

CHAPTER 2



Calvino's Semiotic Journey through Japan: Between Language(s) and Silence

More open, the mind discerns, instead of an antiquated teleology, the truth
that silence alone does not betray

— GEORGES BATAILLE, *The Accursed Share*

In the previous chapter, we charted the evolving relationship between human rationality and other-than-human forms of life in Calvino's fiction and essays. This chapter will shift focus onto the linguistic medium as a specific expression of that relationship. Two theoretical provisos, before embarking on this second line of inquiry. First, while we will discuss texts written by human beings (mainly by a human being called Italo Calvino), through pages typed by human hands and thought by a human mind, the perhaps paradoxical aim of this discussion is the appreciation of the non-exceptionality of human language. In pursuit of this aim, we will follow the theoretical framework of biosemiotics, connecting Charles Sanders Peirce's view of the universe as 'perfused with signs' (1931–58: 489) and Jakob von Uexküll's theory of the *Umwelt*, where the latter represents the environment holding significance for any specific living being.¹ According to this conceptual scaffolding, *Homo sapiens* is the most semiotically free creature to have evolved so far, but this evolution has emerged and is still dependent on other strata of varying biosemiotic complexity. In other words (quite literally), human language occupies an advanced position within a continuum encompassing an incalculable multiplicity of animal, vegetable, and other languages, whose richness has undoubtedly attracted Calvino, including in his various reflections on his Japanese travels.

Second, to talk about language as an 'expression' of human and more-than-human intelligence implies both a discursive and a material meaning. Human beings express themselves (they talk, write, sing, or cry) in much the same ways as their bodies, and the bodies of any other organic or inorganic being, express matter (by emitting, exuding, expelling, or wringing it out). The productive parallel between meaning and matter is at the core of material ecocriticism, for which all matter is 'storied matter', in the related senses that it is layered and the bearer of narrative (Iovino and Oppermann 2014: 1). In Japan, Calvino more than once compares

gardens to poems, advancing a view of human linguistic creativity on a continuum including non-verbal expressivity. Biosemiotics and material ecocriticism will guide us through the analysis of this and similar reflections, further exploring certain threads unravelled in the previous chapter. While we sought to individuate there a possible harmony between different forms of life, here we will interrogate silence as a 'degree zero' of expression, potentially able to subsume different forms of language, and in turn preparing the following chapter's focus on the structural relevance of void in Calvino's work.

Roberto Marchesini reminds us that 'every culture is the outcome of a process of hybridization with an otherness' — this otherness usually coinciding with 'nature' (2002: 15). Even more radically, once we start appreciating every environment as rich in signs, we also understand every space as being always both natural and cultural, and 'culture' as the way 'nature' has evolved in human beings, while producing as many systems of signs ('semiospheres', or indeed 'naturecultures') as there are forms of life in the world.² Humans can best acquire familiarity with the heterogeneous world in which they occur when embracing 'a perceptive and conceptual horizon made of silence, of hearing, of observing' (Iovino 2014: 222). This is why Calvino's experience in Japan, where silence represents an integral part of many material and conceptual spaces, offers a solid bedrock for a broader investigation of his evolving posthumanism. Japanese cultural expressions are not more ontologically connected to the natural environment than any other manifestation of human culture. What they have to offer (and what Calvino promptly senses) is a remarkable epistemological openness towards other-than-human forms of life and communication, in which context silence plays a fundamental role.

Following Paul Ricœur's *Rule of Metaphor* (1975), 'metaphor, a figure of speech, presents in an *open* fashion, by means of a conflict *between* identity and difference, the process that, in a *covert* manner, generates semantic grids by fusion of differences *within* identity' (Ricœur 2003: 252). The creative encounter between identity and difference is at stake both when we consider the dynamics that generate verbal communication against silence (or meaning against white noise), and when, among the diverse languages and signs developed by human cultures, we pit a specific tradition against another. With this awareness in mind, in the last section of this chapter we will investigate different metaphors through which Japanese literature has replicated in culture and language the creativity of nature and silence. Calvino's exposure to such metaphors is key, because 'Allo scrittore [...] può accadere d'esplorare zone che nessuno ha esplorato prima, dentro di sé o fuori; di fare scoperte che prima o poi risulteranno campi essenziali per la consapevolezza collettiva' (S, 359) [The writer may happen to explore areas that no one has explored before, within himself or outside, and to make discoveries that sooner or later turn out to be vital areas of collective awareness (Calvino 1986: 98)]. Among these vital areas, scrutinised not least by exploring Japanese culture, we can identify Calvino's renewed openness to non-human languages and to the expressiveness of silence.

2.1. Calvino's Silences and the Languages of Other Beings

Calvino's work has been constantly flanked by margins of silence, swinging 'between fluency and writer's block' (McLaughlin 1996: 79). If we delve into the books that patiently emerged from this oscillation, we notice that the earliest narratives display a certain confidence in human language, in opposition to surrounding silence. As time goes by, Calvino gradually opens towards an integration of non-Western and non-human forms of communication, often recognisable beneath a progressive acceptance of the value of silence in the works that more distinctly bear the mark of some contact with or interest in Asian cultures: an imaginative Mongol empire in *Le città invisibili*; Taoism in *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1973); and Japan in *Collezione di sabbia* and *Palomar*.³

In particular, the relevance of Calvino's experience in Japan lies in its gesture towards the co-presence of diverse forms of existence and communication, which anthropocentrism and logocentrism usually overshadow. Japanese natureculture triggers such a realisation in Calvino, both through the estranging exoticism that reactivates his 'lettura visiva del mondo' (S, 566) [visual reading of the world (Calvino 2013a: 154)], as well as in terms of the importance that both Buddhist meditation and Japanese literary tradition devote to alternative forms of communication, most notably to silence as the bearer of meanings that common language cannot express. In a mature book like *Palomar*, Calvino demonstrates a renewed, distinctive mastery of language. Here he subsumes the acquaintance with non-human forms of communication under the awareness of the centrality of silence in any linguistic act, towards a radical embracing of silence itself, which is no longer just reflected upon, but also practiced to its ultimate consequences in the finale of the book. Silence thus changes its configuration in Calvino's works, shifting from a merely narrative function to a poetic and philosophical depth, and turning its relative status (silence as opposed to language) into an absolute relevance (silence as language), which results in a Zen-like overcoming of verbal conceptuality *tout court*.

2.1.1. *Stepping Stones towards Speaking the Unspeakable*

If we follow Calvino and his father along 'La strada di San Giovanni', we realise that their relationship with the natural environment represents a door opened on language.⁴ Or rather, on languages. In fact, in describing this door opening, Italo recognises a fundamental difference between his own and his father Mario's attitude towards the world, as well as the words needed to decipher it:

mio padre [...] del mondo vedeva solo le piante e ciò che aveva attinenza con le piante, e di ogni pianta diceva ad alta voce il nome, nel latino assurdo dei botanici, [...] e il nome volgare, se ce n'era uno, in spagnolo o in inglese o nel nostro dialetto, e in questo nominare le piante metteva la passione di dar fondo a un universo senza fine [...]. Capite come le nostre strade divergevano, quella di mio padre e la mia. Ma anch'io, cos'era la strada che cercavo se non la stessa di mio padre scavata nel folto d'un'altra estraneità, nel sopramondo (o inferno) umano, [...] la pagina da voltare che immette in un mondo dove tutte le parole e le figure diventassero vere, presenti, esperienza mia. (RR3, 9–11)

[The only things he saw in the world were plants and whatever had to do with plants, and he would say all their names out loud, in the absurd Latin botanists use, [...] and their popular names, too, if they had them, in Spanish or in English or in our local dialect, and into this naming of plants he would put all his passion for exploring a universe without end [...]. You see how our roads diverged, my father's and my own. Though I was like him in a way. For what was the road I sought if not a repeat of my father's, but dug out of the depths of another otherness, the upperworld (or hell) of humanity, [...] the page to turn that leads into a world where all words and shapes become real, present, my own experience. (Calvino 1993b: 7–10)]

While Mario Calvino adheres with indisputable confidence to the language of botanical taxonomy and inhabits securely the space of scientific rationalism, Italo carves out for himself the possibility of a distance, of a re-elaboration of the same paternal curiosity for the surrounding world that reclaims, in his case, a higher degree of independence, both imaginative and linguistic. Science will remain part of this movement of inventive spacing, as we have already seen, but only insofar as it will allow Italo to play with scientific knowledge itself and, if necessary, even challenge its rigid coordinates.

I am thus sceptical of a reductive reading of Calvino's use of botanical (and scientific) language as characterising his narrative output evenly. In encountering specific taxonomies in many of Calvino's texts, the reader should be urged each time to question their significance, which cannot be limited to an unconditional celebration of the protean lavishness of nature and denunciation of its endangered status. When Calvino resorts in his books to the technical definitions of plants his parents would have used, it is usually to convey a friction that we should interrogate less superficially than is usually done.⁵ For example, in *La speculazione edilizia*, the reference to the botanical denomination of the 'miosotis' (RR1, 827), as opposed to the vulgar name 'nontiscordardimé', does not simply represent a disinterested focus on the unicity and specificity of that plant, as Miriam Aloisio suggests, adding that it would encourage an observation of nature as it is, in contrast with real estate's utilitarian approach to space (2017: 171).

This reference to a plant through its Latin name is far from constituting an observation of nature *as it is*. Rather, it colludes with a rationalistic logic that uses language as a tool for dominating nature and forcing it into purely human structures — the agrilogistics discussed in the previous chapter. In doing so, the scientist who imposes Linnean taxonomies onto plants occupies, *bona fide*, the same spectrum whose more radical and violent end accommodates property speculators. It is perhaps not by chance that Calvino, while using the plant's Latin name, actually misspells it ('miosotis' instead of 'Myosotis'), and elsewhere invents botanical denominations to obviate the lack of knowledge caused by a symbolic separation from his familiar upbringing:

bastava un brandello di giornale calpestato che mi finiva tra i piedi [...] e già la mia mente aveva preso il galoppo, la catena delle immagini non si sarebbe fermata per ore e ore mentre continuavo a seguire in silenzio mio padre, che additava certe foglie di là da un muro e diceva: 'Ypotoglaxia jasminifolia' (ora

invento dei nomi; quelli veri non li ho mai imparati), 'Photophila wolfoides' diceva, (sto inventando; erano nomi di questo genere) [...]. (RR3, 12)

[all it took was for a scrap of trampled newspaper to find its way beneath my feet [...] and already my mind would be racing off, the sequence of images would go on for hours and hours as I walked silently behind my father, who might point to some leaves on the other side of a wall and say, 'Ypotoglaxia jasminifolia' (I'm inventing the names; I never learned the real ones), 'Photophila wolfoides', he would say (I'm inventing; they were names of this sort) [...]. (Calvino 1993b: 12)]

While letting the reader ponder the potential oppressiveness of scientific language (and scientific rationalism), Calvino also paves the way, by misspelling or inventing Latin names, towards an original re-elaboration of science. Taxonomic detail will certainly have freedom of movement within this productive elaboration, but always in a context that pursues new expressive avenues, since 'la battaglia della letteratura è appunto uno sforzo per uscire fuori dai confini del linguaggio' (S, 217) [the struggle of literature is in fact a struggle to escape from the confines of language (Calvino 1986: 18)].

