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We Animals, We Cyborgs:  
Rethinking Anthropocentrism in Postwar Italian Literature

By

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requirements for the degree of

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in

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Committee in charge:

Professor Barbara Spackman, Chair

Professor Mia Fuller

Professor Katherine Snyder

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## Abstract

We Animals, We Cyborgs:  
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The challenge to anthropocentrism is at the core of critical animal studies, that draws from and contributes to the reflections of posthumanistic thought. By turning their attention from what are usually considered criteria to separate and place in a hierarchy human and nonhuman animals (most prominently, reason and language) to what they have in common, namely their embeddedness and materiality, the animal studies challenges at their very roots the humanistic ideals that dictate what a human beings are, how they look like, what their privileges are. As Cary Wolfe puts it, “underneath them all [human and nonhuman animals] [...] is a shared finitude, a shared ‘passivity’ [...] that runs directly counter to the liberal model of the subject as above all a creature of volition, autonomy, and agency” (*Posthumanism* 139). By shifting the focus from agency to vulnerability, animal studies seeks to transfigure a principle of exclusion into a common, constitutive ground on which to envision a new way of conceiving the relations among living beings.

In this dissertation I analyze texts that reject, each in its own way, the neatness of the distinction between humanness and animality. Their four authors - Federico Tozzi (1883-1920), Anna Maria Ortese (1914-1998), Primo Levi (1919-1987), and Paolo Volponi (1924-1994) - populate their pages with human characters who look at and interact with nonhuman animals as characters in their own right, and not as mere rhetorical and symbolic props or projections of human feelings, states of mind, or behaviors. The attitude of these writers and of (most of) their characters is born of the intuition of what all animals, human and non human, share - namely their finitude, their vulnerability, the thick, inescapable materiality of their bodies. In this intuition is the germ of a challenge to anthropocentrism through the implicit and sometimes explicit critique of the Cartesian paradigms of mind/body dualism and of the animal-machine, both based on the preeminence of reason as the criterion for the ontological superiority of (a selected few) human animals.

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## Introduction

Un tempo io fui già fanciullo e fanciulla, arbusto,  
 uccello e muto pesce che salta fuori dal mare.  
 Da un frammento di Empedocle  
 (Primo Levi, “Autobiografia”)<sup>1</sup>  
 [Once I was both boy and girl, bush,  
 bird and silent fish jumping out the sea.  
 From a fragment by Empedocles  
 (Primo Levi, “Autobiography”)]<sup>2</sup>

The epigraph to Primo Levi’s poem “Autobiografia” [“Autobiography”] presents an “I” with a composite heritage, cutting through time, genders, species, plant and animal life. With this quotation from Empedocles and the poem itself, whose lyrical voice is Empedocles’, Levi is pointing to a continuum that is temporal and ontological, and he is inserting himself into a philosophical lineage that is characterized by a not-too-neat distinction between human and nonhuman animals: from the fragments he left, we know that Empedocles argued that every entity on earth is caught up in endless cycles during which four material elements (fire, air, earth, and water) combine and recombine under the pressure of two opposing forces, Love and Strife.<sup>3</sup> Empedocles’ repeated cosmogonies differ dramatically from the biblical Genesis: no God is bestowing on a single species the right to dominate the planet; no hierarchy of beings is created; the mere fact of being composed of the same four combining elements establishes an affinity and a sort of equality among all the different entities inhabiting the earth.

The texts I analyze in this dissertation all reject, each in its own way, the neatness of the distinction between humanness and animality. Their four authors - Federigo Tozzi (1883-1920), Anna Maria Ortese (1914-1998), Primo Levi (1919-1987), and Paolo Volponi (1924-1994) - populate their pages with human characters who look at and interact with nonhuman animals as characters in their own right, and not as mere rhetorical and symbolic props or projections of human feelings, states of mind, or behaviors. The attitude of these writers and of (most of) their characters is born of the intuition of what all animals, human and non human, share - namely their finitude, their vulnerability, the thick, inescapable materiality of their bodies. In this intuition is the germ of a challenge to anthropocentrism through the implicit and sometimes explicit critique of the Cartesian paradigms of mind/body dualism and of the animal-machine, both based on the preeminence of reason as the criterion for the ontological superiority of (a selected few) human animals.

### 1. The Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism and Animal Studies

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<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi, *Ranocchi sulla luna e altri animali*, ed. Ernesto Ferrero (Torino: Einaudi, 2014), 205.

<sup>2</sup> Primo Levi, “Collected Poems,” trans. Jonathan Galassi, in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, ed. Ann Goldstein (New York, NY: Liveright, 2015), 1865-2007.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Parry, “Empedocles,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. March 04, 2005. Accessed August 08, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empeodocles/>.



The challenge to anthropocentrism is at the core of critical animal studies, the theoretical framework I am adopting for the analysis of these works, that draws from and contributes to the reflections of posthumanistic thought. By turning their attention from what are usually considered criteria to separate and place in a hierarchy human and nonhuman animals (most prominently, reason and language) to what they have in common, namely their embeddedness and materiality, the works I analyze challenge at their very roots the humanistic ideals that dictate what a human beings are, how they look like, what their privileges are. As Cary Wolfe puts it, “underneath them all [human and nonhuman animals] [...] is a shared finitude, a shared ‘passivity’ [...] that runs directly counter to the liberal model of the subject as above all a creature of volition, autonomy, and agency” (*Posthumanism* 139).<sup>4</sup> By shifting the focus from agency to vulnerability, animal studies seeks to transfigure a principle of exclusion into a common, constitutive ground on which to envision a new way of conceiving the relations among living beings.

Criticizing anthropocentrism implies unveiling and disrupting the process behind what Giorgio Agamben calls anthropogenesis, “the becoming human of the living being” (79), which is predicated on “the anthropological machine which [...] is at work in our culture. Insofar as the production of man through the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman, is at stake here, the machine necessarily functions by means of an exclusion [...] and an inclusion” (37).<sup>5</sup> The process of anthropogenesis bestows on (a few selected) human animals the right to subordinate, exploit, and exclude from their community those who are deemed non-human or not human enough; human entitlement is justified in light of the dogmatic Cartesian *cogito*, that confers to human animals an alleged monopoly on rationality, which manifests itself in the use of language and in the exercise of free will.

A growing body of scientific findings has dispelled the illusion of a human monopoly on the possession of rationality; these fact notwithstanding, animal studies does not aim at expanding the membership in the higher tier of beings to deserving, rational nonhuman companions, but rather at rejecting the mind/body dualism and “the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism” (*Posthumanism* xv) altogether, in order to devise a new and more inclusive form of community. Cary Wolfe suggests that this new community shall be founded on “an ethics based not on ability, activity, agency, and empowerment but on a compassion that is rooted in our vulnerability and passivity - ‘this non-power at the heart of power,’ as Derrida puts it” (*Posthumanism* 141).<sup>6</sup>

The notion of agency is at the heart of the divergence between humanistic and posthumanistic concepts of animality and humanness. For humanism, only a rational being can exert agency, because agency relies on free will, a faculty supposedly reserved to human animals, while their nonhuman companions behave according to blind, mechanistic instincts. According to this conception, human animals are autonomous, self-fashioning entities, whose subjectivity is a

