as already highlighted, one of the conclusive texts of *Palomar* is 'Il mondo guarda il mondo'). Comparative philosophical approaches have not by chance highlighted Merleau-Ponty's proximity to Buddhism's nondiscriminating mode of consciousness (Midal 2013: 112–13), whereby the 'mind can engage an intersubjective experience with nature' (Shaner 1989: 171). If, in Calvino's early works, human perceptions were projected onto objective correlatives, here a material pattern in the outside world is deemed to run parallel to the very substance (and form) of human thought, consistent with the interaction between human and other-than-human that defines Japanese gardens — interpreted by Calvino, as we shall see in the next chapter, as embodied poems.

In 'Molteplicità', the fifth of his *Lezioni americane*, Calvino wishes that it were

possible to conceive a work outside of the self, outside of the limited perspective of the individual, allowing us to embrace other perspectives and to let birds, trees, stones, even concrete and plastic speak for themselves (S, 733). His holistic drive emerges clearly there, as much as his awareness of the impossibility of such a 'self-less' art. But *Palomar* provides a partial solution to this conundrum: in order to hear the voice of and understand the surrounding environment, the self does not really need to obliterate itself (unless symbolically, as Palomar does at the end of the book), but rather to relativise its presence within a broader, non-anthropocentric picture. This is a key aspect of the Japanese tradition, where 'the juxtaposition of specific images grounded in a close observation of nature serves to suggest a larger [...] concern' (Rimer 1978: 246). And this is precisely the reason why Calvino's Japanese experience must be reconsidered, if our understanding of his evolution is to shift in the direction of an evolutionary pattern that is never truly concluded, but always open to influences of different kinds.

1.2. Matters of Perspective in Japanese Traditions

As Brian Moeran and Lise Skov have argued, nature is among the elements that feed most Orientalism and self-Orientalism (*nihonjinron*) with regard to Japan (1997). Specific images and ideas of nature, often in the form of manicured gardens, have been easily related to essentialist views such as Basil Hall Chamberlain's claim that 'the Japanese genius touches perfection in small things' (1891: 32), or Edwin O. Reischauer's insistence that the 'Japanese have always seemed to lean more toward subtlety and sensitivity than to clarity of analysis, to intuition rather than reason, to pragmatism rather than theory, to organizational skills rather than great intellectual concepts' (1977: 226).³⁴ Similar simplifications are challenged by Calvino's intuitive reading of Kyoto gardens as specimens of 'la costruzione d'una natura padroneggiabile dalla mente perché la mente possa ricevere a sua volta ritmo e proporzione dalla natura' (S, 574) [the construction of a nature that can be mastered by the mind so that the mind can in turn receive a sense of rhythm and proportion from nature (Calvino 2013a: 161)]. Even if himself influenced at times by Orientalist tropes, Calvino appreciates the bidirectional dynamic involving nature and mind, naturalness and artificiality, practice and theory in the Japanese gardens, offering a remarkable lesson in dialectical thinking. His view allows us to identify a distinguishing feature of Japanese natureculture in this very dialectical exchange between allegedly irreconcilable polarities, instead of fixed, monodimensional characteristics.

The mutual (and only apparently paradoxical) embedding of ecocentrism and cultivation entailed in many Japanese traditions, including gardening, weaves elements of Buddhist and Confucian philosophies into a peculiar seamless fabric, which also contains elements of Shintō.³⁵ A modern interpreter of this long-established tradition of thought, Nishida Kitarō, among the most influential Japanese philosophers of the twentieth century, also formulates the Japanese spirit in terms of the merging of the mind with nature, of the self with the universe, whereas

Watsuji Tetsurō analyses the interconnection of climate and culture in his seminal essay *Fūdo* (1935).³⁶ In the following sections, we will first explore the philosophical relevance of similar forms of interconnection, mainly through our focus on gardens, and then delve into the role played by Japanese literature in these dynamics, this time focusing on Calvino's Japanese shelf. In all these cases, we will deal more with a cultural myth than with the reality of Japanese forests and urban environments: the manufactured but persistent myth of 'Buddhism as essentially concerned with nature' (Dessi 2013: 350), rooted in the politics of power and ideology of medieval Buddhism and still partially active in contemporary forms of Japanese nationalism and Western ideas of the ecologically noble Other.³⁷