It can be said that Mario Calvino opts for a Cartesian, rationalist involvement in the scientific method: even when acting directly on the environment for the sake of its healthy functioning, he follows logical agronomic principles and aims to spread fundamentals of a technical education that is traditionally humanist.⁶ Italo, on the contrary, disturbs this method from within and, even in his apparently abstract literary practice, moves in the direction of an imaginative elaboration of science and posthuman dialogues — in a relationship with nature that, mediated through literature, is capable of 'restitu[ire] significato a tutto' (RR3, 25) [restoring meaning to everything (Calvino 1993b: 33)]. In *Le cosmicomiche*, in particular, he accounts for the paradoxical existence of human language and theories before the existence of the human altogether. Calvino opens the introduction to *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche* (1968) as follows:

La scienza contemporanea non ci dà più immagini da rappresentare; il mondo che ci apre è al di là d'ogni possibile immagine. Eppure, al profano che legge libri scientifici [...], ogni tanto una frase risveglia un'immagine. Ho provato a segnarne qualcuna, e a svilupparla in un racconto: in uno speciale tipo di racconto 'cosmicomico'. (RR2, 1300)

[Contemporary science no longer gives us images we can represent: the world it opens up to us is beyond any possible image. And yet, for the lay person who reads scientific books [...], every so often a phrase evokes an image. I tried to note some of these down, and to develop them into stories: into a special kind of 'cosmicomic' story.]

This sounds like a manifesto for Calvino's own scientific and linguistic experiments, grounded in the fundamental interaction between science and imagination well beyond the cosmicomic boundaries.

A book like *Il barone rampante*, with its fifty-nine botanical and seventy-eight animal species, navigates the threshold between Mario's and Italo's approaches to science. Its abundant taxonomic variety finds its justification in the historical setting

during the Enlightenment: the age of instrumental utilitarianism and positivism to which Linnaeus's applied science, followed closely by Mario Calvino, belongs with full rights; but also, the historical and conceptual movement from which Italo gradually and creatively distances himself. *Il barone rampante* also allows us to shift our attention from linguistic issues to the value of silence, which is usually referred to, in this book, in opposition to sounds or noises that counter-define it. Silence tends to acquire here a concrete substance, by means of the range of swishes, coughs, chirps, and cracks that interrupt it (RR1, 620); D'Ondariva's garden (the garden of Viola, the female character Cosimo falls in love with) is indeed characterised by a 'different silence', which really amounts to a different set of noises (RR1, 594–95).

Similarly, in 'L'avventura di un poeta', in the collection *Gli amori difficili*, different kinds of silences are distinguished on the basis of the vegetal rustling, the calls of birds, or the sudden whirrs of wings that circumscribe them (RR2, 1166). If the human/nature divide is still fully operative in the Enlightenment horizon of the baron in the trees, 'L'avventura di un poeta' upsets this separation by virtue of the aesthetic experience it describes. McLaughlin emphasises that 'in the first half of the story the poet utters only stammering, incoherent sounds', and 'when to the splendour of nature is added the naked magnificence of [his lover's] body as she swims in the cavern, his stammerings are reduced to total silence' (1998: 72). Silence then acts as an 'unspeakable' beyond concepts, a function it performs in Kantianism as much as in Buddhism (Morton 2015: 200):

Per lui, essere innamorato di Delia era stato sempre così, come nello specchio di questa grotta: essere entrato in un mondo al di là della parola. [...] Capiva che quel che ora la vita dava a lui era qualcosa che non a tutti è dato di fissare a occhi aperti, come il cuore più abbagliante del sole. E nel cuore di questo sole era silenzio. (RR2, 1168–69)

[For him, being in love with Delia had always been like this, as in the mirror of this cavern: in a world beyond words. [...] He understood that what life was now giving him was something not everyone has the privilege of looking at open-eyed, as if at the most dazzling core of the sun. And in the core of this sun was silence. (Calvino 1984b: 286–87)]

By describing as best as he can the experience of beauty, Calvino sketches the role of the unspeakable he will later reflect upon while visiting Japanese temples, where it will acquire a considerably richer philosophical profile, in comparison to the pragmatic modality typically framing silence in his early works.

Indeed, in Calvino's earliest short stories, characterised by resistance or ludic settings, silence displays an essentially practical relevance, at the service of the characters' rebellious, military, or playful actions. It is presented as a narrative tool at the author's or characters' disposal, or as a separate realm that contributes to the realisation of human affairs. In *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947) — Calvino's first novel, which recounts the Resistance in Liguria from the point of view of a child — the main character Pin often walks silently during his adventures in the mountains (RR1, 56), his partisan friend Lupo Rosso moves quietly not to be heard by sentinels (RR1, 44), and several of the partisans' clandestine activities

inevitably occur in silence (RR1, 64; 76; 78). In several short stories in *Ultimo viene il corvo*, silence is associated with children's activities and explorations, in a playful context that is not distant from the approach Calvino chooses for his accounts of the Resistance in *Il sentiero* (RR1, 163–65; 169). Moreover, in the short story 'Gli avanguardisti a Mentone', collected in the themed volume *L'entrata in guerra* (1954), the titular city is immersed in an unnatural silence caused by the Fascist occupation and consequent evacuation (RR1, 509; 516). None of these instances feature philosophical insights: silence is a sheer practical necessity.

Silence finds a place, although *in negativo*, also in the context of Calvino's critical description of Italy during the economic boom. Of all the realities which urbanisation modifies or suffocates, silence is among the biggest casualties. In 'La villeggiatura in panchina', Marcovaldo desperately looks for silence amid the industrial city's auditory hypertrophy, but his attempts are invariably frustrated (RR1, 1071; 1075); in the same short story, silence is cherished in a dream, just as, in earlier texts, it is associated with a mythical childhood (RR1, 193). Silence is broken at nights also in *La nuvola di smog*, which similarly depicts the alterations human activities impose on natural rhythms (RR1, 898). On the contrary, *La formica argentina* defines the natural labour of ants as 'silent and almost invisible', almost to confirm the separation between natural and human dynamics that urbanisation and industrialisation have rendered irreversible (RR1, 455).

This focus on the valences of silence in Calvino's work cannot be distinguished from our analysis of language(s) in the same corpus of texts. A dichotomic view of silence as opposed to language goes hand in hand with a rationalistic, reductive simplification of reality where these categories are merely juxtaposed. Calvino's early texts tend to subscribe to a similar perspective. What his mature production gestures towards, however, is a more open, porous, dialectical view of language(s) and silence as potentially mixing, or at least interacting.⁷ In *Le città invisibili*, for example, Polo and Kublai pit several forms of expression against silence as 'un vuoto non riempito di parole' (RR2, 386) [a void not filled with words (Calvino 1974: 38)].⁸ Polo occasionally dispenses with words and resorts to gestures, jumps, shouts, but also facial expressions, glances, and objects. Silence thus assumes a communicative potential, in the frame dialogues as much as in several invisible cities: Chloe represents its entire existence through acts and gestures, 'senza che ci si scambi una parola' (RR2, 398) [without a word exchanged (Calvino 1974: 51)]; while in Laudomia 'le domande si formulano in silenzio' (RR2, 478) [the questions are asked in silence (Calvino 1974: 141)].

Vittorio Coletti reads this turn towards silence as the outcome of contemporary Enlightenment thinkers' awareness of the limits of science, in terms equally of method and language (1989: 80). Whenever Calvino's narratives approach an Asian landscape, however idealised, not only does silence acquire a particular relevance, but alternative modes of expression also tend to undermine the logocentrism that has long defined the European Enlightenment. The Cartesian paradigm is therefore challenged, breached first by the analogy between different forms of (non) communication, then by the awareness of the necessity of their interchanges, at once

justified by and justifying the interconnection of nature and culture. We should also not forget that Polo and Kublai, in their evocative dialogues, use a chessboard as a replacement for words. While this object seems to support a fully human semiotic dynamic,⁹ beneath the multiplicity of meanings attributable to the pieces on the chessboard lies the vegetal substance of every wooden *tessera*, whose features need to be considered for the semiotic discourse to develop all its potentialities:

Allora Marco Polo parlò: — La tua scacchiera, sire, è un intarsio di due legni: ebano e acero. Il tassello sul quale si fissa il tuo sguardo illuminato fu tagliato in uno strato del tronco che crebbe in un anno di siccità: vedi come si dispongono le fibre? Qui si scorge un nodo appena accennato: una gemma tentò di spuntare in un giorno di primavera precoce, ma la brina della notte l'obbligò a desistere. (RR2, 469)

[Then Marco Polo spoke: 'Your chessboard, sire, is inlaid with two woods: ebony and maple. The square on which your enlightened gaze is fixed was cut from the ring of a trunk that grew in a year of drought: you see how its fibers are arranged? Here a barely hinted knot can be made out: a bud tried to burgeon on a premature spring day, but the night's frost forced it to desist'. (Calvino 1974: 131)]

The material reality of the wooden chessboard is 'enmeshed with meanings and narratives' (Iovino and Oppermann 2012: 448). Moreover, Calvino shows us that, in the recognition of the interdependence of all things, as well as of the conjoined determination of materiality and semiosis characterising many Asian traditions, Western semiotics can find a particularly fertile ground for its own renovation. This is in line with a cross-cultural philosophical stance proposed by Michel Foucault in dialogue with a Zen monk in Japan in 1978, when he asserts that: 'if philosophy of the future exists, it must be born outside of Europe or equally born in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and non-Europe' (1999: 113).

Il castello dei destini incrociati, which is not devoid of Asian, specifically Taoist, references, can be considered as another example of the ability of silence to stimulate non-verbal forms of communication. The characters in this experimental text are affected by an unforeseen form of mutism, which forces them to recount their own stories through an interplay of tarot cards, to be interpreted by the narrator and the reader accordingly. These stories trigger a typically Calvinian combinatorial game: the more tarot cards are dealt, the less combinatorial choices are left. In this context, silence (and the material reality of tarot) is again represented as an alternative to canonical verbal forms of communication. As Elisebha Platzer has shown, Calvino recognises, long ahead of time, the shifting of his contemporary intellectual context towards fluidity, by giving shape in his texts to manifold forms of alterity (2007: 10). Among these forms, he considers languages that exceed traditional communication and plays with a range of creative opportunities offered by the obverse of language itself — silence.