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<sup>4</sup> Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> The dismissal of agency and empowerment as a feature of posthumanism is not uncontroversial among scholars: Rosi Braidotti, in her book *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2017) writes: “For me it is impossible, both intellectually and ethically, to disengage the positive elements of Humanism from their problematic counterparts: individualism breeds egotism and self-centeredness; self-determination can turn to arrogance and domination; and science is not free from its own dogmatic tendencies” (29). The three elements that Braidotti deems positive (individualism, self-determination, science) are fundamental parts of her (liberal) political conception: they are the means through which agency can be exerted. Instead of seeing agency as a fetish (Wolfe), Braidotti sees it as extendable to all animals, human and nonhuman alike, as she makes explicit in this passage: “In opposition to the [...] tendency to melancholia on the part of the progressive Left (Derrida, [...] Butler [...]), I want to argue that the posthuman emphasis on life/*zoe* itself can engender affirmative politics.” (130)

product of their own minds, expressed through language. Posthumanistic thought, on the other hand, conceives of human subjectivity as the product of a continuous process of negotiation with the surrounding environment and the organic and inorganic entities that inhabit it. As Pramod Nayar summarizes,

Human life is what is traversed by and embedded in flows of life that cut across species, life forms and inanimate things. If human evolution depends to a very large extent on its neighbouring species as well, then does it not follow that human life, or subjectivity, is inextricably linked to these other life forms? (79)<sup>7</sup>

The ethical implications of animals studies are readily evident, and empathy and compassion were arguably the points of departure for the development of the discipline. Its reflections on the power dynamics that inform the interactions between human and nonhuman animals enrich the discourse of biopolitics, intended as “the broad investigation of the impact of power apparatuses on the biological dimension of human and nonhuman animals. Simply put, these biopolitical implications are the effects of political and ideological power on the lives of both man and animal” (Gilebbi 100).<sup>8</sup>

Animal studies’ (and posthumanism’s) overall rethinking of anthropocentrism has epistemological underpinnings and implications as well, because it challenges the preeminence of logocentrism as the vehicle for experiencing, knowing, and inhabiting the world. A formidable attack to logocentrism, along with concrete proofs that non-language-based ways of experiencing reality are not just a hypothesis but a reality even for many human animals, come from the sister field of disability studies.<sup>9</sup> The living example that knowledge can be achieved through different senses are human animals such as the autism activist Temple Grandin, who lacks the skill of “thinking in words,” but has the ability to “think in pictures.” Her visual and sensorial perception of reality allows her to experience the world in ways that happen to be very similar to cattle’s; her sensorial empathy enables her to understand why and how cattle feel distress and how to offer them physical relief. Grandin has designed “one third of all the livestock-handling facilities in the United States” (*Posthumanism* 128), and thanks to her disability these facilities can handle cattle more humanely. Once she said: “«I would be denied the ability to think by scientists who maintain that language is essential for thinking.»” Grandin is living proof that a strict application of logocentric humanism would exclude from the ranks of humankind even certified human animals.

My first taste of animal studies was Jacques Derrida’s seminal essay “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),”<sup>10</sup> and the scholars by whom I was influenced the most belong to the “American” strand of posthumanistic thought that eagerly received his thinking on animals and is further developing his theoretical heritage. The most prominent and prolific among these scholars is Cary Wolfe; the ideas of Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, and Ursula K. Heise were also instrumental in my research. Donna Haraway’s and Katherine Hayles’ works on critical

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<sup>7</sup> Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Polity Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Matteo Gilebbi, “Animal Metaphors, Biopolitics, and the Animal Question: Mario Luzi, Giorgio Agamben, and the Human-Animal Divide,” in *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, ed. Deborah Amberson and Elena Past (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 93-107.

<sup>9</sup> Here I am focusing on the epistemological implications of posthumanism, but obviously disability studies aims at dismantling the fetishization of agency and autonomy.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” in *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (January 01, 2002): 369-418.

cybernetics helped me see and feel the connections between that strand of posthumanism and animal studies.

What drew me to posthumanism was the insight it could offer into the “crisis of humanism [...] brought on [...] first by structuralism and then poststructuralism and its interrogation of the figure of the human as constitutive (rather than technically, materially, and discursively constituted) stuff of history and the social” (*Zoontologies* x-xi).<sup>11</sup> Once one tries to zero in on the concept of “human” and on the elements that supposedly distinguish us human beings from other animals, concepts such as agency, consciousness, free will reveal themselves in all their slipperiness, and a *rational* justification for our self-assigned exceptionalism becomes less and less tenable. While the irony of invoking rationality as warrant for opposing logocentrism does not escape me, I like the idea that Logos, after being the main pretext for our illegitimate domination, may become the means to our dethronement.

## 2. Animal Studies and Italian Studies: The Current Landscape and My Contribution

In recent years, the posthumanistic perspective, and animal studies in particular, have gained momentum among scholars of Italian literature and arts. The essays collected in *Thinking Italian Animals* (2014) cover a vast array of authors and engage with posthumanistic concerns connected to animal studies, namely ecocriticism (Serenella Iovino 215-232, Elena Past 233-250 among others) and biopolitics (Matteo Gilebbi 93-107, Giuseppina Mecchia 129-144). As Elena Past and Deborah Amberson write in their introduction to the collection, Italy has long contributed to the posthumanistic debate with its philosophers, thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Marchesini, Roberto Esposito, Rosi Braidotti. The interest toward the discipline was evident at the 2018 AAIS conference, where eight panels were explicitly devoted to posthumanistic issues.

With this dissertation I want to contribute to the discourse on humanness and animality in the Italian context by presenting four authors who are connected in different but significant ways to the Italy of the 1960s, the years of the economic “boom” and of momentous social changes. Three of the works I analyze were either issued or started in the middle of the decade: Anna Maria Ortese’s *L’Iguana* was published in 1965, Primo Levi’s *Storie naturali* in 1966, and the first draft of Paolo Volponi’s *Corporale* was written between the fall of 1965 and the summer of 1966. A few years earlier, during the academic year 1961-1962, Giacomo Debenedetti had delivered his lectures on Tozzi and specifically on *Bestie*, developing the concepts of *personaggio-uomo* and “animalization” that will be examined in Chapter 1; these lectures and his 1963 essay on Tozzi’s novel *Con gli occhi chiusi* rescued Tozzi from the oblivion in which he had been enveloped for the decades following his death (1920).

It is my contention that what impelled these authors to examine closely the fabric of the human and allowed them to perceive the rigid boundary between human and nonhuman animals as deceptive and arbitrary were the economic, social, and cultural changes that were taking place in the 1960s in Italy, a country suddenly catapulted into modernity by a rapid industrialization. Modernization either left intact or further enhanced endemic divisions and disparities (disparities between the South and the rest of the country, city and countryside, men and women, to mention a few). The international situation was another source of anxiety: the Cold War was brewing, the nuclear threat real (the atomic bomb is a menacing presence in both Levi’s and Volponi’s works), and the whole country still bore the signs of World War II. Human animals as a species were becoming more and more powerful and potentially destructive, while the single individuals were

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<sup>11</sup> Cary Wolfe, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Pr., 2003).

left to grapple with their helplessness and vulnerability. Alfonso Berardinelli's description of Volponi's characters would fit most of the characters of the works I analyze: "Il loro incontro con tutto ciò che è moderno, razionale, industriale, organizzato è un incontro fatto di sproporzioni e di malintesi" ["Their encounter with everything that is modern, rational, industrial, organized is an encounter made of disproportions and misunderstandings"] (302).<sup>12</sup> The period when Tozzi lived and wrote was characterized by an existential and epistemological crisis not less severe than the one experienced in the 1960s: as Giorgio Cavallini writes, between the nineteenth and the twentieth century,

Venute meno le certezze del positivismo [...], nuove proposte interpretative della realtà, come la teoria quantistica di Max Planck e la teoria della relatività di Albert Einstein, ne rivelano la complessità e la contraddittorietà; si riscopre la finitezza dell'uomo [...]; si smarrisce la fiducia di poter istituire un rapporto saldo con il reale [...]. (103)<sup>13</sup>

[Positivistic certainties were vanished [...], and reality was revealed to be complex and contradictory by new interpretive proposals such as Max Planck's quantum theory and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity; human finitude was rediscovered [...]; the confidence in the possibility of establishing a steady relation to reality was lost [...].]