1.2.1. *The Holism of Japanese Gardens*

The garden of Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto, which Calvino visited, 'expresses in the reduced space of perhaps three or four hectares the vastly different aspects of sea, mountain, and plain' (Lee 1984: 80). Japanese gardens often resort to forms of reductionism meant to tame and frame nature's plenitude. If this can be said for any kind of garden, since they always represent 'the efforts of human beings to create cultural versions of their natural surroundings' (Hendry 1997: 83), Japanese gardens tend to stand out, in comparison with Western ones, on the grounds of the idiosyncratic holism that underpins them. Arne Kalland recalls that, 'unlike the Versailles park, which with its strict symmetry is not intended to be anything but culture, the Japanese garden [is] meant to give an impression of being nature' (1995: 250). In other words, the process of taming, while undoubtedly in play, is generally marked by the peculiarity of not resorting to a clearcut nature/culture dichotomy, but rather by a porous interaction between the two terms. While many traditional gardens in Japan come out of 'an organization of perspectives', what underpins such a process is 'the aesthetic continuum of nature' (Odin 2017: 123), of which the human being is an integral part (yet by no means hierarchically superior).

The traditional *Sakutei-ki* (Notes on garden techniques), a short collection of precepts that, after circulating secretly for centuries, is now considered a classic of the Japanese art of gardening, expresses this apparent paradox clearly: while providing norms for a cultural construction of the garden, it consistently demands that human beings follow nature. In other words, it harmonises what we would define as a form of Cartesianism — which sees the human being as acting on the environment from a prominent position — with a holism envisaging no disruption of the continuum between nature and human culture.³⁸ Tanaka Seidai emphasises that the phrase 'to do what the stone demands' recurs often in the *Sakutei-ki* and indicates a fundamental principle implied in the text: things and humans are connected by an organic link, making people perceive natural stones directly, even potentially identifying with them (1967). Calvino's hypothesis of a human/non-human harmony resulting from his reflections on Ryōan-ji's sand and stones thus acquires an indisputable relevance, with a long-term reverberation potentially recognisable in his text 'Essere pietra' (1981).³⁹ Here, perhaps not coincidentally, the stone that

speaks makes reference to 'un equilibrio, una complementarità, un'armonia che noi pietre, pur restando separate e inassimilabili, possiamo raggiungere' (RR3, 420) [a balance, a complementarity, a harmony that we, as stones, while being separate and non-assimilable, can reach], and to a reciprocity uniting human beings and stones: 'Se l'uomo si serve di noi per erigere le sue costruzioni è perché la potenza della edificazione è già in noi' (RR3, 420) [If human beings use us to erect their constructions, it is because construction is already within us, *in potentia*].

As Steve Odin puts it, the all-comprehensive, integrated whole which constitutes certain Japanese world-views can be understood as a 'web-like system of interconnected perspectives, whereupon each perspectival event both causally influences and receives influence from all other relational events' (2017: 126).⁴⁰ Buddhism visualises this system through fractal models graphically reproducing the processes of mutual identification and interpenetration of different elements within the same whole (Oh 2000: 283–84): mandalas, or the Hua-yen (jp. Kegon) image of the net of Indra, where 'each *dharma* [phenomenon] is like a multifaceted jewel located at the nexus of a web. Each jewel stands alone, but each of its facets reflects one of the other jewels' (Kasulis 1992: 5).⁴¹

Drawing on Louis-Adolphe Bertillon's definition of *mésologie* as the study of reciprocal reactions between organisms and their environments (1972), Augustine Berque has extensively reflected on how a holistic view can also be adapted to society in terms of *milieu*, 'a society's relationship to space and nature' (Berque 1997: 9). The *milieu* is both natural and cultural, subjective and objective, collective and individual, and reflects in sociological terms the kernel of *Fūdo*, by Watsuji Tetsurō. This work — a cornerstone of Japanese philosophy, translated into English as *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study* (1961) — emphasises how the interpenetration of self and environment is at the core of the understanding of self found in many Japanese cultural expressions, including haiku, landscape painting, and treatises on Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjinron*). Moving from culture to society, Berque builds upon this idea by suggesting that there is a connection between the way the Japanese relate to nature and space and the way they interact with one another: 'the logic of the Japanese medial process, or mediance, tends both to blur the identity of the self and to enhance the identification of the self with what is not the self: environment, both social and natural' (Berque 1992: 93–94).

Nina Cornyetz urges us to be aware that the naturalisation of an environmentally and ethnically specific sensibility as a 'constitutive component of Japanese *being*' is a 'modern construct' with nationalistic and racist potential (2007: 20). Such a mechanism has also been deliberately rooted in the psychology of Zen (Mathers and others 2009: 49); in particular, the concept of 'decentered self-awareness', key in intersubjective psychoanalysis (Atwood and Stolorow 1984), has been compared to the Zen notion of achieving compassion via self detachment (Herrigel 1960).⁴² As Takie S. Lebra explains, 'with no resistance, self is supposed to merge with the rest of the world. Merging means a twofold process: on the one hand, self becomes part of the objective world or nature; and on the other, self absorbs the outer world into itself' (1992: 115). Without paying much attention to the risks involved in

associating specific ways of being to circumscribed environments, in the Japanese gardens Calvino reflects upon the positive cross-species potential of entities that only apparently belong to different realms, but rather share properties that put them on a spectrum of continuity — as he creatively demonstrates by describing tree-like women, and woman- and man-like waterfalls.