2.1.2. *Calvino's Semiotic Travels in Japan*

When visiting Japan, Calvino experiences two main eccentricities of language. To begin with, he is confronted with a system of signs not just foreign, but totally indecipherable to him, which prompts a relativisation of given habits of communication. Furthermore, he experiences the crucial importance that silence assumes in Zen Buddhism, from which he draws an even more radical relativisation of language. The first set of thoughts is delineated in 'La vecchia signora in kimono viola' and can be read vis-à-vis the second chapter of Barthes's *Empire of Signs*, titled 'The Unknown Language' (Barthes 1982: 6–8). The second thread, regarding silence more specifically, is expounded in 'I mille giardini', a key text that chimes instead with the third chapter of *Empire of Signs*, 'Without Words' (Barthes 1982: 9–10). In both cases, the trajectory is towards the gradual recognition of the patterns of relationship that, beyond or below dissimilarities, connect different forms of human and non-human expression, including silence.

In 'La vecchia signora in kimono viola', the opening text of 'La forma del tempo: Giappone' in *Collezione di sabbia*, Calvino tries to decipher the dynamics of a conversation between a haughty old lady and a young girl sitting next to him during a train journey from Tokyo to Kyoto, the content of which he cannot understand (S, 569–70). The choice of a conversation between two women to represent the difficult, if not impossible understanding of the Japanese alterity is coherent with many androcentric stereotypes reinforcing problematic forms of Orientalism, and the description of the old lady, in particular, subscribes to a common view of 'the Japanese as basically fanatical [and] with a tendency to cruelty in their private lives' (Rosen 2000: 2). Ueno Chizuko points out that 'the Orientalist scheme is identical to that of gender in the structuralist paradigm of binary oppositions: the Occident : the Orient :: men : women :: culture : nature' (2005: 226). The exchange Calvino overhears on the train allows him 'to descend into the untranslatable, to experience its shock without ever muffling it' (Barthes 1982: 6). But while he fruitfully integrates these reflections into his semiotic interests, he does not problematise the risks of essentialising cultural, as well as gendered 'othernesses'.

It is worth clarifying that, while travelling in Japan, Calvino is completely unaware of the language spoken: Wada Tadahiko remembers that, during the visits around Kyoto they made together, Calvino never failed to remark upon the number of *pachinko* halls they encountered, but he always misread the signs in *roman-ji* characters, italianising as /pa'kiŋko/ what should be pronounced in Japanese as /pa'tʃiŋko/.¹⁰ Therefore, Calvino's travels happen at an a- (pre-? post-?) linguistic level, which itself resonates with the overcoming of language at the core of Buddhist meditation and in many of the Japanese novels Calvino had the opportunity to read, as we will see below. Crucially, the language that Calvino does not master is not limited to the Japanese system of sounds and words. His lack of points of reference encompasses the entire system of Japanese society, with its customs and traditions, hierarchical constructions, and interpersonal interactions. As Calvino writes:

Nuovo del paese, sono ancora nella fase in cui tutto quel che vedo ha un valore proprio perché non so quale valore dargli. [...] Quando tutto avrà trovato un

ordine e un posto nella mia mente, comincerò a non trovare più nulla degno di nota, a non vedere più quello che vedo. Perché vedere vuol dire percepire delle differenze, e appena le differenze si uniformano nel prevedibile quotidiano lo sguardo scorre su una superficie liscia e senza appigli. Viaggiare non serve molto a capire (questo lo so da un pezzo; non ho avuto bisogno d'arrivare in Estremo Oriente per convincermene) ma serve a riattivare per un momento l'uso degli occhi, la lettura visiva del mondo. (S, 566)

[New to the country, I am still at the stage where everything I see has a value precisely because I don't know what value to give it. [...] When everything finds an order and a place in my mind then I will start not to find anything worthy of note, not to see any more what I am seeing. Because seeing means perceiving differences, and as soon as differences all become uniform in what is predictable and everyday, our gaze simply runs over a smooth surface devoid of anything to catch hold of. Travelling does not help us much in understanding (I've known this for a while; I did not need to come to the Far East to convince myself that this was true) but it does serve to reactivate for a second the use of our eyes, the visual reading of the world. (Calvino 2013a: 153–54)]

This reflection raises several questions regarding Calvino's position as a Western tourist, but one with a significant semiotic awareness and with a specific familiarity with the work of Roland Barthes.¹¹

In *Mythologies* (originally published in 1957), but also in the chapter 'The Unknown Language' in *Empire of Signs* (1982: 6), Barthes dwells upon the general tendency of a culture to convert history into nature, that is to say, to mask the mythological, constructed function of objects, as if they were merely responding to practical, natural needs. The task of the semiotician should be to identify the arbitrariness of the signs by penetrating their mythological depth. A sort of dull semiotic investigation is instead pursued by tourists, who take things at face value, as an instance of a supposedly unchangeable cultural practice (Culler 1988: 155). This picture becomes more blurred if those who travel carry with them a semiotic awareness, as in the case of Barthes and Calvino. Indeed, semioticians know that 'once society exists, every usage is converted into a sign of this usage', as Barthes writes in his *Elements of Semiology* (1967: 41). On one hand, semioticians add a relevant quantum of awareness to the touristic behaviour: they are aware of the conventionality of things as signs, and of the temporal partiality of the semiotic void which produces marvel or simple interest in the 'other' (Colucci 2016: 42, n. 2), as Calvino shows in the passage quoted above. On the other hand, their approach is not far from any form of tourism, which reads cities, landscapes, and cultures as mere signs of themselves. On top of this already intricate short circuit, Zen culture, which both Barthes and Calvino engage with, is said to emphasise surfaces, forms, etiquette, and rituals, in a 'play of forms without content and surfaces without depth' (Rambelli 2013: x).

Drawing on Paul Fussell's distinction between explorers, travellers, and tourists, Calvino (like Barthes) could be considered as a semiotic traveller: 'If the explorer moves toward the risks of the formless and the unknown, the tourist moves toward the security of pure cliché. It is between these two poles that the traveler mediates, retaining all he can of the excitement of the unpredictable attaching to exploration,

and fusing that with the pleasure of “knowing where one is” belonging to tourism’ (Fussell 1980: 39). Calvino approached Japan by means of philosophical and literary mediations that distanced his experience from that of an adventurous, uninformed exploration. Yet, as Amano Kei reported to me, in Kyoto Calvino did not settle for the itinerary organised for him by the Japan Foundation but longed for a plunge into Kyoto’s daily life and popular culture. Moreover, he elaborated on his Japanese experience by integrating it within his semiotic trajectory, the natureculture of Japan generating alternative models for rethinking universality.

This discourse can be further combined with Lévi-Strauss’s perspective on cultures, as proposed by Michele Monserrati (2020: 176–82). Calvino was well acquainted with the French ethnologist’s work, often cited in essays and letters.¹² In 1983, he commends Lévi-Strauss’s *The View from Afar* for its harmonisation of the culture of discontinuity and a rigorous analytical sensitivity, which represents the only method able to account for the unity of the human within the unity of the universe, and to connect microcosm and macrocosm (S, 1022). Calvino identifies in Lévi-Strauss’s relativistic idea of culture a useful method for understanding not only different human groups, but even the relationship between human and other-than-human, thus corroborating the parallel between Calvino’s encounter with a cultural otherness and his explorations of other ontologies. While *Le Regard éloigné* was published in 1983, after Calvino’s Japanese journey, the analysis of how different ‘reference systems’ interact was already introduced by Lévi-Strauss in a public lecture delivered at UNESCO in 1971. It is thus fair to follow Monserrati in his identification of Lévi-Strauss’s ideas at the theoretical foundation of ‘La vecchia signora in kimono viola’, where Calvino fuses his long-standing interest in Lévi-Strauss’s method with semiotics.

If the semiotician recognises that everything *can* be read as a sign, if anything, of itself, and if Zen culture *must* be addressed with this awareness in mind, then to navigate surfaces and things, to explore the shallow depth of sign, is a self-contained heuristic act, which does not envisage the need to resort to language in order to grasp any deeper reality. If the world can be read visually, as Calvino states, what emerges is a tangible equivalence of written and unwritten worlds. Indeed, on one side, the written world loses its categorial mastery over the unwritten world, as Calvino experiences in approaching the indecipherability of Japanese language.¹³ On the other, the unwritten world appears as something to be read, thus with its own grammar and semiotic status. As a result, human language, landscape, and social environment emerge as equal systems of signs which stem from, and in turn reinforce, the material-ecocritical as well as the biosemiotic model; language and reality, discourse and matter — and, therefore, the human and the non-human — constitute distinct yet profoundly interconnected realms, enriched by their mutual recognition.

Calvino elaborates on this awareness, prompted by his first impressions in Japan, in a later paper delivered at the Institute for the Humanities of New York University on 30 March 1983, under the title of ‘The Written World and the Unwritten World’. Here Calvino declares that he is not totally convinced either by the thesis according to which ‘il mondo non esiste; esiste solo il linguaggio’ [the world doesn’t exist, only

language exists], or by the opposite view claiming that 'il linguaggio comune non ha senso; il mondo è ineffabile' (S, 1867) [the common language has no meaning; the world is literally unspeakable (Calvino 1983a: 38)]. There is no primacy to be accorded either to the written world (the world of language, of written and spoken words) nor to the unwritten world (the world of materials and objects). If it is true that the human being cannot do without language, Calvino states, it is also necessary to acknowledge that there also exists in the world a 'silenzio pieno di significato' (S, 1869) [silence [...] full of meaning (Calvino 1983a: 39)], towards which language strives. Hence his pragmatic view: 'In un certo senso, credo che sempre scriviamo di qualcosa che non sappiamo: scriviamo per rendere possibile al mondo non scritto di esprimersi attraverso di noi', since 'dall'altro lato delle parole c'è qualcosa che cerca d'uscire dal silenzio, di significare attraverso il linguaggio, come battendo colpi su un muro di prigione' (S, 1875) [In a certain way, I think we always write about something we don't know, we write to give the unwritten world a chance to express itself through us; on the other side of the words there is something words could mean (Calvino 1983a: 39)]. In this view, human language is not only partial — since there are other ways in which the unwritten world can express itself, such as animal and vegetal forms of communication — but it is also intrinsically dependent on the materiality of the world it represents, which guides and influences us even when we assume we are in total control of our choices, linguistic or otherwise.