Debenedetti must have felt a deep sympathy for Tozzi's characters, who, like the characters created by Ortese, Levi, and Volponi, find themselves at a loss in environments where they cannot exert any control, cannot achieve any knowledge, and are at the mercy of the circumstances. These characters are stripped of the illusion in which the liberal subject informed by the values of liberal humanism basks, the illusion of possessing as a birthright "a coherent, rational self, the right of that self to autonomy and freedom, and a sense of agency linked with a belief in enlightened self-interest" (Hayles 85-86).

I am not the first scholar to analyze the active presence of nonhuman animals in the works of these four authors. To mention a few relevant contributions, Deborah Amberson wrote extensively on Federigo Tozzi's representation of physical manifestations and sensorial experiences, reflecting on the process of "animalization" undergone by his human characters; Marianna Deganutti, Tatiana Crivelli, and Inge Lanslots wrote on Anna Maria Ortese's nonhuman creatures; Charlotte Ross reflected on corporeality and embodiment in the works of Primo Levi, and Damiano Benvegnù has published extensively on the topic of animality in Levi; Matteo Gilebbi worked on Paolo Volponi's poetry and Daniele Fioretti wrote an essay on the posthumanistic aspects of Volponi's narrative.

In the following chapters I will follow Tozzi, Ortese, Levi, and Volponi as they grapple with remapping the abyss dividing human and nonhuman animals, and I will pay attention to the lingering humanistic aspects of their narratives and of their thoughts, in order to understand both the appeal of and the resistance to a radical rejection of the anthropocentric view of reality.

Chapter 1 is devoted to Federigo Tozzi and to his extremely short but extremely dense book, *Bestie*. The nonchalant interactions of its protagonist with nonhuman animals and with natural and inorganic entities shift the attention from a rational approach to reality to the material quality of experience. Chapter 2 analyzes Anna Maria Ortese's "animal trilogy" (*L'Iguana, Il cardillo addolorato, Alonso e i visionari*) and traces her reflections on the evils of human rationality and on the

<sup>12</sup> Alfonso Berardinelli, *Casi Critici: Dal Postmoderno Alla Mutazione* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Giorgio Cavallini, *Verga, Tozzi, Biamonti: Tre tritici con una premessa comune* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1998).

necessity to build a more inclusive community of beings based on our shared vulnerability. In Chapter 3, Primo Levi and Paolo Volponi show some reluctance to renegotiate the divide between human and nonhuman animals, but they launch their attacks to anthropocentrism by blurring the divide between human animals and machines.

## Chapter 1

### **Animality, *Anima*, Animism: Federigo Tozzi's Surrender to Posthumanism**

The reader who enters the world created by Federigo Tozzi with *Bestie* (1917), finds herself walking in a blurry landscape, where the contours of bodies and objects are indefinite, buildings do not stay firm on their foundations, walls threaten to close in on people.<sup>14</sup> At times an uncanny continuity is established between bodies and natural entities, abstract concepts and physical realities: book illustrations escape from the pages to threaten the characters, objects transform into daggers sinking into human soul.<sup>15</sup> Time also eludes the reader, providing no clue to help him orient herself.

In a narrative work, a clear-cut separation between a body and the elements of the environment that surrounds it is the most basic way in which an author leads his readers to identify a character, to single out its profile, carving it from indistinctness. The reader of *Bestie* has a very different experience, because Tozzi's prose invites the reader to engage with the text in an effort to disembroil the human characters from their entanglement with everything else: "Mi ricorderò sempre dei bei prati verdi che cominciavano dalla mia anima e da' miei piedi, e finivano quasi all'orizzonte" ["I will always remember the pretty green fields that started from my soul and my feet and ended almost at the horizon"] (27). Where does the grass end and the soul begin? How much do feet have in common with grass?

The physical blurriness of the narrative elements (characters and objects alike) is the correlative of a more far-reaching, fundamental one: in *Bestie* the very traits of what, according to most Western thinkers, can be considered a standard human being, lose their sharp definition. Tozzi presents to the reader human characters whose features are partially at odds with those of "man" as defined by humanistic tradition. In the pages that follow, I will analyze how the narrative of Tozzi's *Bestie* questions basic humanistic tenets and invites the reader to rethink the notion of humanness, especially in light of the encounter with nonhuman animals.

#### 1. The Decline of Rationality and the Emergence of Animalization

*Bestie*, a series of 69 short and very short narrations, ranging from a single line to approximately six pages, is told by an unnamed narrator who speaks mostly in the first person. These narrations are called aphorisms by some scholars, but I think that the term vignettes, used by Nelson Moe among

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<sup>14</sup> All the excerpts from *Bestie* are from: Federigo Tozzi, *Bestie* (Firenze: Le Cáriti, 2006). All the translations in this chapter are mine - I thank Zack Bekowies and Kyle Thomson for their help. Here are some quotations in which the imagery to which I am referring is particularly evident: "Sono le tue ali che tremano oppure è il mio cuore?" ["Are your wings trembling, or is it my heart?"] (20); "Dio mio, queste case mi si butteranno addosso!" ["My God, these houses will jump on me!"] (19); "La città si chiude sempre più" ["The city is closing off more and more"] (20). A disclaimer: throughout these pages, I will make reference to the abstract, universal, chimerical entity known as "the reader"; while aware of the nonexistence of such an entity, in the absence of a valid alternative, I will use it for mere convenience.

<sup>15</sup> "[P]iù di ogni altra cosa [...] mi rimase a mente una figura dov'era un orso che voleva entrare dentro una capanna. / Tutte le volte che ho visto orsi veri, ho sempre pensato a quello, e come, guardandolo, per un bel pezzo mi scuotevo e mi smuovevo tutto" ["What stuck in my mind above anything else [...] was a picture of a bear that wanted to enter into a shack. / Every time I've seen real bears, I have always thought of that one, and, as if looking at him, I shaked and shivered for a long while"] (21); "Ecco la sera, quando le cose della stanza doventano [sic] pugnali che affondano nella mia anima" ["Here's the evening, when the things in the room turn into daggers that sinks into my soul"] (78).

others, is a much better choice, not only because of the length of most of them, but also because it conveys both a pictorial and a narrative connotation.<sup>16</sup> The erasure of a clear demarcation line between description and narration in *Bestie* is part of a more general loss of definition in the boundaries between the elements composing the diegetic landscape.

The sense of bewilderment created by the line above, where grass, soul, feet, and horizon form a conglomerate with no definite demarcations, is repeated throughout the book both at a temporal and at a spatial level; *Bestie's* chronotope is such that protagonist and reader are thrown into a world with no spatial or temporal reference points. The opening vignette, in which houses threaten to close in on the protagonist, immediately ushers the reader to an unsettling diegetic landscape, in which the human protagonist cannot even trust the solidity of a building: “Le case si facciano un poco a dietro, e quel mendicante non mi cada addosso. [...] Dio mio, queste case mi si butteranno addosso! [...] La città si chiude sempre di più [...]” [“May the houses move back a little, and may that beggar not fall on me. [...] My God, these houses will jump on me! [...] The city is closing off more and more [...]” (19-20).