If human rationality outgrows its natural grounds in the hierarchical logic of Cartesianism and Enlightenment, and if a holistic worldview decentres the human subject into the mesh of natural forces, a more balanced disposition should attain the awareness of the non-hegemonic centrality of rationality via a more prudent use of rationality itself, which is eventually prone to disposing of its potential superiority. Japanese gardens represent the perfect epitome of this trajectory: flora does not have higher-order rational faculties, and yet is there supposed to guide gardeners' actions, as much as the mind of those who practice meditation must let go of control and embrace the organic, interconnecting flow of breath. Against this specific facet of a holistic entanglement, Calvino could confront multiple roots of his own ever-developing ecological awareness. The most significant example, in this respect, is the Marxist view of human beings as an inseparable part of Nature, already pondered on by Amerigo Ormea in *La giornata d'uno scrutatore*, when he leaves through Marx's *Early Writings* and reads:

L'universalità dell'uomo appare praticamente proprio in quella universalità che fa dell'intera natura il corpo *inorganico* dell'uomo, sia perché essa 1) è un mezzo immediato di sussistenza, sia perché 2) è la materia, l'oggetto e lo strumento della sua attività vitale. La natura è il *corpo inorganico* dell'uomo, precisamente in quanto non è essa stessa corpo umano. Che l'uomo *viva* della natura vuol dire che la natura è il suo *corpo*, con cui deve stare in costante progresso per non morire. (RR2, 49–50)

[Man's universality appears, practically speaking, in that same universality that makes all nature man's *inorganic* body, both because nature is (1) an immediate means of subsistence, and because it is (2) the matter, the object, and the instrument of man's vital activity. Nature is man's *inorganic body* precisely because it is not his human body. To say man *lives* on nature means that nature is his *body*, with which he must constantly progress, in order not to die. (Calvino 1971: 45)]

While Calvino's early journalistic production proceeded more under the sign of a Marxist approach to the world, his contact with Japanese gardens marks a turning point in his creative work, where a decentralisation of the Western point of view triggers a decentralisation of the human point of view *tout court*. When Calvino notices the specificities of Japanese gardens in terms of harmonisation and permeability of humanity and the environment, he is deploying an observational capacity rendered even sharper by the eccentricity of his travel experience in a far remote country, which makes his own standpoint eccentric — and thus decentred.

1.2.2. *Cross-species Interdependencies and Identifications in Calvino's Japanese Books*

Two main features recur in the references to the environment, especially flora, within the otherwise heterogeneous selection of Calvino's Japanese books: the attention to detail and the reciprocal interaction between human and other-than-human beings. In particular, authors rarely fail to focus on precise taxonomies or sensorial characteristics of the botanic world, as if only by drawing near the specificities of certain environments with rigour could we glimpse the possibility of a mutual influence between vegetal and human forms. Significantly, the two Japanese Nobel Prize winners, Kawabata Yasunari and Ōe Kenzaburō, offer diverse examples of the same inclination towards detailed descriptions. Kawabata's *The Old Capital* (1962) is riddled with violets, maples, moss, cherry trees, irises, water lilies, pine trees, cypresses, bamboo, weeping willows, cinnamon trees, plane trees, larches, firs, tulips, azaleas, peonies, camphor trees, cedar trees, chrysanthemums, and honeysuckles.⁴³ In *Thousand Cranes* (1952) and *The Lake* (1954), by the same author, there are also, respectively: pomegranates, roses, carnations, bluebells, and oleanders; pine trees, ginkgoes, and wild cherry blossoms.⁴⁴ Tsukimura Reiko cautions that what may seem merely lyrical is in fact a revelation of life in Kawabata: 'nature works as a consolation which allows us to see beauty in sorrow. Our perception of "the fate of plants" is a barometer of our capacity for sympathy, which testifies to our being genuinely alive' (1968: 25). Drawing on the Japanese construction of *mono no aware* (sensitivity to things), Kawabata indulges in his descriptions of nature as a means of triggering an intense awareness of life, in his characters and his readers alike.