Calvino here highlights the pre-discursive structure of reality as a condition of the emergence of meaning, thus bringing 'the material back in without rejecting the legitimate insight of the linguistic turn', as advocated by Susan Hekman (2010: 7). Once again, Lévi-Strauss's *Le Regard éloigné*, which Calvino reviewed in 1983, plays a key role in the development of this awareness, as it foregrounds a continuity 'between sensory data and their processing in the brain — the means of this apprehension — and the physical world itself' (1985: 115). In Mario Porro's opinion, this is the main lesson Calvino takes from structuralism: that is to say, the individuation of structural properties in nature that are not dissimilar from the codes through which human nervous systems decipher these properties, and more generally from the intellectual categories that organise them (1995: 262). Calvino reflects at length on the radical embeddedness of cognitive structures within the surrounding environment already in 'Dall'opaco'; as Antonello maintains, in this text Calvino finds a resolution to the mind-matter dualism, by viewing the landscape as capable of a mediated self-cognition through the cognition of the minds that navigate it (1995: 217). While the reflections of 'Dall'opaco' emerge from and cluster around the Ligurian landscape with which Calvino is most familiar, similar considerations are prompted in Japan by the estranging experience of travelling in an utterly foreign country and wandering around Zen gardens. A similarity that is not surprising, if we recall that Buddhist thought converges with neuroscientific analyses of the mind in understanding cognitive awareness, within patterns of dependent relationships, as 'a process which arises in dependence upon [external] conditions, rather than a faculty which acts by cognising objects' (Waldron 2002: 3).

In the text 'I mille giardini', Calvino connects in a decisive way Japanese attentiveness towards changing perspectives and the relevance of silence, each in relation to an appreciation of human experiences as entangled with and dependent on the environment's own processes of signification. He notes that the garden surrounding Katsura Imperial Villa 'è stato predisposto in modo che di passo in passo lo sguardo incontri prospettive diverse' (S, 583–84) [has been so set out that at each step one's gaze meets different perspectives (Calvino 2013a: 169)] and, crucially, that:

qui è il percorso la ragione essenziale del giardino, il filo del suo discorso, la frase che dà significato a ogni sua parola.

Ma quali significati? [...] il contrasto tra la civiltà e la natura? [...] una lezione sul modo di muoversi nel mondo? Ogni interpretazione lascia insoddisfatti; se c'è un messaggio, è quello che si coglie nelle sensazioni e nelle cose, senza tradurle in parole. (S, 583)

[here the footpath is the *raison d'être* of the garden, the main theme of its discourse, the sentence that gives meaning to its every word.

But what meanings? [...] the contrast between civilization and nature? [...] a lesson about how one should move in the world? Every interpretation leaves one dissatisfied: if there is a message, it is the one we grasp in sensations and things, without translating them into words. (Calvino 2013a: 169)]

Calvino is reiterating a parallel, already suggested in 'Il rovescio del sublime' (S, 576), between poetry and gardens, therefore between a verbal and a non-verbal system of signs. Both are based on a finite number of units whose combinations constitute ever-expanding mechanisms of signification: phonemes, words, and sentences in poetry; plants, stones, and lakes in gardens.¹⁴ But he also advances a notion of signification as bursting forth directly from things, without any linguistic counterpart.¹⁵ In other words, the same combinatorial mechanism engenders both language and reality, as Calvino will also discuss in his *Lezioni americane*, referring to Lucretius's combination of *stoicheia* as both atoms and letters of the alphabet (S, 653). Human language only makes sense as a tool for drawing near, describing, or understanding reality insofar as it is recognised, fundamentally, as a tool that reality has established to draw near, describe, or understand itself — as Palomar will also realise.

To fully appreciate the relevance of Calvino's Japanese encounter for the formulation of this non-logocentric hypothesis, it is important to compare 'I mille giardini' with the reflections about void and silence connected to his journey to Iran — in the same section of *Collezione di sabbia*, 'La forma del tempo'. When visiting the Sheikh Loftollah Mosque at Isfahan, Calvino extrapolates a conclusion from his contemplation of the mihrab:

Dopo essere rimasto un bel pezzo a contemplare il mihrab, mi sento in dovere di giungere a una qualche conclusione. Che potrebbe essere questa: l'idea di perfezione che l'arte insegue, la sapienza accumulata nella scrittura, il sogno di appagamento d'ogni desiderio che si esprime nello sfarzo degli ornamenti, tutto rimanda a un solo significato, celebra un solo principio e fondamento, implica un solo ultimo oggetto. Ed è un oggetto che non c'è. La sua sola qualità è quella di non esserci. (S, 612)

[After staying for a good while contemplating the mihrab, I feel I need to reach some conclusion. Which could be this: the idea of perfection which art pursues, the wisdom accumulated in writing, the dream of satisfying every desire that is expressed in the luxury of ornaments, all these point towards one single meaning, celebrate one foundational principle, entail one single final object. And this is an object which does not exist. Its sole quality is that of not being there. One cannot even give it a name. (Calvino 2013a: 198)]

The beholder, after standing in front of the mihrab, either draws a nihilistic conclusion (if embracing a materialistic view) or a notion of transcendence (in a religious sense). Neither of the two possible approaches conceives an interaction between the beholder and the object. In fact, the object points at void, nothingness, absence, silence, without admitting any further development of thought beyond this human reflection: a pattern coherent with the solidity and linearity of monotheistic religions (Hume 1981: 85–86), in opposition to ‘weak’ — in Gianni Vattimo’s sense — and more fluid forms of thought.

As opposed to the silence evoked in the mihrab, which is the conclusive pinnacle of a cultural *trajectory*, silence in Japanese gardens rather enshrines a dynamic *trajectivity*, a continuous mediation of the borderline between the human and the non-human, as well as culture and nature. Berque has advanced the notion of trajectivity by drawing upon the root *trans-*, which encompasses the idea of transcending dualism and making connections between the extremes of subjective and objective, thus overcoming the inherently centripetal implication of the *pro-* of *projection* (1997: 120). The concept of trajectivity meaningfully illuminates the temporal dimension sustaining Japanese gardens and traditional architecture, as it combines linear temporality, circular temporality, and achronisation (we will expand on this in the fourth chapter). As far as language is concerned, the relationality constituting the main tenet of trajectivity inevitably disposes of any logocentric presumption, as Calvino remarks more than once in ‘I mille giardini’. In particular, at the end of this text he dwells upon the relevance of non-linguistic means in four crucial pillars of Japanese culture: the art of gardening; the tea ceremony; meditation; and haiku. Here Calvino tells of Sen-no Rikyū, great master of the tea ceremony and designer of gardens around tea-houses and temples, who had two hedges planted in a temple near Osaka in order to hide the view over the sea. The master also had a small stone pond built in the proximity of the shrubs, bending over which visitors could see their image shrunk in that narrow stretch of water and consider their own smallness — especially when, after raising their faces again, they were dazzled by the immensity of the sea seen from afar. ‘Ma sono cose che a volerle spiegare troppo si sciupano’ (S, 586) [But these are things that are ruined if you try to explain them too much (Calvino 2013a: 172), Calvino concludes. The awareness of the interconnectedness between the individual and the infinite universe, rather than being explained linguistically, must be experienced (as it is by Palomar at the end of the book), or at least suggested by means of the peculiar praxis represented by gardens or haiku.¹⁶

2.1.3. Palomar *between Words and Silence*

If Calvino has questioned the alleged objectivity and stability of reality throughout his ever-changing combinatorial experiments, in *Palomar* he represents the ultimate challenge to fixed linguistic and heuristic coordinates. In this book, by collecting articles from his travels and tuning into animal conversations, Calvino discusses communicative systems that are beyond Western habits, and goes as far as deconstructing the logocentric matrix of human expression. *Palomar* can thus be considered as a *summa* of Calvino's life-long dialectical engagement with the human and the non-human world, whose modes of expression are finally connected in semiotic syntheses that debunk hierarchical statuses, ultimately opening towards silence as a constitutive porosity underpinning every form of expression. Pietro Citati locates in Palomar's inclination towards silence the symbol of a total expressive crisis, which he opposes to the unconcluded project of *I cinque sensi* (published unfinished in 1986 as *Sotto il sole giaguaro*), where the sensuality and reality of the world are, in Citati's opinion, more forceful (1986: 3). I aim instead to deconstruct such a dichotomisation by arguing that the representation of life has never been more compelling than in the depiction of Palomar's death, and that language has never been more communicative than in the book's final silence, which does not annihilate the senses but rather sublimates them.

In the opening text of the Japanese section of *Collezione di sabbia*, as discussed above, Calvino defines travel as a stimulus for the reactivation of a 'visual reading of the world' (Calvino 2013a: 154). A few years later, in the opening story of *Palomar*, he dedicates himself precisely to the activity of reading a fragment of the world in the text tellingly entitled 'Lettura di un'onda'. Palomar repeatedly discusses natural phenomena at the intersection of materiality and discursivity, and his own human practices of knowledge are subsumed under biosemiotic dynamics where 'culture is emergent in nature, and mind is emergent in body/environment' (Wheeler 2011: 271). From the outset, the book looks for a literary answer to the silent questions posed by the Japanese experience: is it possible for a human subject to approach the pancryptic nature of the world without projecting pre-established, fixed values upon it?¹⁷ Can an ever-changing dialectical connection be established between human and non-human, meaning and matter, words and silence — and, ultimately, East and West?

As Mara Mauri Jacobsen points out, Calvino represents in *Palomar* the incessant literary confrontation between two opposite poles delineated in the memo on 'Esattezza' (1992):

Da una parte la riduzione degli avvenimenti contingenti a schemi astratti con cui si possano compiere operazioni e dimostrare teoremi; e dall'altra parte lo sforzo delle parole per render conto con la maggior precisione possibile dell'aspetto sensibile delle cose. (S, 691)

[on the one side, the reduction of secondary events to abstract patterns according to which one can carry out operations and demonstrate theorems; and on the other, the effort made by words to present the tangible aspect of things as precisely as possible. (Calvino 1988: 74)]

Palomar certainly displays a specific adherence to phenomena, since 'intende guardare [...] un oggetto limitato e preciso' (RR2, 875) [he wants to look [...] a limited and precise object (Calvino 1985b: 3)], but he often succumbs to the 'totalità del dicibile e del non dicibile' (S, 691) [totality of the speakable and of the unspeakable]. The character experiences a discontent of sorts at the end of almost every phenomenological adventure on which he embarks; an intellectual unrest that asks to be considered in its heuristic significance, as it represents the subject's awareness of the unpredictable, ungraspable objectivity of the world.¹⁸

In these dynamics, Palomar gradually disentangles himself from the presumption of subjugating the world via his language-oriented mind.¹⁹ While the starting point is that of a challenge to the labyrinth of reality and an attempt to read the unwritten world, the focus on single images, situations, or events allows Calvino to suggest the underlying, silent, somewhat threatening, but at once undeniable presence of the non-linguistic, non-speakable, non-describable: 'Forse il vero risultato a cui il signor Palomar sta per giungere è [...] di scorgere la vera sostanza del mondo al di là delle abitudini sensoriali e mentali?' (RR2, 879) [Is this perhaps the real result that Mr. Palomar is about to achieve? To [...] perceive the true substance of the world beyond sensory and mental habits? (Calvino 1985b: 7)]. The answer to this question is: 'No, egli arriva fino a provare un leggero senso di capogiro, non oltre' (RR2, 879) [No, he feels a slight dizziness, but it goes no further than that (Calvino 1985b: 7)]. Yet, a 'substance' beyond all-too human 'sensory and mental habits' is recognised, albeit negatively, just as multiplicity is recognised beyond oneness (RR2, 876), and the invisible beyond the visible (RR2, 878).