If neither the protagonist nor the reader can rely on the physical substance and definiteness of objects, the reader cannot count on chronology to make sense of the narration: not only are the vignettes not arranged in a chronological order, but it would be impossible to establish one. As a consequence, the narration is bereft of any evident plot; the reader is transported back and forth in time by a narrator who shares impressions, descriptions, and stories about himself and the life around him. Time is out of joint in at least two senses: not only do the vignettes not follow a chronological order and the use of the present and the past tenses alternate freely, but time bends in strange ways, producing bewildering short circuits, as in the following passages taken from the same vignette:

L'aria dava una sensazione di violenza. [...] / La notte innanzi [...] avevo sentito portar via le stelle e l'obbligo di non arrivare fino alla sera dell'indomani. Ed ecco, invece, ch'io m'ero messo ad aspettare questa sera! [...] Ecco che per un tempo indefinibile, un anno forse, io mi esponevo a ritrovare i segni della mia sofferenza tutte le volte ch'io avessi voluto aprire gli occhi e il respiro. [...] / Ma avrei voglia di scrivere una novella, i cui personaggi fossero burattini di legno. [...] / Oggi (già passato un anno?) il cielo è in un modo che pare rosolio; e i calabroni se lo bevono tutto. (48)

[The air conveyed a feeling of violence. [...] / The night before [...] I had sensed the stars being carried away and the obligation not to come until the following evening. And there I was, instead, waiting for this evening! There I was, for an indefinite time, maybe one year, exposing myself to finding the signs of my suffering each time I wanted to open my eyes and my breath. [...] / But I would like to write a short story, in which the characters would be wooden puppets. [...] / Today (has a year already passed?) the sky is such that seems like rosolio, and the hornets are drinking it all up.]

In the space of a few lines the narration starts with a past tense, goes even further in the past, steps forward again, then shifts to the present, and finally suggests the possibility that an entire year has passed since the beginning of the vignette. The use of deictic expressions such as “la notte innanzi” [“the night before”] and “questa sera” [“this evening”], and even the presence of the word “oggi” [“today”] are utterly ironic, since no context is given, and these precise references do not actually

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<sup>16</sup> Nelson Moe, “Observations on *Bestie*,” *MLN* 108, no. 1 (January 1993): 113-124.

anchor the events to any specific moment in time, as if the author were putting pushpins on a blank map.

Syntax also contributes to the general absence of coordinates: Tozzi's scholars agree on "[t]he absence of a traditional causality both at the level of the overall narrative organization and the individual sentence" (Amberson 102).<sup>17</sup>

The unreliability of time and space and the absence of a traditional causality generate a narrative realm that is not ruled by rationality: without a "before" and an "after", without a system of causes and consequences, reason cannot guide the reader in navigating the universe of *Bestie*. It is precisely the suspension of rationality, the *ur-tenet* of humanism, that allows Tozzi's narrative to propose an alternative vision of human nature, one that is not necessarily predicated on the humanistic principles of free will, autonomy, and agency, intended as the will and ability to take charge of one's own destiny.<sup>18</sup> From the Enlightenment on, humanism has provided a powerful tool to establish the standard one must meet in order to be considered a legitimate human being. By defining what is "proper" and exclusive to humans, it has supplied humanity with philosophical grounds to justify its position of superiority on other forms of life and to legitimize their exploitation.<sup>19</sup>

*Bestie* presents the reader with a diegetic landscape inhabited by human and nonhuman characters that defy the conventional categories rooted in the humanistic tradition. Tozzi's assault on humanistic certainties begins with repositioning perspectives and points of view; two scenes from the book show how the simple exchange of gazes between human and nonhuman animals can breach the solidity of the humanistic edifice, bringing the two entities in physical and ontological proximity. The first scene features the encounter between the protagonist and a green lizard: "Sopra un muricciolo, vidi un ramarro. Mi fermai, perché non scappasse. Allora, guardando i suoi occhi paurosi e intelligenti, provai una delusione dolorosa: e feci il viso rosso di vergogna" ["On a law wall, I saw a green lizard. I stopped, so he would not run away. Then, looking into his fearful and intelligent eyes, I felt a painful disappointment: and my face turned red with shame."] (59). The erasure of a neat partition between humanness and animality is signaled in part by the characterization of the green lizard and especially by the reaction of the narrator who intercepts its gaze. The eyes of the lizard are described as intelligent: this particular animal is endowed with some form of rationality. More importantly, the gaze of the animal provokes a particular reaction in the narrator, an uncontrollable flush of shame. According to Daniel Just,

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<sup>17</sup> Deborah Amberson, *Giraffes in the Garden of Italian Literature: Modernist Embodiment in Italo Svevo, Federico Tozzi and Carlo Emilio Gadda* (London: Legenda, 2012). On the absence of traditional causality in *Bestie*, see also Romano Luperini, *Federigo Tozzi: Le immagini, le idee, le opere* (Roma: Laterza, 1995), 108-120; Franco Petroni, *Ideologia e scrittura. Saggi su Federico Tozzi* (San Cesario di Lecce: Manni, 2006), 137-154.

<sup>18</sup> The bibliography on posthumanism has been seeing a constant growth since the last decade. For an introduction, see Cary Wolfe, "Introduction. What Is Posthumanism?," in *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xi-xxxiv; Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, USA: Polity Press, 2013); *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (March 2009); for a European perspective, *European Journal of English Studies* 18, no. 2 (2014), and in particular Ivan Callus, Stefan Herbrechter, and Manuela Rossini, "Introduction: Dis/Locating Posthumanism In European Literary And Critical Traditions", 103-120; on Italian literature in particular, Deborah Amberson and Elena Past, eds., *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> On the issue of humanism as providing the legitimization for exploitation of beings seen as inferior, see Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); Stanley Cavell et al., *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).



The concept of shame in Western discourse has often carried a lesser moral significance than guilt. Unlike guilt that pertains to one's actions and intentions, shame relates to one's affects and emotions. [...] [T]he experience of shame depends on the awareness of being exposed to a shaming gaze, and therefore on the consciousness of an autonomous self [...]. (895)<sup>20</sup>

As Just points out, in order to be ashamed, one must feel that he is confronted by a gaze emanating from a sentient, autonomous being: the gaze of the lizard would not provoke a reaction of shame if the narrator did not attribute to the animal some sort of consciousness. Tozzi's characters in *Bestie* never experience guilt, but are repeatedly ashamed.<sup>21</sup> The prevalence of shame over guilt is consistent with a moral universe that is dominated not by the rational binary of right and wrong, but by a murkier conglomerate of "affects and emotions".

The second time that the gaze of the protagonist and the gaze of an animal meet, the human character's ashamed reaction is even more extreme:

Ma tra le tende, tutte polverose e sbiadite, c'era una gabbia appesa, con un canarino così giallo che pensavo fosse colorito con i tuorli dell'uova [...]. Io mi vergognavo di lui, che mi vedesse con il mio libricciuolo sotto il braccio lì ad aspettare. [...] Un giorno [lo] portai via; e, piuttosto che ritrovarlo in quella gabbia, lo schiacciai con il tacco delle scarpe. (64)

[But amid the curtains, all dusty and faded, a cage was hanging, with a canary so yellow that I thought he was dyed with egg yolks [...]. I was ashamed that he saw me waiting there, with my booklet under my arm. One day I took [him] away, and, to avoid seeing him in that cage again, I crushed him under my heels.]