In Cornyetz's analysis of different forms of 'aestheticism', Kawabata's 'cultured' reinvention of the real, in the light of a supposedly spiritual Japanese superiority, encompasses nature in the form not only of plants, flowers, and trees, but also female bodies (2007). The construction of so-called natural aesthetics in his texts involves a deliberate transformation of objects and women into images mirroring the author's own ideal of pleasure. Indeed, in Kawabata's novels, women are often contemplated through glass and mirrors, fetishised, distanced, and described as unattainable for the sake of sheer masculine sensual fulfilment. In her political and psychoanalytical study of Kawabata, Cornyetz attributes to his works a 'complex eroticism that is at once distanced or disinterested, yet also incorporates an experiential-sensual dimension inscribed on female bodies as well as other objects' (2007: 49). Particularly in books such as *Snow Country* (1948) and *House of the Sleeping Beauties* (1961), descriptions do not differentiate between virginal beauties, natural elements, and art objects. *Snow Country* recounts the winter sojourns of *connoisseur* Shimamura in a hotel in the mountains and his erotic dalliance with a *maiko*, Komako, whose beauty is constantly praised throughout the novel (Kawabata 1960: 15; 45). Even more significantly, *House of the Sleeping Beauties* revolves around an old man, Eguchi, who spends his nights in a pleasure house where he is only allowed to sleep close to narcotised virgins and to desire their bodies at a distance. As Matsuura Hisaki maintains, 'when Kawabata Yasunari gazes intently at human beings it is the same gaze with which he gazes intently at antique curios [...]; all that

is needed is the object-as-fetish for his gaze to uninhibitedly and uni-directionally fondle' (1992: 270). Calvino deploys a stylisation of Kawabata's positional sexism in his Japanese chapter, but such a unidirectional approach to gender, as seen above, is in fact subverted from within.

On the other side of the Japanese canon, Ōe Kenzaburō, more politically progressive and stylistically innovative than his predecessor, is himself an avid amateur botanist, whose writing similarly abounds with natural images.⁴⁵ Among his main interests there is the examination of human beings caught in existential situations, as well as the fear of possible deracination by nuclear holocaust, and he constantly utilises analytical natural references to represent such forms of disorientation and madness. In *A Personal Matter* (1964), for example, the protagonist rides a bike in a state of utter confusion occasioned by learning that his son has just been born with a defective cranial bone structure, and the ginkgo trees that he encounters are exhaustively described with the aim of reflecting the character's anguish: 'thick and dark with leaves' and with 'black trunks supporting deep oceans of green' (Ōe 1969: 21–22). As the scene proceeds, the reader is also confronted with the second distinguishing feature of interest for this analysis — the narrativisation of the web of interdependencies discussed above in the light of Shintō and Buddhism.

The main character of Ōe's *A Personal Matter*, Bird, feels 'threatened by the trees' (1969: 22), as if they were properly living and agentive beings as much as himself. This form of defamiliarisation, which Ōe borrows from Rabelaisian grotesque realism, characterises many of his works, and it recurs often in other Japanese books in Calvino's library.⁴⁶ In Kawabata's *The Old Capital*, for example, Chieko 'sometimes [...] was moved by the "life" of the violets on the tree. Other times their "loneliness" touched her heart' (Kawabata 1987a: 3). But vegetal life is not the only referent in this mechanism of interaction. Natsume Sōseki achieves a peculiar form of 'dehumanisation of art' in *I Am a Cat* (1906), by describing the life of a domestic environment 'with the aloofness, indifference, and irony of a pet cat' (Odin 2001: 244).⁴⁷ Sōseki became a writer best known to the average Japanese because *I Am a Cat* was included in the public-school reader (Hane 2013: 93). Many generations of Japanese people thus became acquainted not only with a vivid description of the mundane universe of human interactions, but also with the hypothetical intersection of the latter with plausible non-human perspectives. One of the haiku collected by Iarocci also revolves around a similar cross-species interaction:

Un essere nato uomo
e un altro nato gatto
camminano insieme,
per la via rugiadosa
(Shūson Katō in Iarocci 2014: 28)

[A being born man
and another being born cat
walk together,
along the dewy path]

Another poem of the same collection, by Sōseki himself, plainly envisages a future

life in the guise of a violet:

Poter rinascere!
Piccolo...
Pari a violetta!
(Natsume Sōseki in Iarocci 2014: 59)

To be born again!
Small...
Like a violet!

The dynamic exchange between human and other-than-human beings generates, quite consistently, their mutual identification. To return to Kawabata, in *The Old Capital* the fate of twins Chieko and Naoko is mirrored by two 'violets growing in the two hollows of the great maple' (Kawabata 1987a: 88), whose contact seems improbable but is in fact not impossible. In *Beauty and Sadness* (1964), a woman empathises with the rain and compares it with tears, an old lady even identifies herself with the rain, and a metalinguistic passage deals with the habit in the Kansai language of referring to natural elements with honorary titles.⁴⁸ Most of all, *Snow Country* is riddled with flow dynamics which result, in the final pages, in a suggestive scene where the Milky Way takes on a human quality (Kawabata 1960: 134). Not only does Kawabata describe 'the actual circumstances of human beings as figuratively and psychologically corresponding to the beautiful scenes' of nature through this parallel (Akiyama 1989: 197), but its intertwining of human and natural destinies can even point to a sort of mystical communion.⁴⁹ The distinctive elaboration of the holistic experience, in Kawabata's case, aims to overturn human/other-than-human dualities in view of a form of cultured aestheticism.