The vertigo Palomar experiences at the end of 'Lettura di un'onda' points to the 'unexpressed not otherwise expressible' that constitutes a postmodern variant of the 'sublime' in Jean-François Lyotard's view (Carbone 1989: 76). Barthes also speaks of 'a faint vertigo' affecting him when confronting 'the pure significance' of the unknown Japanese language, 'the interstice, delivered from any fulfilled meaning' (1982: 9). In this vertigo, in this tension towards the ineffable — opposed to the nausea of too close an adherence to things (Fabbri 1987: 28) — it is possible to recognise the outcome of Calvino's contact with the Buddhist category of the 'inconceivable'. The Tibetan modernist writer Gendün Chöphel refers to the 'inconceivable' as something that 'is there even if it is not present to the senses or mundane consciousness, and insofar as it is formally posited, it is only posited with reference to a practice or practices which engage with "it"' (Boon 2015: 68).²⁰ Taking this definition into account, it is possible to read Calvino's creation of *Palomar* as a form of 'practice' pursuing the expression of the 'inconceivable'; or rather, as a form of dialectical praxis in terms of 'relation between theory and practice' (Cazdyn 2015: 106).²¹ In a 1985 interview with Sandra Petrigiani in which he discusses his approach to fantasy, Calvino connects his attempt to pursue the non-written through writing, and the practical outcome that can be thus achieved:

io credo che esista anche il non linguistico, il non dicibile, il non scrivibile e che lo scrivere sia appunto un rincorrere sempre questo mondo non scritto e forse non scrivibile. In tal senso il mondo è fatto anche di immagini, di pensieri [...].

Di queste immagini abbiamo bisogno per agire, per crescere, per operare, per giudicare. (SNiA, 628)

[I believe that the non-verbal, the unspeakable, the unwritable also exist, and that to write is tantamount to constantly chasing this unwritten and perhaps unwritable world. In that sense, the world is made up of images, of thoughts, as well [...]. We need those images to be able to act, grow up, function, judge.]

This praxis, fusing abstraction and the adherence to the particular (SNiA, 628), leads to the subject's permeability to other forms of life and to the conceptualisation of the complementarity between mind and environment, as well as discourse and matter. With respect to language, Palomar undergoes these two steps by tuning in to animal forms of communication, comparing those to human language, and finally disposing of a categorial conception of language altogether in his praise of silence.

Significantly, in 'Il fischio del merlo', Palomar advances a parallel between the modes of communication of blackbirds and those of humans (RR2, 892). If biosemiotics considers *Homo sapiens* as the most semiotically free creature to have evolved so far, in this text we see this freedom at its utmost: a human being named Italo Calvino writes about a human character who is (or perhaps is not) his own alter ego, who questions his own way of communicating vis-à-vis birds' whistles. 'The co-evolved relationship between the environment and us gives rise to [an] ineffable creativity *as* language and *in* language' (Wheeler 2006: 109) and 'Il fischio del merlo' represents such linguistic creativity in all its posthumanist potential. The communication of blackbirds leans towards monotony, Calvino notices: their whistles are always almost identical to themselves, thus they break the basic rule of meaning in human language, emerging as 'an aleatory, local deviation in the "window" between [...] monotony and white noise' (Watkin 2015: 171–72). A changeable variable, however, is the duration of silence between each whistle (RR2, 892–93). Therefore, either the whistle has a merely phatic function, and 'tutto il dialogo consiste nel dire all'altro "io sto qui"' (RR2, 893) [the whole dialogue consists of one saying to the other 'I am here' (Calvino 1985b: 24)], or what truly has a meaning is silence — 'E se fosse nella pausa e non nel fischio il significato del messaggio?' (RR2, 893) [And what if it is in the pause and not in the whistle that the meaning of the message is contained? (Calvino 1985b: 24)].

Through this parallel, Calvino envisages two key factors behind human communication: not only is it possible that human beings do not understand each other (RR2, 893), but also silence must be considered as a viable, alternative form of expression, and by no means a less productive one. Through reflecting on the different way of communicating of blackbirds, this potentiality beyond human language becomes intelligible. Such a perception cannot but provoke the sense of vertigo that has been detected above as an indication of Calvino's fascination (frightening and inescapable at once) with the non-human, key in many forms of Buddhist meditation:

Se l'uomo investisse nel fischio tutto ciò che normalmente affida alla parola, e se il merlo modulasse nel fischio tutto il non detto della sua condizione d'essere

naturale, ecco che sarebbe compiuto il primo passo per colmare la separazione tra... tra che cosa e che cosa? Natura e cultura? Silenzio e parola? Il signor Palomar spera sempre che il silenzio contenga qualcosa di più di quello che il linguaggio può dire. (RR2, 895)

[If man were to invest in whistling everything he normally entrusts to words, and if the blackbird were to modulate into his whistling all the unspoken truth of his natural condition, then the first step would be taken toward bridging the gap between... between what and what? Nature and culture? Silence and speech? Mr. Palomar always hopes that silence contains something more than language can say. (Calvino 1985b: 27)]

The comparison between human language and blackbirds' whistles encourages a renewed awareness of the mechanisms of communication, as further proven by 'Del mordersi la lingua'. While this text is inscribed within a sociological framework (it is part of the subsection 'Palomar in società'), it echoes 'Il fischio del merlo' when Calvino states that silence can also be considered as a kind of speech, whose meaning must be found in its interruptions (RR2, 961). Stefano Franchi identifies in this text a declaration of the ultimate inefficiency of both silence and language, since 'in a universe as saturated by communication as ours, silence is but a different form of communication', and 'true silence, like things, keeps escaping beyond words — or their absence' (1997: 761). However, in my opinion, 'true silence' is an all-encompassing, diffused silence towards which *Palomar* is heading, with the conclusion of the book constituting a subtle representation of the existence of the unrepresentable, as we will see in the final chapter of this book.

'Il gorilla albino' develops a further reflection on language and silence, stemming this time from the observation of the behaviour of an animal perceived as kin, 'sharing a dimension of solitude, incommunicability, and the need for meanings' (Iovino 2021: 50). The gorilla never abandons an old tyre, an empty circle that is as alien to him as potentially containing all the symbols one might want to attribute to it. Palomar wonders whether 'immedesimandosi [nel copertone] il gorilla è sul punto di raggiungere al fondo del silenzio le sorgenti da cui scaturisce il linguaggio' (RR2, 944) [identifying himself with [the tyre], the gorilla is about to reach, in the depths of silence, the springs from which language burst forth (Calvino 1985b: 83)]. Here language is no longer seen as the goal towards which everything in existence tends, but rather as a *quid* emerging from silence. As much as Japan offers 'the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system' (Barthes 1982: 3), which makes 'our' system stand out in all its relativity, similarly the gorilla's attachment to his tyre represents the possibility of finding meaning even in something alien, abstract, apparently naked of meanings, and of reflecting on the complementarity of opposites that similarly characterises ancient Asian traditions like Zen and Taoism.²²

It is important to underline that a different form of life (animal life) and a different (Asian) culture act as 'functions' in discourses that tend to maintain as their point of reference 'our' (human and Western) symbolic system, in *Empire of Signs* as much as in *Palomar*. Perhaps not incidentally, Calvino does not include in his definitive version of the book 'Dialogo con una tartaruga' (RR3, 1155–58), a Palomar item written in 1977. This omission might be due to the dialogical structure of the text:

as McLaughlin suggests, 'since silence is one of the themes of *Palomar*, the book in the end could contain no sustained discussions with any one other than the protagonist himself' (1998: 142). At the beginning of the 1980s, when *Palomar* is published, Calvino's dialectic is not yet properly 'dialogised', remaining an abstract hypothesis in the writer's and his character's mind, open to our speculations as to the development such a hypothesis might have undertaken had *Palomar* not ended up being Calvino's last completed book. Nevertheless, what guides Calvino throughout his life-long literary praxis, and especially in the late 1970s, is the idea of '[dare] voce a ciò che è senza voce' (S, 358) [[giving] a voice to whatever is without a voice (Calvino 1986: 98)], and conceiving of an open, relational, thus ecological identity as 'un fascio di linee divergenti che trovano nell'individuo il punto d'intersezione' (S, 2826) [a bundle of diverging lines that find their point of convergence in the individual].²³ Asian and animal forms of life and expression constitute some of the heterogeneous lines, either silenced or wilfully silent, this bundle-identity needs in order to establish itself.

The establishment of a similar identity happens within an 'actively storied dimension that brings together subjects, places, and their shared becoming' (Iovino 2021: 52). Dialectical interactions are integral to this forming process: language emerges from silence and silence can potentially communicate better than language (RR2, 895); 'pure significance' deconstructs 'meaning' and at once casts a fresh light on how 'the symbolic' works (Barthes 1982: 4–9); meaning and absence of meaning, as well as speakable and non-speakable, interact constantly. Only in the dialectic connecting these poles can the act of writing continue to find the conditions of possibility for its own existence. In this context, even the problematic parallel between Asian and animal 'othernesses' is neutralised through its fruitful semiotic potential: far from being presented as inferior, these alterities are necessary for a full understanding of the relational ontology connecting diverse beings and forms of communication. The significant step forward Calvino makes in *Palomar* is represented by the overt embrace of this constant oscillation, partly transfigured, partly meta-narrated.

The meta-narrative approach to the awareness just outlined can be identified in the entire third and final section of the book, entitled 'I silenzi di Palomar'. Significantly, this section opens with 'L'aiola di sabbia', describing Palomar/Calvino's visit to the garden of rocks and sand of Ryōan Zen temple in Kyoto, 'l'immagine tipica della contemplazione dell'assoluto da raggiungersi coi mezzi più semplici e senza il ricorso a concetti esprimibili con parole' (RR2, 951) [the image typical of that contemplation of the absolute to be achieved with the simplest means and without recourse to concepts capable of verbal expression (Calvino 1985b: 91)]. Calvino appreciates the wordless contemplation that Zen gardens prompt, similarly to Zen *kōan* and other means of meditation 'overturning verbal and rational modes of thought' (Hume 1992a: 148). As Nathalie Roelens notes, Palomar is already inclined to practice silence in his relationship with other people, thus he cannot but welcome and conform to the Buddhist suspension of language, aimed at dispossessing the individual of the relativity of its own

self (1989: 38). More importantly, even if Palomar is not able to experience silence directly during his visit at Ryōan-ji because of the surrounding crowd of tourists, he finds a way to extrapolate an interior silence out of the external confusion. He looks at the Zen garden, craning his neck among other necks, and sees the possibility of a never definitive harmony between mankind-sand and world-boulder, as if between two nonhomogeneous harmonies (RR2, 953). An apparently paradoxical synthesis emerges, allowing the self to realise that the rational, the verbal, the human, and the Western are 'merely [...] system[s] among others' (Barthes 1982: 33).