What the two passages have in common is not only the effect of the gaze of the animal on the protagonist, but also the apparently unwarranted nature of the human character's reaction. In both cases, the narrator does not provide an unambiguous explanation for the shame that suddenly takes hold of the character: we do not know why the gaze of the lizard provokes a "delusione dolorosa" ["painful disappointment"], and neither is the connection between disappointment and shame clear. The second scene is even more baffling: shame is apparently caused by the mere fact of being seen waiting with a booklet, and the subsequent reaction of the protagonist seems to lack any proportion to the offense. In both cases, the absence of a nexus of causality on a narrative level reinforces the impression that the narrative universe of *Bestie* is governed by a lack of rationality that affects characters and situations alike.

Contemporary Tozzian scholarship has connected the very presence of animals in the book to the irreparable loss of sense experienced by characters and reader alike: according to Romano Luperini, "Le *Bestie* sono gli emblemi e gli enigmi di un mondo destituito di senso, in cui non si dà più la possibilità dell'*Erlebnis*, dell'esperienza autentica e verace" [The *Beasts* are emblems and enigmas of a world devoid of sense, in which the possibility of the *Erlebnis*, of an authentic and genuine experience, is not available anymore.] (116).<sup>22</sup> Human characters appear not to be even interested in looking for meaning: "abbiamo qui un soggetto che [...] appare ridotto alle funzioni sensoriali e memoriali, in preda a desideri, umori, ricordi, percezioni. Le sue scarse azioni non

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Just, "From Guilt to Shame: Albert Camus and Literature's Ethical Response to Politics," *MLN* 125, no. 4 (September 2010): 895-912.

<sup>21</sup> On the manifestation of shame in Tozzian characters, see Amberson 81-84.

<sup>22</sup> Romano Luperini, *Federigo Tozzi: Le immagini, le idee, le opere* (Roma: Laterza, 1995)

sono coordinate da alcuna logica [...]” [“here we have a subject who [...] appears to be reduced to the functions of his senses and his memory, at the mercy of desires, moods, memories, perceptions. His infrequent actions are not governed by any logic.”] (110-111). Luperini is describing a subject “reduced” to his sensorial and mnemonic functions, whose actions lack any logical explanations - a subject who has undergone a process of animalization, intended as a reduction of the human to the non-human animal as a belittlement of his capabilities, a regression to a previous stage of evolution. Accordingly, this character is at the mercy (“in preda”, “at the mercy”) of his desires and moods: he lacks control on his actions, he lacks agency entirely.

The concept of animalization as an instrument to penetrate Tozzi’s narrative universe was introduced by Giacomo Debenedetti, the critic who is universally recognized to have rediscovered Tozzi in the 1960s and who remains an inescapable reference point for Tozzian scholarship.<sup>23</sup> Debenedetti’s reading of Tozzi, and his conceptualization of the idea of animalization in particular, both in its insights and its shortcomings, contained the germ of what would be elaborated in the following decades: his concept of animalization illuminates the novelty in the way Tozzi perceives and represents human characters, but ultimately reinforces a humanistic view of humanness and literature, failing to detect Tozzi’s contribution to the erosion of that model.

Debenedetti assigns Tozzi a prominent role in his reflection on twentieth century narrative, placing him among the likes of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco by virtue of the innovations he brings to narrative at a juncture in the history of modern literature where naturalistic, mechanistic storytelling is declining.<sup>24</sup> Debenedetti identifies Tozzi as the first Italian writer to convey “la crisi dell’uomo di fronte all’impossibilità di una presa naturalistica del mondo” [“the crisis of man in front of the impossibility of a naturalistic grasp on the world”] (*Romanzo* 255), where the loosening of the “naturalistic grasp” is signaled first and foremost by the weakening of the mechanism of causality: “È ormai pacifico che, di qua dal naturalismo, i narratori hanno rotto il giogo del racconto consequenziale, azionato dall’ingranaggio di causa ed effetto” [“It is obvious that, after naturalism, narrators have broken the yoke of consequential storytelling, activated by the gearwheel of cause and effect”] (“Commemorazione” 362).<sup>25</sup> In one of its uses, the term animalization designates the new diegetic model that contrasts with naturalization; Debenedetti borrows the term from German expressionist painter Franz Marc:

Marc alla «naturalizzazione» contrappone quella che chiama l’«animalizzazione». [...] Lo scopo di Marc è di abbandonare il punto di vista soggettivo e sentimentale dell’occhio che guarda, sia pure commosso, e di riuscire invece a «far parlare il mondo stesso, invece del nostro

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<sup>23</sup> “Debenedetti made a significant contribution to this critical debate [on Tozzi], so it is he who should receive credit for much of the attention paid to Tozzi. With his 1963 reading of *Con gli occhi chiusi*, Debenedetti liberated the author from the confines of the Siense provinces in order to place his innovative work firmly in the narrative avant-garde of expressionism.” (Amberson 3); “Tozzi è diventato un classico del Novecento grazie soprattutto a Debenedetti e a Baldacci” [“Tozzi has become a classic of the nineteenth century thanks to Debenedetti and Baldacci especially”] (Luperini VII).

<sup>24</sup> Debenedetti conceives of naturalism as a literarily unfruitful approach, that aims at reproducing the exteriority of things, and obliterates and neglects their mystery (see Giacomo Debenedetti, *Il romanzo del Novecento* (Milano: Garzanti, 2001), 82; 86-87).

<sup>25</sup> The two works by Debenedetti from which I will be quoting are: “Commemorazione provvisoria del personaggio-uomo,” in *Italiani del Novecento* (Firenze: Giunti, 1995): 353-391; and *Il romanzo del Novecento* (Milano: Garzanti, 2001). *Romanzo* is the posthumous collection of Debenedetti’s careful drafts of his university lectures, held at the University of Rome from 1960 to 1966. His lectures were an opportunity for him to work on his ideas, and often present thoughts that would be further developed in individual essays.

spirito commosso davanti all'immagine del mondo»; [...] raffigurare, [...] esprimere la vitalità interna di questi esseri viventi, quell'intenzione, quel senso che essi manifestano e non dichiarano. (*Romanzo* 85)

[Marc contrasts «naturalization» with what he calls «animalization». [...] Marc's aim is to abandon the subjective and sentimental point of view of the looking eye, albeit moved, and to «let the world itself speak, instead of our spirit, moved in front of the image of the world»; [...] to illustrate, [...] to express the inner vitality of these living beings, the intention, the sense that they manifest and do not declare.]

In the first part of this quotation, Debenedetti touches, in passing, on an element that is then quickly dismissed from his analysis: the displacement of the point of view. The perception and the recognition of the gaze of the animals force the reader to consider the nonhuman animals populating the text as something other than symbols or mere, passive recipients of the human gaze. I will discuss this aspect more fully in the following pages; here I want to remark that, in defining what animalization entails, Debenedetti swiftly passes from registering the shift of the point of view to describing a ventriloquization of sorts: the task of the artist would be to make the speechless world speak - a route that Tozzi never takes. As I will argue, *Bestie* is, instead, a compelling example of a narrative universe that is not ruled by logocentrism.