An aesthetic holism of sorts can also be identified in Japanese poetry. In his 'Lectures on Zen Buddhism', Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki refers to different poetic reactions to a flower seen in the wild by English poet Alfred Tennyson, on one hand, and by Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō, on the other (1960: 2–4).⁵⁰ Tennyson needs to pick the flower to understand 'God and man'; and by his *having* it, he destroys the flower. By way of contrast, Bashō wants to *see*, not merely look at the flower, but also 'to be at one, to "one" himself with it — and to let it live' (Suzuki's parallel is discussed in Fromm 1978: 17). Although these are but two specific examples, by no means representative of a supposedly 'English' or 'Japanese' way of writing nature poems, it is often true that Japanese poetic expressions, where a distinctive attention to details originates a sense of union between subject and environment, tend to reflect the Shintō and Buddhist interconnection of things that has much in common with Heideggerian *aletheia* (the way the world discloses its meaning via a holistic structure). Moreover, in that particular form of poetry that is Japanese haiku, ideograms evoke images even just by means of their layout, with words and things undergoing a continuous semantic exchange, as we will see in the next chapter. Even if Calvino only became acquainted with a number of Italian translations of haiku, it is possible to speculate that one of the reasons behind his appreciation of Japanese poetry's relationship with nature, as above, lies precisely in his awareness of the interconnectedness of things and events that haiku represents,

which Zanzotto also highlighted in his introduction to the collection *Cento haiku* (2014: 9–10).

Kawabata's and Bashō's works constitute — it is important to reiterate — only two facets of an extremely rich and diverse literary tradition, where a similar integrated approach to nature can of course lead to completely different outcomes. To take a very distant example, Abe Kōbō's output often conveys, via human/vegetal metamorphoses, the 'evaporation of the self-subject' (Guest 2004: 172). Abe's early surrealist stories recurrently tell of physical transformation of man into some other, mainly vegetal forms.⁵¹ The peculiar 'surreality in which subject and object continually infuse each other' progressively passes into images and perspectival games that, while not necessarily implying metamorphic changes, do not cease to interrogate the porous relation between humanity and what surrounds it (Guest 2004: 168). Among these images, there is the Möbius strip in *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962), a symbol of the main protagonist's own story: Jumpei is an entomologist who is suddenly trapped in a village stuck in the sand, as if he was an insect himself. In *The Face of Another* (1964), a mask is tasked with the impossible reconstruction of a broken balance between subject as self-affirming rationality and the public gaze.⁵² And, in *The Ruined Map* (1967), a similar overturning of conditions is actualised when the detective on which the story focuses becomes the man he himself is looking for. Finally, in Abe's *The Box Man* (1973), the box the main character decides to inhabit appears as a metaphor for a unidirectional view of the Other, thus for photography and writing, but the very fragmentation of the self the absurd plot points to is enhanced by the representation of the permeability between self and environment, by means of surreal perspectival games (Abe 2001: 150–51).⁵³