In an interview with Luca Fontana released in 1985, Calvino is directly asked to confirm whether a connecting line can be drawn between the texts composing *Palomar* and Japanese *ukiyo-e*, the so-called 'paintings of the floating world' produced, among others, by Utamaro (1753–1806) and Hiroshige (1797–1858). Calvino was certainly acquainted with this art that flourished among the townspeople during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868).²⁴ As highlighted in the introduction, in his Japanese shelf there is a collection entitled *Le stampe del mondo fluttuante*, the catalogue of an exhibition on Japanese xylography from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moreover, as Francesca Serra points out, the first redaction of 'Lettura di un'onda' opened with a reference to Hokusai (1760–1849), the painter of *The Great Wave*, widely-known for his powerful landscape prints (1996: 69). Calvino later decided to expunge this and other overt cultural references from his book, buttressing the suspended atmosphere to which Fontana refers. Replying to Fontana's question, Calvino indeed states:

C'è un rapporto di analogia e, in alcuni casi, di filiazione diretta, ad esempio in *Laiola di sabbia*, dove il signor Palomar osserva un giardino zen in Giappone. Posto di fronte al mondo fluttuante, il signor Palomar cerca di arrivare a una qualche esattezza di tipo logico-matematico, però sempre con un'adesione non riduttiva. Io stesso sono ben lontano da una certezza assoluta nei risultati della razionalità. Per il signor Palomar la battaglia è tra il linguaggio e il mondo non scritto. (SNiA, 646)

[There is an analogy and, to some extent, even a direct connection, for example in 'The Sand Garden', where Mr. Palomar observes a Zen garden in Japan. Placed in front of the floating world, Mr. Palomar tries to reach some logical-mathematical form of exactitude, but always with a non-reductive attention. I think myself that there is no certainty as to the results of rationality. As for Mr. Palomar, his struggle is between language and the unwritten world.]

Not only does Palomar investigate the limits of language, he also oscillates constantly between trust in rationality and openness towards irrationality. Accordingly, Calvino mediates between his familiar background and his own personal re-elaborations of science. The sort of rationality sustaining a narration (or a praxis) like *Palomar* rests on the apparent paradox of rationally accepting an irrational hypothesis, verbally representing a non-verbal alternative, and embracing with a Western mind those contradictions which have long sustained many expressions of Japanese philosophies and religions.

By hearing and observing silence, the human mind progressively familiarises itself with a world that at once precedes and comes after the human itself: a world

dwelt in by things and beings that prove that the presence of the human being in the broader environment is neither eternal nor unique. The expansiveness of Calvino's imagination, aided by the encounter with Ryōan Zen garden's embodied dialectics (between the human and non-human, but also self and non-self, individual and group, conscience and world), leads him to the configuration of Palomar as an 'extended ego, a self "outside the subjective": an 'intersection of city, birds, plants, roofs, things, and himself as a human individual who tries to "escape subjectivity", not so much in order to reach a supposed objectivity, but rather to embrace a wider portion of the neverending surface of things' (Iovino 2014: 223).

The related dialectic between materiality and discourse, and the attempt to give a voice to silence (or rather to find silence within voice, and voice within silence) has been defined by Carlo Ossola as a profusion of symmetry which ultimately cannot but withdraw within itself, in what the critic calls an 'Augustinian return to interiority' (1988: 115). Preferring to advance interpretive suggestions, rather than superimposing confessions of sorts, *Palomar's* paradoxical development could also be read in the light of a Buddhist matrix, alongside an Augustinian one.²⁵ After all, the triadic, dialectical structure of the book binds it to Buddhism,²⁶ if not specifically to yoga, etymologically meaning 'union', 'return to immanence'. Yoga could indeed illuminate the process that informs *Palomar*, where the subject tries to establish a state of intimacy with the totality of the universe, most notably in the texts 'Il mondo guarda il mondo' and 'L'universo come specchio', within 'Le meditazioni di Palomar'.²⁷ Silence is central both in the development of the book and in yoga meditation. While yoga is more distinctively recognisable as a praxis, Calvino's self-reflections regarding his use of language in *Palomar* situates the act of writing on the prolific threshold between theory and action, between the abstraction of linguistic means and their material approach to things (SNiA, 624). As Calvino notices with respect to the work of Francis Ponge, when language approaches objects, it puts itself into perspective, eventually realising that its own de-centralisation does not downscale, but rather redefine its value (S, 1406).

To conclude, when Calvino states that Palomar befriends many Chinese and Japanese wise men — 'I suoi amici sono... Monsieur Teste di Valéry, il signor Keuner di Brecht... e molti saggi cinesi e giapponesi!' (Marabini 1976: 187) [Among his friends are... [...] Valéry's Monsieur Teste, Brecht's Mr. Keuner [...] and many Chinese and Japanese wisemen!] — it is possible to find their common ground in the approach towards language, and silence accordingly. As Barthes states: 'if this state of *a-language* is a liberation, it is because, for the Buddhist experiment, the proliferation of secondary thoughts (the thought of thought) appears as a jamming: it is on the contrary the *abolition* of secondary thought which breaks the vicious infinity of language' (Barthes 1982: 75). In the final text of *Palomar*, analysed at length in the chapter on death, this '*abolition* of secondary thought' is incisively represented. Here Palomar dies while describing his surrounding environment and the book ends contextually. In this way, the subject achieves his own dethronement, undermines his own centrality, all the while acknowledging the ungraspable objectivity of the world and proposing a way in which to represent such

inaccessibility. When Calvino defines *Palomar* as a book 'on' silence (Tornabuoni 1983), he is thus both declaring that one of its main themes is silence, but also that the entire book is materially constructed on the verge of silence (Serra 1996: 53). Once again, he deploys a form of praxis that might be read in comparison with meditation and haiku composition. The following section aims to discuss the extent to which these are similarly imbued in silence and located on the productive cusp of thought and practice.

2.2. The Sound of Silence in Japan

Several Buddhist practices imply an intimacy and openness to non-human forms of communication. Zen Buddhism, in particular, contributes to undermining the fundamentals of language, aiding practitioners to rid their minds of the primacy of the verbal in order to enter silence. The interaction, linguistic or otherwise, between human beings and the environment is traditionally connected to the so-called 'child-like mind'. In a famous Buddhist saying, the child-like mind is described as bearing an original intimacy with the world, not yet structured into social and linguistic coordinates. Whereas this emotional attachment is generally lost as the child develops, it is one of the objectives of meditation to re-cultivate it. The linguistic outcome of this view is a debasement of the linguistic means that have opened the gap between human and other-than-human in the first place. In this respect, Calvino's ignorance of the language spoken in Japan assumes a semiotic relevance that sharpens his attention towards the surrounding environment, thus offering a practical instance of the relativisation of *logos*. A multifaceted treatment of language, as well as of silence in its stratified depth, also emerges from a survey of the narrative and poetic works constituting Calvino's Japanese literary collection. Moreover, a targeted engagement with the themes of language and silence in Japanese novels and poems allows us to recognise some *traits d'union* between the realms of the religio-philosophical and the literary.

2.2.1. Buddhist Deconstructions of Linguistic Hierarchies

Dōgen Zenji (1200–53), the Sōtō Zen master who experienced awakening while practicing in China, is believed to have stated: 'The ocean speaks and mountains have tongues — that is the everyday speech of Buddha... If you can speak and hear such words you will be one who truly comprehends the entire universe' (quoted in Shaner 1989: 173). Zen Buddhism not only devalues human language, but also, and more precisely, puts it in communication and communion with other forms of expression, consistently deconstructing anthropocentric hierarchies. Not incidentally, Zen has strongly influenced the so-called 'deep ecology' movement, based on biocentric egalitarianism, metaphysical holism, and a consciousness shift aimed to realise that 'the distinction between "life" and "lifeless" is a human construct' (Seed 2019: 145–46).²⁸ Moreover, Dōgen's words constitute the main source of inspiration for the call to 'think like a mountain', as it was advanced by Aldo Leopold in *A Sand Country Almanac* (1949), a foundational text of ecophilosophy.

Dōgen, as well as Kūkai (774–835), who founded the esoteric Shingon sect of Buddhism, argues that, although we are all originally enlightened, it is our duty to authenticate the interdependent relationship with others and nature that such an enlightenment entails. In order to do so, we should commit to perceiving the world from a non-discriminating mode of awareness, and to engaging a sensitive interaction between us as persons and our environment, which does not involve the structure of human language.²⁹ The entanglement of self and nature illuminates the implication between words and the objective reality (including animals, plants, and the most diverse forms of life), but this awareness can only be regained by disposing of language and by means of meditation. In his posture of thinking, Palomar draws near to the Buddhist meditative practice that pushes the boundaries of language to the limit, eventually transcending words altogether in the experience of an enlightenment not covered by words.³⁰ In Zen Buddhism, this enlightenment is defined as *satori*: it can be attained once confusion of mind, dualism, and mental discrimination are overcome, in order to let any form of egoism fall. Language plays a key role in this respect, especially in the Rinzai sect — one of the two main Zen sects, together with Sōtō: whereas Sōtō is also called *mokusho zen*, ‘silent enlightenment’, Rinzai goes under the name of *kanna zen*, ‘contemplation of words’. Rinzai makes wide use of *kōan*, inherently insoluble, or even nonsense riddles, whose aim is to put the practitioner’s mind before insolvable problems, which can only disclose their profound meaning once the intellect is left behind.³¹

A passage from Fabio Rambelli’s *Buddhist Theory of Semiotics* (2013) illuminates the extent to which Buddhism debases common language:

If the world produced by the discriminating activity of consciousness — that is, the world of our everyday experiences — is illusory, any discourse about such a world (that is, ordinary language) is deluded and ultimately empty; language has no ultimate truth-value, it is like words uttered in a dream. Words only refer to the superficial features of things, not to their essence (which, by definition, is Emptiness — the lack of any positive, linguistically definable quality); words are themselves the product of ignorance, attachment, and suffering, which they contribute to perpetuating. The external world, then, is essentially a linguistic and semiotic construction and thus devoid of ontological reality. This connection between words and things needs to be deconstructed with the help of Buddhism if one is to attain liberation from ignorance, suffering, and the cycle of rebirths. In this sense, at least, language is relevant for Buddhist soteriology in a negative sense, as something to be deconstructed and overcome. (Rambelli 2013: 81)

The idea that words merely reflect the superficial aspect of things is uncannily close to Calvino’s position in a passage from *Palomar*: “‘Solo dopo aver conosciuto la superficie delle cose [...] ci si può spingere a cercare quel che c’è sotto. Ma la superficie delle cose è inesauribile’” (RR2, 920) [‘It is only after you have come to know the surface of things [...] that you can venture to seek what is underneath. But the surface of things is inexhaustible’ (Calvino 1985b: 55)]. If Barthes defines Zen culture as one of pure surface, solely concerned with the signifier and ignoring or erasing the signified, Calvino develops similar ideas once he describes the

surrounding environment, even when a Japanese framework is no longer there to solicit a similar approach to reality. This retention of a Zen approach to (non) discourse can be identified as one of the major outcomes of Calvino's acquaintance with Japan, together with the intuition that, to use Rambelli's words, the essence of things is Emptiness — as we will see in the next chapter.