From the last part of the quotation above, we can infer how an animalized narrative represents a crucial shift from a diegetic universe ruled by causality: an animalized narrative relies on discursive elements that, like the speechless animals, manifest themselves on the page without declaring their meaning - that is to say, without providing the reader with an unambiguous explanation of their significance. By presenting facts and characters in their nakedness, without imposing an interpretation, the narrator disrupts the mechanism of causality upon which naturalism is based. Debenedetti sees this mechanism at play in *Bestie*:

Anche le *Bestie* di Tozzi appaiono a emanare un senso, un'intenzionalità magari non articolabile, non dichiarabile a parole. Quel che Marc voleva raggiungere, far parlare il mondo stesso, anziché il nostro spirito, è anche l'assunto del romanziere: far esistere personaggi, cose, fatti che trasmettono un loro senso, senza declinare un loro perché [...]. (*Romanzo* 85)<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Debenedetti's emphasis on the risks and shortcomings of an overexplaining narrative is strongly reminiscent of the ideas expressed by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay "The Storyteller"; Andrea Cortellessa has written an article underlining some parallels between the two scholars: "E tanti sono in effetti i contatti fra queste due biografie: dalla natura anfibia, di critico insieme scrittore, sino all'incomprensione da parte di quell'Università che avrebbe avuto tutti i vantaggi, invece, a coltivarne il magistero [...]. Ma ce n'è un altro, più sottile. Tanto Benjamin che Debenedetti, infatti, si congedano dalla forma che hanno innalzato a cime abissali, il saggio appunto, con un episodio di perfetta ambivalenza: tanto le pagine sul *Narratore* del primo, del 1936, che la *Commemorazione provvisoria* del secondo celebrano infatti lo spirito della narrativa classica registrandone il tramonto; e si spingono più d'ogni altro nel futuro - proprio come l'Angelo della storia raffigurato dallo stesso Benjamin nella nona tesi *Sul concetto di storia* - con gli occhi fissi sul passato" ["There are actually many points of contact between the biographies of the two: from their amphibian nature of critics and writers, to the fact that they were both misunderstood by Academia, which would have benefitted from their teachings instead [...]. But there is another, more subtle one. Both Benjamin and Debenedetti take their leave of the form they have immensely elevated, namely the essay, with an instance of perfect ambivalence: both *The Storyteller* of the former (1936) and the *Commemorazione* of the latter celebrate the spirit of classic narrative while they take note of its sunset; and they venture into the future farther than anyone else, while keeping their eyes fixed on the past - just like the Angel of history represented by Benjamin in the ninth of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*"]; *Le parole e le cose*;

[Tozzi's *Beasts*, too, when they appear, radiate a sense, an intentionality that maybe is not possible to articulate and declare by words. What Marc wanted to achieve - letting the world itself speak, instead of our spirit - is the narrator's intention as well: to bring into being characters, things, facts that emanate their own sense, without expressing their own whys.]

In this analysis, the extreme otherness of Tozzi's *Bestie* and the novelty of their signifying presences get normalized and almost dismissed by Debenedetti: the animals represented are just instances of what each and every character always is - or, at least, what it should be in order to represent an alternative to naturalization.

In this first understanding of animalization, the choice of the term relies mainly on one distinctive characteristic: speechlessness. Since animals purportedly cannot speak, their intentions are opaque to humans; in becoming animalized, narrative elements lose their ability to convey a transparent meaning. The absence of language is commonly regarded as one of the main signs of the ontological inferiority of nonhuman animals, because it would prove their lack of rationality. In Debenedetti's vision, the same lack of rationality that thwarts a vision of the world and of narrative that is based on causality, and that allows Tozzi's narrative to transcend naturalization, affects his human characters, who regress toward the animal state:

[I]l grado di evoluzione di quegli esseri non mostra altro che individui colti nel loro stadio prettamente animale, tutto automatismi, riflessi condizionati [...].

Siamo così in un mondo - [...] spaventoso come una bolgia - di esseri viventi, per cui la vita non è ancora storia, è semplicemente un susseguirsi di bisogni fisici o psichici [...]. Gli uomini di Tozzi sono veduti nello stadio anteriore alla nomenclatura dei sentimenti e dei bisogni, sono rivelati alla radice dei loro impulsi. (*Romanzo* 231-232)

[The level of evolution of those beings shows nothing but individuals caught at a stage that is essentially animal, all automatisms and conditioned reflexes [...].

We are therefore in a world - [...] dreadful as a ditch of Hell - of living beings for whom life is not story yet; it is simply a succession of physical and psychical needs [...]. Tozzi's men are seen at a stage prior to the nomenclature of feelings and needs; they are revealed at the root of their urges.]

Debenedetti's animalization takes on these two different connotations, both revolving around a loss of rationality: as a narrative approach, it constitutes an evolution in narrative representation; as a feature of human characters, it is the result of a regression into a primitive stage of evolution: Tozzi's characters inhabit a time before the beginning of history (and before lives can be made into stories). Debenedetti connects the primitive nature of Tozzi's characters to the fact that they exist in a condition prior to the advent of nomenclature, not simply before "language". He is hinting at something that goes beyond "l'incapacità, così tipica dei personaggi [tozziani], di esprimersi in parole" ["the inability, so typical of Tozzian characters, to express themselves in words"] (*Romanzo* 230): not only are these characters unable to express their feelings and needs, but they are seen as incapable (or not yet capable) of assigning names to them; they cannot perform an act of mastery

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"Commemorazione provvisoria del critico letterario," article by Andrea Cortellessa, February 27, 2017, accessed July 18, 2017, <http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=26444>).

and submission analogous to that accomplished by man when he named animals in the book of Genesis.

We see the myth of Genesis identified as the symbolic origin of the idea of superiority of human over nonhuman animals by Jacques Derrida in his lecture-turned-essay “The Animal That Therefore I Am”.<sup>27</sup> The act of naming performed by man in the first book of the Bible lays the foundations for the role of language in establishing hierarchies between sentient beings. Debenedetti shares his vision of animality with most Western philosophers, as Derrida remarks:

[F]rom Aristotle to Lacan, and including Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and Lévinas [...], all [...] say the same thing: the animal is without language. Or more precisely unable to respond, to respond with a response that could be precisely and rigorously distinguished from a reaction, the animal is without the right and power to «respond» and hence without many other things that would be the property of man. (400)

The connection between the absence of language and the lack of agency and free will is what emerges also from Debenedetti’s quotation above: Tozzi’s characters, caught in a stage before nomenclature, cannot take control of their selves. Like animals, they are at the mercy of their instincts, acting by way of reactions (“riflessi condizionati”, conditioned reflexes) and not of responses.

Debenedetti further expands on his concept of animalization when he discusses another character created by Tozzi, Pietro, the protagonist of *Con gli occhi chiusi*: “esattamente come un animale, non distingue le cose che si muovono dalle cose vive. Il ragazzino è già animalizzato [...], reagisce a un succedersi di stimoli e sensazioni contingenti [...], non c’è continuità di coscienza, coerenza di sentimenti” [“exactly like an animal, he does not distinguish things in motion from living things. The little boy is already animalized [...], he reacts to a succession of accidental stimuli and sensations [...], there is no continuity of conscience, no coherence of feelings”]; his only conscience is “la coscienza organica di vivere, che [...] prova attimo per attimo, senza che gli attimi successivi si ricordino dei precedenti, articolino una storia” [“the organic conscience of living, that [...] feels moment after moment; and the subsequent moments do not recall the preceding ones, do not articulate a story”] (*Romanzo* 226-227). The expression “coscienza organica” [“organic conscience”] sounds like an oxymoron of sorts: Pietro lives and acts like a brainless organism, unaware of himself and, therefore, unable to tell his own story.