Japanese literary critic Karatani Kojin once observed that the Japanese never needed deconstruction because they never had a centred subject to begin with (Jameson 1993: XIII). This statement, albeit provocative and vaguely simplistic, sheds some light on the relationship to the environment of many of the Japanese writers Calvino had the opportunity to read, despite their peculiarities and distinctions. In such a relationship, the human subject does not impose its centrality, but is rather committed to describing in detail the surrounding environment as both 'other' and 'self', and to illuminating its own human condition by making the interwoven human/non-human relation emerge. After all, if Japanese cultural expressions are often characterised by a 'subjectivation of the environment' and a parallel 'environmentalisation of the subject', as naturalist Imanishi Kinji once said (Berque 2017: 21), then the interconnection of humans and other beings can be identified as the main feature towards which Calvino is drawn, and which he subsequently re-elaborates in his own terms.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. For a detailed analysis of Calvino's botanical language in *Il barone rampante*, see Dellacasa (2019).
2. *Marcovaldo* has been read through ecocritical lenses, often with a specific focus on the animals populating the book, by Ross (2003), Sanna (2016), Matiassi Cantarin and Marino (2018), and Iovino (2018; 2021; 2023).
3. For a discussion of *La speculazione edilizia* in the light of the coeval thickening of 'the Anthropocene's lithic stratum', see Iovino (2018: 71–73) and Seger (2015: 24–40).
4. *Palomar's* animals have been discussed in depth by Fitzgerald (1994), Bolongaro (2009), and Rohman (2009).
5. I draw this stratigraphy from Iovino (2023: 22–24).
6. The Anthropocene has generated an almost incalculable number of alternative definitions, and for this reason one of them is the 'Neologismcene' (Mentz 2019: 57–64). Among these alternatives, I subscribe to Jason W. Moore's 'Capitalocene' (2015; 2016), which insists on the world-ecological responsibilities of capitalism and imperialism. Valuable discussions have also been raised by Anna Tsing's 'Plantationocene' (2015), Donna Haraway's 'Chthulucene' (2016), and Marco Armiero's 'Wasteocene' (2021). As far as chronology is concerned, 'proposals for marking the start of the Anthropocene include an "early Anthropocene" beginning with the spread of agriculture and deforestation; the Columbian Exchange of Old World and New World species; the Industrial Revolution at ≈1800 CE; and the mid-20th century "Great Acceleration" of population growth and industrialization' (Waters and others 2016: 137).
7. In Foucault's view, 'the garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity' (1986: 26).
8. Karen Barad has developed the idea of an 'ethics of entanglement' where quantum physics meets material ecocriticism (2007). 'Natureculture' is Donna Haraway's conceptualisation of the inseparability of nature and culture in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed (2003: 1–5). See Serpil Oppermann's work for a posthumanist and feminist contextualisation of 'relational ontology' (2013). Finally, it is worth specifying that Cartesianism has become a perhaps reductive but useful shorthand for hierarchical dichotomisations at the foundation of human domination and exploitation of the environment, above all the nature/culture dichotomy (see Moore 2015).
9. Antonello identifies in 'Dall'opaco' (1971) Calvino's most recognisable adoption of a monistic philosophical perspective (1998: 121), which I fully endorse, although I prefer to talk in terms of holism, rather than monism. For a reappraisal of corporeality and embodiment in Calvino's oeuvre, see Baldi (2020) and Beltrami (2021).
10. For a 'posthumanising' reading of Calvino, see Iovino (2014).
11. See EP, 249.
12. Paola Govoni reminds us that the environment in which Italo was brought up did not envisage any friction between scientific and non-scientific cultures (2012: 548), and yet Calvino reinforced the alleged separation between the so-called 'two cultures', by defining himself the 'pecora nera' [black sheep] of his family (EP, 18), in order to distance himself from his parents' generation (Govoni 2012: 550).
13. Mario Calvino's studies on subtropical agriculture were in line with the colonial and imperial expansionism of the Fascist regime, towards which he contributed by co-writing the book *Nuovi orizzonti agricoli della Libia*, published under the auspices of the Istituto Coloniale Fascista (Govoni 2012: 562).
14. 'The term "deep ecology" was coined by the Norwegian sceptical philosopher and eco-activist, Arne Naess (1912–2009). The deep ecology movement was carried forward by the US sociologist, Bill Devall (1938–2009), and philosopher George Sessions (1938–2016)' (Seed 2019: 147). It refers to 'an egalitarian and holistic environmental philosophy founded on phenomenological methodology', recognising 'the equal intrinsic worth of all beings as well as one's own ecological interconnectedness with the lifeworld in all its plenitude' (Keller 2008: 206).
15. For a clear analysis of Bruno Latour's work on the notion of distributed agency, see Crowley (2022: 47–88).