At the end of 'Le meditazioni di Palomar', experience overcomes expression as per the 'logic' of Zen.³² The kind of silence that is accessed by meditating is as eloquent as being wordy: it is not against the word, but rather subsumes the word itself. Kūkai, the founder of the Shingon sect mentioned above, used to say that 'the Dharma [truth taught by the Buddha] is beyond speech, but without speech it cannot be revealed. Suchness transcends forms, but without depending on forms it cannot be realized' (Hakeda 1972: 145). As is often the case with Buddhism, the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction is subverted, and again this element is key for a novel understanding of the paradoxical conclusion of Calvino's last book.³³ The discipline and concentration that the path towards the full appreciation of the Zen 'logic' involves have traditionally kept the populace away from Zen, which has conversely won a strong following among samurai and modern warriors. Despite this elitist feature, Zen has had a considerable influence on cultural developments throughout the history of Japan.³⁴ Calvino briefly discusses the 'cost of culture' at the end of the text eloquently titled 'Il rovescio del sublime', where he proposes a justification for the inequalities needed to attain aesthetic peaks, as in Zen-oriented arts or imperial gardens (2013a: 165).

It is also important to remember that the attention to silence, in itself and as a medium for a healthy language, is entirely consistent with the political and cultural revisionism that was at the core of the so-called 'symposium on modernity' held in Kyoto in July 1942. This symposium gathered together a prominent group of Japanese intellectuals to discuss how Japan should have approached modernity and Westernisation; it represents a cornerstone in Japanese public discourse, underpinning the creation or ratification of an exceptionalistic and essentialised culture. During the colloquium, writer and literary critic Kamei Katsuichirō expressed his 'regret for the decline of sensitivity towards words', which he paired with the decline of Japanese 'spirit', overwhelmed by noises, slogans, and clichés produced by the speed of modernity (Harootunian 2000: 71–73). Tanizaki's 1933 praise of shadows and nuances — which Calvino owned in French (*Éloge de l'ombre*, 1977) and Italian (*Libro d'ombra*, 1982) — went hand in hand with this configuration of Japan as an auratic place of 'uncanny silence', in deliberate opposition to the West (Najita and Harootunian 1989: 753–54). This ideological framework must be kept in mind when approaching analyses of Japanese conceptions and traditions, since they are often constructed in order to validate reactionary stances, while presenting themselves as neutral statements on an alleged Japanese 'essence'.

Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, for example, in his essay on 'The Japanese Attitude to Nature', identifies the weakness of logocentric orientation at the root of many Japanese cultural constructions. He highlights a prevalent mythocentric ontological discourse, as opposed to a logocentric one, in order to explain Japanese religious

syncretism and the 'very successful dilution of whatever principled differences had existed between [...] Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism' (1995: 204). Moreover, Eisenstadt refers to the 'relative devaluation of the subject as against the environment' as a way of explaining a semiotic construction based on a 'topological-metaphorical relationship between subject and environment', rather than on the 'active ordering, structuring or "mastering" of the environment' that language entails (205). Eisenstadt's view constitutes an ideological construction itself, in which it is difficult to establish whether the devaluation of the subject in the environment causes, or rather is caused by, the devaluation of linguistic means. Nevertheless, the non-centrality of language in a larger-than-human world, which characterises any natureculture and to which the Japanese certainly give space, is apt to connect the ecological awareness from which it arises and the spiritual outcomes to which it gives rise.

Even the grammatical structure of Japanese has been conceived as strictly connected to the formation of the so-called *milieu* in Japan. In Berque's view, the redundancy of the grammatical subject in Japanese (a null-subject language) would result in a glorification of the collective subject at the expense of the individual (1997: 223). Communication is supposed to happen more fully between the self and other agents of the surrounding environment (humans included, but by no means exclusively), rather than between individuals only, in a non-verbal context that prevails over the verbal. As seen when discussing Berque's definition of the Japanese *milieu*, natural and social environments intertwine, and the subject (and, accordingly, language) allegedly pervades these realms with a greater harmony than in other cultures. For this reason, the Japanese language would gesture towards an expansive, naturecultural understanding of communication.

The most recent neuroscientific studies, as well as Buddhist analyses of mind, have connected 'reflexivity, and the linguistic categorizations associated with it, with cognitive processes (*viññāna*) that have been built up through the accumulating, epigenetic cycles of dependent arising' (Waldron 2002: 33). In other words, human mind and language are nothing more than the embodiment of previous experience, and thus reflect and respond to the environment within which they dependently co-arise. While this characteristic does not distinguish Japanese from any other language, Japanese and other logographic linguistic systems, where 'ideograms are supposed to have specific, inherent meanings unrelated to how you might express them' (Unger 2003: 114), are noteworthy for their concrete representation of the mutual embeddedness of language and environment, and their potential disposal of sounds in favour of pure visuality. In the final part of this chapter we will see how these specificities of Japanese language inform novels that are both attentive to non-human languages and open towards silent non-conceptuality.

2.2.2. *Literary Expressions of Silent Non-conceptuality*

In this section, we will first sketch the representation of the other-than-human in human language, then move on to analysis of literary expressions of silence in the books Calvino had the opportunity to read. The most compelling example of nature's anthropomorphic voice is certainly Sōseki's *I Am a Cat*, mentioned in the previous chapter, whose narrator and main protagonist is a teacher's domestic cat. Sōseki does not create a brand-new language to let his cat express his view on the lives of middle-class Japanese men and women, but rather assigns him an ordinary form of expression. Yet, it is a witty, eccentric non-human voice to which the reader grows accustomed. This is also in play in Sōseki's *Kokoro* (1914), which reports in detail the relationship between a young man and what he identifies as his *sensei*, while reconstructing the latter's youth and the reasons behind his decision to commit suicide.³⁵ In a passage of this book, the human voice of one of the characters (K) beats Sensei's consciousness 'like the waves of the sea' (Sōseki 1957: 205). The book is riddled with similar comparisons: Sensei often likens his mental state 'to a tide, which ebbs and flows continually' (Sōseki 1957: 210) and describes his 'sense of defeat' as 'so violent that it seemed to spin around in [his] head like a whirlpool' (Sōseki 1957: 228).³⁶

Mishima's *Runaway Horses* offers another instance of the interconnection of human and more-than-human forms of communication when bestowing intentional sounds and attributes on natural phenomena: 'He [Isao] could sense the peril of the ice catching the full force of the evening sun. He felt as if he could hear distant, shrill cries of pain as it was being ruthlessly dissolved by the final heat of summer' (Mishima 1975b: 194). The Italian translation of the same passage, which Calvino had at his disposal alongside the English one, personifies more strongly both ice and summer heat: 'Poteva quasi sentire il senso di pericolo che emanava da quella massa esposta ai violenti raggi del sole calante, come se avvertisse in lontananza lo stridulo lamento del ghiaccio che andava sciogliendosi sotto l'impetosa calura dell'estate morente' (Mishima 2010: 187).³⁷

Moreover, in Kawabata's *Snow Country* and *Sound of the Mountain* (1954), the echoing sounds of alpine landscapes suggest a vagueness that has been compared to the ambiguity characterising Japanese language itself.³⁸ This ambiguity, stemming from Kawabata's poetic spirit, allows us to turn our attention to the delicate forms of expression composing haiku, the quintessentially Japanese form of poetry, at times defined as 'not a product of intellection' on the grounds of its openness towards a sensibility beyond rationality (Suzuki 1959: 227). Haiku's features often chime with Buddhist precepts, first among them the relational view of existence.³⁹ Silence itself is thus perceivable only through or after other noises or sensual perceptions:

Danze, per la festa di tutti i defunti.
Dopo, sussurro del vento tra i pini
e frinire di insetti
(Sogetsu in Iarocci 2014: 23)

[As the festival dancing dies,
the sound of the wind in the pine trees
and the insects' voices.]

Dilegua
l'eco della campana del tempio;
persiste
la fragranza delicata dei fiori.
Ed è sera —
(Matsuo Bashō in Iarocci 2014: 53)

[Temple bells die out.
The fragrant blossoms remain.
A perfect evening!]

Il sole esita a tramontare —
Dalla montagna
mi giunge un'eco
in questo canto di Kyoto
(Yosa Buson in Iarocci 2014: 74)

[Slowly passing days,
with an echo heard here in a
corner of Kyoto.]

When contrasted with different forms of language, silence contributes to the relativisation of language itself and to the understanding of communication as an inherently dialectical process in which all beings have equal footing.

Haiku also represents the ability of silence to testify to the non-verbal continuity between human and non-human forms:

'Oh, guarda!
e null'altro da proferire,
dinanzi ai ciliegi in fiore
del monte Yoshino
(Yasuhara Teishitsu in Iarocci 2014: 71)⁴⁰

['Ah!' I said, 'Ah!'
that was all I could say —
cherry blossoms of Mount Yoshino]

What Western aesthetics tends to define as 'sublime' is traditionally referred to in Japanese aesthetics as *yūgen*, 'true beauty and gentleness', a set of feelings that, according to Nō playwright Zeami, cannot be expressed through words (Ray 2020). These feelings, customarily inspired by nature, reach a 'transcendental beauty behind the surface that exists on another plane of reality to which the work of art may help to lead the reader' (Rimer 1978: 16). Andrea Zanzotto, in his introduction to Iarocci's *Cento haiku*, remarks that haiku rely on a specific rhetorical tool for evoking the silence that lies beneath, within, and above material reality (2014: 9). He refers to the use of *kireji*, barely translatable pause-words strikingly similar to *men* and *de* in ancient Greek, whose value is that of a rest, as precious as semantically useless.

The non-conceptual realm of silence variously emerges also in Calvino's Japanese narrative books. The story of Sōseki's *I Am a Cat* fades away into silence when the cat, who is both the main character and narrator, slowly drifts into peace through death. This final embrace of silence and death might testify to Sōseki's understanding of Shin Buddhism as concerned primarily with peace and sustenance in the next world, thus with the transcendence of materiality altogether.⁴¹ But Buddhism is far from dominating the scene of Japanese modern literature. For example, Endō Shūsaku's *Silence* (1966) addresses the problem of the silence of the Christian God, as experienced by a Jesuit missionary in seventeenth-century Japan. Endō was brought up as a Roman Catholic, an Easterner with a Western faith, a condition which did not fail to cause him interior troubles, but which also prompted his literary work.⁴² Even this different religious perspective entails an overcoming of dualities such as immanence and transcendence, as well as silence and communication. As Endō comments on his novel: 'I wasn't writing that God was "silent", but that there was a "voice in the silence"' (Endō 1994: 99).