Debenedetti’s remark that the animalized characters cannot remember their own past brings to mind Heidegger and his influential theorization of the “poorness” of animals. As Stuart Elden notes, Heidegger believes that memory is among the human properties that animals lack: “Heidegger picks up and discusses Nietzsche’s suggestion [...] that the animal is distinguished from the human because the animal forgets or does not remember, that they live without time and history, that they are the ahistorical animal [...]”.<sup>28</sup>

Debenedetti’s concept of animalization has inspired most contemporary Tozzian scholars, who elaborate on both strands of his definition: animalization of the narration and its consequences, on the one hand and the process of animalization of the characters, on the other. In both cases, the reflections boil down to lack of rationality and its consequences on epistemology,

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. Davis Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 369-418.

<sup>28</sup> Stuart Elden, “Heidegger’s animals,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 39 (2006): 273-291; 281.

either as a way to hinder the reader's access to meaning or as an illustration of the nature of human animals (those of the Tozzian kind, at least).

Tozzian scholars invariably see the animalization of characters as a debasement of human faculties. Deborah Amberson remarks that "the profound sameness that binds the human to the animal [...] bolsters Tozzi's suggestion of a horrifying equivalence between animal and man" (96). Amberson's "horrifying equivalence" is echoed by Riccardo Castellana's comment that in *Bestie* there is ("vi è") "lo scacco e lo straniamento causati dallo *choc* del riconoscimento della 'disumanità' dell'umano" ["the defeat and estrangement caused by the shock of recognizing the 'inhumanity' of the human"] (56).<sup>29</sup> These readings reveal a humanistic approach to the narrative, because horror and shock are not expressed and represented "in" the text, but they can be felt by the readers of *Bestie*, reacting to Tozzi's suggestion of the eerie ontological closeness of human and nonhuman animals. As I will argue more extensively in the next section of this chapter, one of the reasons that it is possible to read *Bestie* as a posthumanistic work is its defiance of a straightforward identification between the reader and the narrator/protagonist as fellow human beings who meets the criteria of the ideal human specimen.<sup>30</sup> The narrative strategies employed by Tozzi in presenting the reader with the thoughts and actions of the protagonist create what Castellana defines as defamiliarization, estrangement ("straniamento"), as the following examples will show.

Castellana mentions the "inhumanity" of Tozzi's narrator while commenting on the presence and narrative function of animals in *Bestie*.<sup>31</sup> In Italian as in English, "inhumanity" ("disumanità" in Italian) has a strong moral connotation. As I previously mentioned, the moral dynamics of *Bestie* are hardly reducible to a dichotomy of right and wrong, but I would not hesitate to define as cruel some of the actions taken by the narrator/protagonist throughout the vignettes. At times, animals are at the receiving end of these actions: "Quando fui presso un pino, sentii un usignolo; io feci un grido, e poi gli tirai un sasso. Avessi avuto un fucile!" ["When I got to a pine tree, I heard a nightingale; I screamed, and then I threw a stone at him. I wish I had a rifle!"] (42); "Una cicala [...] canta: la vedo. Mi ci avvicino [...]. La stringo. Le stacco la testa" ["A cicada [...] sings: I see her. I approach [...]. I squeeze her. I take her head off."] (47).<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, there is one moment when the protagonist's rage is directed towards his fellow human beings (his father and his brothers), and the encounter with the body of an animal triggers a dramatic change to his mood:

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<sup>29</sup> Riccardo Castellana, *Parole, cose, persone: Il realismo modernista di Tozzi* (Pisa: F. Serra, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> To clarify, I am certainly not ignoring or denying the presence of negative, perverse, less than ideal characters in the Italian literature preceding *Bestie*; what I argue is that the debasement of characters such as Alessandro Manzoni's Don Rodrigo or Gabriele D'Annunzio's Andrea Sperelli is of moral rather than ontological nature. Their representation does not explicitly challenge an idea of humanness based on humanistic ideals; on the contrary, they are read, interpreted and judged according to a frame of reference whose humanistic values and dynamics are readily present to the mind of the reader. These characters, with their flaws, cross a very clear line (the line of propriety, of adherence to an ideal), while Tozzi is blurring the line and changing the very frame of reference, questioning the ideal.

<sup>31</sup> "In Tozzi [...] [l']epifania animale [è] così manifestamente gratuita e mai funzionale alla coerenza del quadro descrittivo che la precede [...] da divenire la materializzazione concreta di tale senso di straniamento" ["In Tozzi [...] the animal epiphany is so blatantly gratuitous and never functional to the cohesion of the description that precedes it [...] that it becomes the concrete manifestation of that sense of estrangement"] (Castellana 57).

<sup>32</sup> At times, on the contrary, the protagonist feels empathy for the suffering of nonhuman animals (see for instance 32, when he witnesses the slaughter of toads); in all these cases, his states of minds are represented in their external manifestation, not from an emotional standpoint.

Voglia Dio che l'azzurro che respirate, così bello e limpido, divenga fiele o così duro che moriate subito [...]! Che le vostre case entrino dentro la terra; e sopra ci verrò a ballare con un'intera banda di musicanti [...]! Cada il veleno dal cielo [...]!

Quando fui in cima alla salita, vicino a un aratro, vidi una lucertola morta, con le gambe aperte all'insù, così sottile e pallida che singhiozzai. (45-46)

[May God grant that the azure you breathe, so nice and clear, become bile, or so hard that you die at once [...]! May your houses enter into the earth; I will come dancing on them with an entire music band [...]! May poison fall from the sky [...]!

When I got to the top of the slope, I saw a dead lizard, near to a plow, with her legs spreaded upward, so thin and pale that I sobbed.]

In none of these cases is the idea of “inhumanity” in linear relation to the idea of animality. What these excerpts have in common is the lack of explanation for the actions of the narrator, a quality that is likely to disconcert the reader more than the actions themselves.<sup>33</sup> Why would the narrator like to shoot the nightingale? Why does he kill the cicada? The third example, in which hatred suddenly gives way to tears at the sight of the dead lizard, is noteworthy for the contrast between the burst of despair and the preceding feelings: are tears provoked by a perceived sense of fraternity with the dead animal? Is the protagonist reminded of his own mortality, of his vulnerability - a trait that he shares with the dead lizard, and with nonhuman animals in general? The absence of a psychological context for human actions strips them of their justification, and the reader is led to wonder to what extent human actions inherently “make sense” and to what extent, instead, their rationality is a byproduct of the linguistic structure that inevitably shapes their narrative.