16. While Kerstin Pilz reflects on human alienation in Calvino's social realist fictions and novels of fantasy (2005: 193–94), Iovino shifts the focus towards the alienness and alienation of animals (2023: 66), which nonetheless runs parallel and often symbolises the alienation of human characters such as Marcovaldo (2018: 75).
17. For a discussion of the conceptual antecedents of the Anthropocene within Eurocentric and colonial understandings of modernity inherited from the European Enlightenment, see Simpson (2020: 55). However, as Giulia Pacini points out, 'contrary to other scholars of his time, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who became notorious for their representation of the Enlightenment as a monolithic and violent project bent on establishing man's mastery over nature, Calvino evoked the worlds of Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint Pierre, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Denis Diderot, as he celebrated a culture that called for the protection of forests and sometimes even conceived of the intrinsic value of trees' (2014: 57). After all, Calvino himself defined the Enlightenment as a 'giungla di contraddizioni insanabili' [jungle of irreconcilable contradictions] in an interview with Ferdinando Camon (1973: 199).
18. Calvino's interest in the question of the animal was recognised immediately after the publication of his first short stories and has raised significant critical attention since then. Falqui, for example, notices Calvino's 'compiacimento [...] per quanto di stregato trapela negli animali e di animalesco negli uomini' [satisfaction at recognising the enchanted side of animals and the animal side of human beings] already in *Ultimo viene il corvo* (1961: 197). The representation of the animal in *Il visconte dimezzato* is appreciated by Cecchi as far as its gothic traits are concerned (1959: 310–13), and by Banti in its closeness to Walt Disney's cartoons (1952: 75–76). For more recent investigations on this subject, see Schneider (1981; 1989), Ferretti (1989), Dini (2002), Ross (2003), Bolongaro (2009), Iovino (2011; 2021; 2023), Piana (2013), and Baldi (2019; 2023).
19. Rob Nixon defines Anthropocenic violence as a 'slow violence' that 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (2011: 2).
20. See Gioanola (1988) and Baldi (2020: 129–70) for discussions of Calvino's works in relation to the fantastic genre.
21. See, in particular, Jane Bennett's notion of distributed agency (2010) and Stacy Alaimo's 'transcorporeality' (2010).
22. For an analysis of how material ecocriticism meets mysticism in ecomysticism, see Tagnani (2017).
23. Rushing similarly reads *Le cosmicomiche* as 'stories about our impossible relationship to a desire that is always founded on loss' (2006: 47).
24. In his discussion of *Le cosmicomiche* in relation to science fiction, Baldi remarks that 'what distinguishes Calvino's tales from much science fiction is that he projects [a] sense of discovery onto the earth itself, often seeking the other and the alien on our world, not necessarily far out in space' (Baldi 2016: 51). Moreover, Calvino experiments 'with the form of his characters, which are human despite their inhuman appearance' (Baldi 2016: 52).
25. Marzia Beltrami convincingly argues that Calvino's 'most abstract and cerebral ideas [...] are ultimately rooted in embodied experience' (2023: 221). In acknowledging the pertinence of a critical reading that brings together Calvino's intellectual abstraction and his engagement with reality, I maintain that his corporeal experience of Japanese gardens is particularly significant as it is overtly thematised in his travelogues, rather than implicitly re-elaborated — again in continuity with earlier texts such as 'La strada di San Giovanni' or 'Dall'opaco'.
26. Among the many scientific discourses Calvino was interested in, cybernetics and information science occupy a prominent position. In her analysis of '*Le città invisibili* as Cybertext and Cyberspace', Eleonora Lima reminds us that cybernetic literature is specifically characterised by 'the antinomic relation between mathematical constraint and open structure, chaotic multiplication and geometric selectivity' (2023: 194).
27. In my article 'Zen as Everyday Praxis: A Way Out of Italo Calvino's Neurosis', I highlight the crucial role of Zen in indicating a way out of such a tension previously identified by several critics, such as Markey (1983), Hume (1992b: 177), Sbragia (1993: 284), Raffa (1996: 400), Re (1998: 133), Pedriali (1998: 60), Ricciardi (1999: 1068), and Burns (2000: 993).