Many novels have attracted psychoanalytic interpretations focused on silence. In Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, in which the male protagonist Eguchi pays to sleep beside sleeping girls, the reader is confronted with a form of unidirectional communication at a level beyond language. The subject, alienated and oppressed by law (thus by language), is unconsciously desirous of a return to the body of the mother, the quintessentially pre-linguistic place.⁴³ The silence in which Kawabata's character seeks refuge is strictly connected to the continuum of nature, which is represented in the novel by a uterine place, from which language cuts the individual apart. Remarkably, this interpretation is in line with the hypothesis that the transcendence of the materiality of human condition could be gained by reappropriating a child-like mind. Another text Calvino owned, *Vita Sexualis* (1909) by Mori Ōgai, revolves around the sensuality and sexual desires of a professor of philosophy, from his adolescence to his adulthood, and is shot through by the protagonist's familiarity with the subconscious meaning of the language of symbols.⁴⁴ Here the reader is confronted again with the depths of silence as a form of non- or hyper-communication, beneath or beyond common language.

Such multifaceted approaches to language and silence in Calvino's curious explorations of Japanese literature are as diverse as the historical periods, literary trends, and genres to which they relate. The aim of this brief overview is not to speculate on the possibility of some direct filiation between Calvino's Japanese reflections and this corpus of texts, since silence and languages are themes Calvino had addressed previously, and are in any case traceable in almost any national literary tradition. It is nonetheless clear that Calvino's late non-anthropocentric humanism resonates profoundly with the forms of Buddhism and Japanese art and literature he explored in the 1970s and 1980s, and that the deconstruction of different forms of logocentrism is closely related to his cross-cultural exchange with Japan, no less eloquent and substantive for its trajectory towards silence.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. As far as the history and theory of biosemiotics are concerned, I am mainly referring to the essential work conducted by Wendy Wheeler (2006; 2011; 2015; 2016a; 2016b) and Jesper Hoffmeyer (1997; 2015).
2. For this understanding of the mutual imbrication of nature and culture, which hopefully clarifies my own occasional use of inverted commas to refer to 'nature' and 'culture', I am following Wheeler (2006).
3. Francesca Bernardini Napoletano (1977) and Franco Ricci (1984) have focused on the presence of silence as a theme, respectively, in *Le città invisibili* and *Gli amori difficili*. Here I aim to sketch more broadly the evolution of Calvino's treatment of silence from his early works to his mature literary output, after the point when a Japanese influence can be retraced as effecting a poetic and philosophical turn in how silence is envisioned and reproduced on the page.
4. I am following, in turn, Antonello (1995: 217).
5. Angela Borghesi pays close attention to Calvino's not infrequent lapses of botanical accuracy, even in *Il barone rampante* (2019; 2023).
6. I am here paraphrasing Mario Calvino's programmatic presentation of *L'Agricoltura figure*, a periodical established in 1901. See also Forneris (2004: 25–26).
7. I am borrowing from Emanuele Coccia, who in turn adopts from the Stoics, the view of three possible forms of union among substances and objects: simple juxtaposition (*parathesis*), fusion (*sunchusis*), and total mixture (*krasis*) (2019: 50). In my opinion, Calvino moves from the former to the latter: in mixture, things (in this case, languages and silence) can occupy each other's place, while preserving their distinctive qualities, as opposed to fusion, where they change qualities in the name of a newly formed unity.
8. See RR2, 377–78; 387; 431; 442; 447; 458.
9. See, among others, Bernardini Napoletano (1977: 195), Harris (1990: 79–80), Milanini (1990: 132), Bonsaver (1994: 168), Zancan (1996: 890–98), and Brera (2011: 281). For 'a careful reading of the connection between language, communication, and the game of chess as it stretches across the novel [*Le città invisibili*] with a particular emphasis on illustrating how Calvino's representation of chess resonates with the global medieval history of the game', see Kumar (2023).
10. I am here reporting an anecdote related to me by Professor Wada during one of our conversations in Kyoto in April 2019.
11. Calvino's interest in semiology is testified by a relevant number of references to Barthes in his essays: 'Cibernetica e fantasmi' (S, 208); 'Due interviste su scienza e letteratura' (S, 229–31); 'L'ordinatore dei desideri' (S, 284–85, nn. 5/7; 288; 298; 302–03, nn. 39–40; 306, n. 48); 'I livelli della realtà in letteratura' (S, 389); and 'In memoria di Roland Barthes' (S, 481–86), to name a few.
12. See, among others: 'Cibernetica e fantasmi' (S, 207); 'Roberto Calasso, *La rovina di Kasch*' (S, 1021–22); 'La mappa delle metafore (Il *Pentamerone* di G.B. Basile)' (S, 1598); 'La tradizione popolare nelle fiabe' (S, 1612–15; 1617–18); and '*Lo sguardo da lontano* di Claude Lévi-Strauss' (S, 2067–76).
13. When reaching this awareness, Calvino undoubtedly follows in the footsteps of Barthes's 'The Unknown Language': 'The dream: to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication or vulgarity; to know, positively refracted in a new language, the impossibilities of our own; to learn the systematics of the inconceivable' (Barthes 1982: 6).
14. Harris also highlights that Calvino 'both describes and enacts — in elegant, deliberate, incremental sentence segments — a central element in Japanese garden design: how each stone, each step, provides a new perspective' (2023: 16).
15. Barthes similarly explores the non-logocentric hypothesis in 'Without Words': '*How did you deal with the language?* Subtext: *How did you satisfy that vital need of communication?* Or more precisely, an ideological assertion masked by the practical interrogation: *there is no communication except in*

- speech*. Now it happens that in this country (Japan) the empire of signifiers is so immense, so in excess of speech, that the exchange of signs remains of a fascinating richness, mobility, and subtlety, despite the opacity of the language, sometimes even as a consequence of that opacity' (Barthes 1982: 9–10, emphases in the original text). However, Barthes's focus, for example in 'Without Words', is decisively on human bodies as exceptional semiotic subjects, able to communicate through 'eyes, smile, hair, gestures, clothing', as opposed to the voice (1982: 10).
16. Eric Cazdyn has advanced a stimulating re-theorisation of praxis in his comparative analysis of Buddhism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis (2015). Praxis 'as the problem of the relation between theory and practice' or, better, as 'the desire to unite theory and practice', has always affected Buddhism, emerging in the commitment to the question of enlightenment as 'an unthinkable, undreamable, unknowable state that can only be thought, dreamed, and known from a state of non-enlightenment' (2015: 106; 110).
 17. Baldi effectively defines Palomar as exploring 'the "pancryptic" nature of the visible surface of the world' (2019: 77).
 18. Domenico Scarpa individuates the most moving feature of a character like Palomar in his contradictory desires to let the world speak and, at the same time, to leave it untouched (1999: 206).
 19. In 'Cercare la complessità', Calvino elucidates that *Palomar* addresses '[la] problematica del non-linguistico: cioè come si può leggere qualche cosa che non è scritto, per esempio le onde del mare' (SNiA, 572–73) [the non-linguistic issue: that is, how to read something that is not written, such as the waves in the sea].
 20. Japanese artist Arakawa Shūsaku, whom Calvino knew and appreciated, similarly challenged conventional mental and bodily perceptions of the world, so as to make sense of it in a renewed fashion (Weller 2003: 47).
 21. Already in 1975, Teresa de Lauretis identified Calvino's 'poetic and ideological vision' as one where 'human activity is at once "doing" and "saying", praxis and poiesis' (1975: 423).
 22. See chapters I, II, XI, XV, XVI of *Tao Te Ching*, among others.
 23. Iovino defines this anti-subjective view of identity as fundamentally ecological (2007: 120). Both quotes come from essays Calvino wrote in the late 1970s: respectively, 'Usi politici giusti e sbagliati della letteratura' (1976), and 'Identità' (1977).
 24. See, among many other sources on Japanese culture and art, Hane (2013: 55).
 25. In the Norton Lecture dedicated to 'Leggerezza', Calvino refers to Buddha when discussing the parity of every being (S, 638), in line with his interest in a genuine reconfiguration of society as including human and non-human individuals on the same level: 'Credo in una società di tutti gli esseri viventi, e delle piante, e degli oggetti, e delle pietre. Penso che se ho un'anima io, ce l'hanno anche i cosiddetti oggetti inanimati' (SNiA, 630) [I believe in a society including all living beings, and plants, and objects, and stones. I think that if I have a soul, then even the so-called inanimate objects have one].
 26. In the fourth chapter, I will discuss at greater length the structure of *Palomar*. For Boon, Cazdyn, and Morton, dialectic itself binds the Frankfurt School–Hegel–Lacan line to Buddhism (2015: 12), and can account for different cross-cultural forms of engagement with it.
 27. My comparative interpretation of yoga and *Palomar* validates Baldi's view, according to which eyes in *Palomar* 'are part of a body, environment and mind, not just the disembodied eye of Descartes, nor of a Monsieur Teste who abandons the body' (2019: 76–77).
 28. See also Devall and Sessions (1985: 100–01).
 29. See Shaner (1989: 174–78).
 30. As far as meditation in Buddhism is concerned, see Tollini (2018: 667–68).
 31. See Tollini (2018: 668). It is not secondary to note that Ryōan-ji, the temple Calvino visited and described both in 'La luna corre dietro alla luna' in *Collezione di sabbia* and 'L'aiola di sabbia' in *Palomar* belongs to the Myōshinji school of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism.
 32. The 'logic' of Zen is discussed by Sueki (2018: 45).
 33. Morton has often defined the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction as an 'idea-virus, so to speak, whose virulence is still operational' but can be opposed through Buddhist meditation (2015: 244).

34. See Hane (2013: 31–32).
35. As the translator notes at the beginning of the book, ‘the English word “teacher” which comes closest in meaning to the Japanese word *sensei* is not satisfactory [...]. The French word *maître* would express better what is meant by *sensei*’ (Sōseki 1957: 1, n. 1).
36. See also Viglielmo (1976: 176–78).
37. Calvino had both *Runaway Horses*, translated by Michael Gallagher (Tuttle, 1974) and *Cavalli in fuga*, translated by Riccardo Mainardi (Bompiani, 1983).
38. See Boardman (1971: 103).
39. See Colligan–Taylor (1990: 26).
40. Haiku collected by Iarocci are quoted in their Italian translation, which is the version Calvino had the opportunity to read.
41. This line of interpretation has mainly been proposed by Mizukawa and others (2007: 154).
42. See also Rimer (1978: 252–53).
43. I am referring here to a reading of *House of the Sleeping Beauties* advanced by Mebed (2019).
44. See Nakai (1980: 230).

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