28. I am talking here in terms of complexity of science, but it would be even more appropriate to refer to the science of complexity, whose image of a 'universe of participation' re-evaluated Lucretius's atomism as a model for reconciling deterministic and indeterministic processes, as well as order and disorder (Pilz 2005: 208). Calvino reviewed in *la Repubblica* (3 May 1980) Ilya Prigogine's and Isabelle Stengers's *The New Alliance*, a pivotal text in the science of complexity (S, 2038–44).
29. With regards to Calvino's attitude towards erotic themes, love, and desire, see also de Lauretis (1987), Ferroni (1998), Gabriele (1994), Rushing (2006), and Baldi (2012).
30. The attention devoted to the autonomous experience of the disciple rather than to verbal instruction is typically Zen (see RR2, 809; 811; 812). Suzuki states that 'experience [...] counts much more in Buddhism than its teaching' (1980: 90). While referred to religious experience, thus to something different from what is described in Calvino's chapter, this element throws an interesting light on the figure of Mr Okeda.
31. Tommasina Gabriele has demonstrated that Calvino has only reluctantly represented eros in his texts, mainly due to his linguistic concerns about a generally abused and deteriorated lexicon (1994). In the essay 'Il sesso e il riso', Calvino advocates for a mimetic exorcism that, through the minor confusion caused by laughter, can control the absolute confusion incited by sex (S, 262).
32. For an analysis of the kinesics (the study of body movements and gestures as forms of non-verbal communication) involved in 'Il seno nudo', see Barrado (2003).
33. See 'Rapidità' (S, 672), 'Esattezza' (S, 692–94), 'Notizia su Giorgio Manganelli' (S, 1156), 'Marianne Moore' (S, 1348), 'Francis Ponge' (S, 1401–07), 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto' (S, 1873), 'Lo sguardo di Palomar' (SNiA 561), 'La ricchezza degli oggetti' (SNiA, 581–82), 'Il mondo non è un libro, ma leggiamolo lo stesso' (SNiA, 611), 'Il silenzio ha ragioni che la parola non conosce' (SNiA, 623), and 'I quaderni degli esercizi' (SNiA, 640).
34. For a historical summary of Orientalist approaches to the study of Japan, see Minear (1980).
35. For a detailed analysis of Shintō, see Balmas (2018); for Japanese Buddhism, see Tollini (2018). Balmas proposes to identify in Zen the ultimate synthesis of Indian Buddhism and Japanese Shintō, based on a shared profound relation with nature (2018: 606). See Kalland for an analysis of the continuity between Shintō's view of supernatural power (*kami*) residing 'in anything which gives a person a feeling of awe', and Buddhism, according to which everything has Buddha nature and all creatures are on the same level (1995: 246–47). For some memorable pages about the reverence towards nature in Shintō, see also Maraini (2000: 23–27).
36. With reference to Nishida, see Kyburz (1997: 258); as far as Watsuji is concerned, see Berque (1994: 1998; 2004), Befu (1997), and Carter and McCarthy (2019).
37. See also Kalland (2005) and Rambelli (2001).
38. The Zen garden is a good example of what Michael Pollan defines a 'mid-space': within this space, the gardener 'doesn't feel that by virtue of the fact that he changes nature he is somehow outside of it. He looks around and sees that human hopes and desires are by now part and parcel of the landscape' (1991: 194).
39. For a compelling reading of Calvino's work as composing a 'geo-poetics', or a 'petriverse', see Harris (2023).
40. Kyburz reminds us that the Chinese world view rests on the same assumption, as further proof that many of the characteristics here discussed are far from characterising Japan exclusively (1997: 258).
41. The most complete description of this poetical metaphor is in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, one of the fundamental sūtras of Mahāyāna Buddhism.
42. As Suler explains, 'the ability to "decenter" from the organizing principles of one's own subjective world, to attain a "decentered self awareness" of the cognitive-affective schemata that constitute self structure', opens the scope of 'empathic immersion into another person's self experience' (1995: 410).
43. *The Old Capital* is the story of two twin sisters (Chieko and Naeko) separated after their birth, who progressively reconstruct an affective and existential connection.
44. *Thousand Cranes* explores the protagonist Kikuji's relationships with several women, partly linked to his father's past. *The Lake* reconstructs fragmentarily the sentimental past and present of Ginpei Momoi.

45. I am here referring to an opposition between Ōe and Kawabata since, in an interview with Yoshida Sanroku released on 7 June 1986, Ōe declared openly his antipathy for such people as Kawabata Yasunari or Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, towards which he used to feel antagonistic, especially in his early years as a writer (Yoshida 1988: 397). For an introduction to Ōe's style and themes, see Yoshida (1995); Riggan (2002: 5) refers to Ōe's botanical interests; Sakurai (1984: 371) discusses Ōe's use of natural images, especially in his early years.
46. For Ōe's use of defamiliarisation, in continuity with Rabelais, see Yoshida (1985: 83–84).
47. I refer to the concept of 'dehumanisation of art' as discussed by Ortega y Gasset (1948).
48. *Beauty and Sadness* tells the story of the long-lasting but unattainable love between writer Oki and artist Otoko, interlaced with the sexual and sentimental desires of peripheral female characters.
49. The view of a mystical communion at the end of *Snow Country* is also advanced by Phillips, who points out that many of Kawabata's novels end with uncanny apparitions of stars and celestial bodies (2006: 427).
50. Tennyson's poem reads: 'Flower in a crannied wall, | I pluck you out of the crannies, | I hold you here, root and all, in my hand, | Little flower — but if I could understand | What you are, root and all, and all in all, | I should know what God and man is'. Bashō's haiku, in its English translation, runs like this: 'When I look carefully | I see the nazuna blooming | By the hedge!'.¹
51. Yamamoto separates Abe's early works into two groups: one in which transformation is an 'active force allowing man to start a new life style' ('The Flood', 1950; 'The Magical Chalk', 1950; 'The Life of a Poet', 1951); and a second one where transformation is a 'negative force which is destructive of the human psyche' ('Dendrocalia', 1949; 'A Red Cocoon', 1950; *The Wall* — *Mr. S. Karuma's Crime*, 1951; 'A Stick', 1955) (1980: 174).
52. See Persiani for a Lacanian reading of *The Face of Another*, specifically focused on the corporeality of body and mask (2001).
53. On the permeability between self and environment, see Hock Soon Ng (2009: 317).

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