Tozzian scholars are especially concerned by the effects of animalization on the epistemological capabilities of the characters. The provocative novelty of *Bestie* in reconfiguring the categories of humanness and animality is read by Amberson and Castellana as an epistemological defeat. In a note to her text, Amberson, who defines Tozzi's characters “epistemologically challenged”, quotes Franco Petroni to make explicit what the “horrifying equivalence between animal and man” entails: “Petroni identifies the cognitive dimension of the equivalence between human and animal when he writes: ‘Se l'essere umano è non diverso dagli altri esseri viventi, e sofferenti, egli non può avere nemmeno il privilegio della conoscenza’” [my translation of the passage in Italian: “If the human being is not so different from other living and suffering beings, he cannot even have the privilege of knowledge”](Amberson 113n59). Petroni's “privilege” echoes what Derrida denounced as the supposed “property of man”; the animalization of Tozzi's human characters shakes the hierarchical order according to which human animals are granted some exclusive qualities - first and foremost, reason and the access to knowledge. If rationality constitutes a boundary between humanness and animality, Tozzi's representations of human and nonhuman animals and of their interactions show the erosion of this boundary from both sides: human animals appear to be baffled by reality and act in apparently irrational ways, and, at the same time, nonhuman animals are endowed with the potential for thinking and accessing some sort of knowledge. The green lizard who provokes an ashamed reaction in the protagonist has “occhi intelligenti” [intelligent eyes], and the very first line of the book is marked by the possibility of thinking nonhuman animals, knowing something that the narrator does not: “Che punto sarebbe quello dove s'è fermato l'azzurro? Lo sanno le allodole che prima vi spaziano e poi vengono a

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<sup>33</sup> On Tozzi's “programmatic intent to privilege not the emotion but rather its somatic manifestation” in representing his characters (Amberson 78), see Amberson 77-81.

buttarsi come pazze vicino a me?” [“At what point has the azure stopped? Do the skylarks, who sweep the sky and then come throwing themselves near me like crazy, know?”] (19) Another allusion to the epistemological potential of animals comes when the narrator, after lamenting his own inability to understand the pain provoked by his life in Siena, suggests: “Lo sapeva, forse, quella mia tartaruga che riuscii a tener chiusa in casa una sera, e la mattina dopo non la trovai più” [“Maybe that turtle of mine knew it. I managed to keep her locked inside one evening, and the next morning I did not find her anymore”] (58).

Animal rationality is never framed as a certainty: Tozzi’s narration shows an inquisitive but respectful attitude towards nonhuman animals’ rational faculties, which remain suspended in a state of possibility, preserved in their alterity, not penetrated by the arrogance of human alleged omniscience.

Tozzi’s epistemological prudence with respect to the motivations behind the behavior of nonhuman animals is also displayed in a series of questions that remain unanswered: “Perché quel pesce rosso, nascondendosi sotto le alghe, guizzò?” [“Why did that goldfish, hiding under seaweed, dart?”] (53); “Perché la gatta miagola e si spenzola dalla grondaia?” [“Why does the she-cat meow and dangle from the gutter?”] (71) Castellana interprets these questions as a further sign of Tozzi’s characters’ inability to rationally grasp the world: “È l’alterità inquietante della bestia a sollecitare la domanda di senso, ma l’interrogativo cade nel vuoto: il mondo si rivela inconoscibile per via razionale” [“It is the eerie alterity of the beast that triggers the inquiry about meaning, but the question goes unheeded: the world turns out to be unknowable by rational means”] (58).<sup>34</sup> I argue that all these examples constitute a real declaration of poetics: they signal a new way of conceiving not only the relation between human and nonhuman animals, but also the relation between animals as literary characters and readers. There is only one passage in the book in which the narrator penetrates the thoughts of an animal, and this moment becomes the unmistakable evidence of the refusal to exploit the animal as a meaning-making machine:

Ma perché, dunque, quando due briachi cantarono io non chiusi la finestra? Perché la loro voce mi dava una gioia irrefrenabile [...]? [...] Perché non morii in quel momento di dolore?  
[...]  
E capii perché un gatto, accovacciato su la porta di casa mia, fosse scappato quando gli fui vicino. (40)

[But why, then, did I not close the window when two drunkards sang? Why did their voice give me uncontainable joy [...]? [...] Why did I not die of pain at that moment? [...]  
And I understood why a cat, crouched on my threshold, had run away when I had gotten close to him.]

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<sup>34</sup> While it is true that some of the questions asked by the protagonist of *Bestie* constitute a *mise en scène* of the limits of human rationality, it must be noted that the large majority are not stimulated by “l’alterità inquietante della bestia” [“the eerie alterity of the beast”]: to be exact, of the 14 questions introduced by the interrogative word “perché” [“why”], only the two that I have quoted above are directly triggered by the actions of a nonhuman animal. All the remaining questions are about the narrator’s sensorial perception (example: “E perché posso sentire odori che forse né meno esistono?” [“And why can I smell scents that maybe don’t even exist?”], 27) or about his behavior (“Ma perché soffro così, e non vado a trovarla?” [“But why am I in such pain, and don’t go see her?”], 49); and most of them could be interpreted as existential quandaries, of philosophical and psychological nature, whose significance may inhere within their status as questions, albeit with no answers.



Here the vignette ends: the reader will never partake in the knowledge shared by the cat and the narrator. The reader is excluded from a secret understanding that derives from a personal relationship with a specific cat endowed with an “unsubstitutable singularity” (Derrida 378). There is no universal truth to be learned from this episode; instead, but it is an occasion for the reader to fully experience the disquieting presence of the animal other.

The traditional relation of nonhuman animals (as literary characters) to meaning is one of absolute passivity: unable to access meaning, they are expected to produce it according to preordained frameworks. The resistance of Tozzian nonhuman animals to being engaged in allegories disrupts this scheme, disquieting the reader: “A turbare il lettore è la questione del significato. Perché la comparsa delle *bestie* non coincide con alcuna epifanica rivelazione” [“What upsets the reader is the issue of meaning. Because the appearance of the *beasts* does not correspond to any epiphanic revelation”] (Luperini 108); “Le *bestie* non assurgono al senso neppure nella loro dipendenza dagli uomini” [“*Beasts* do not achieve meaning thanks to their dependency on men, either”] (Luperini 109) writes Luperini.<sup>35</sup> Nonhuman narrative animals are asked to be meaning-making machines; unlike human characters, they are expected to be readily available to be relatively transparent, even epiphanic signifiers. But beasts populate the pages of *Bestie* with supreme indifference to the presence of their human counterparts; they are characters in their own right, living, acting, and maybe thinking in a realm coterminous with the human, at times provoking questions that are destined to remain unanswered. Sometimes they fall prey to human beings and even to the narrator, since Tozzi’s *avant-la-lettre* posthumanism is certainly not concerned with animal rights. What is more important, they are free from the reins of allegory: even the skylark that opens and ends the narration resists any simple allegorical reading.

In *Bestie*, nonhuman animals do not mean: they are. *Bestie* is an animalized narration because, in its bold attempt to redefine what is proper to humans, it resists a logocentric approach, based primarily on what the narration *means*, as if it were following the admonition of Modernist poet Archibald MacLeish: “A poem should not mean / But be” (23-24).<sup>36</sup> As Moe writes, Tozzi is “disorienting the reader with respect to the familiar codes of literary signification” (114): the pictorial aspect of Tozzi’s vignettes constitutes part of an articulate invitation to the reader to engage with the text with all her faculties, not just with her intellect. Because language is the stuff of literature, a reading completely divorced from meaning would be unthinkable, but Tozzi invites the reader to try and experience his writing similarly to painting, an art in which the issue of meaning is less upfront, and aesthetic appreciation involves the senses along with the intellect.

The invitation to approach the text with all the senses can also be inferred from the way in which the narrator experiences the world around him - an experience that is rhetorically expressed

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<sup>35</sup> Debenedetti, instead, argues that the possibility of accessing meaning and of discerning a destiny is not precluded, but only deferred, and it is up to the reader to pursue this objective: “L’apparire delle *bestie* in Tozzi è il primo segno che questo mondo ha cessato di essere un pretesto o un incentivo a cavarne, attraverso l’operazione artistica, un paesaggio o una natura morta, o magari una scena dove figure e azioni si riducono a stimoli per un brillante virtuosistico esercizio dell’occhio che li osserva: diventano movimenti di vita, chiusi e complessi grumi di un divenire nel quale riconoscono poi, ma solo in un momento ulteriore, la sagoma di un destino che ci riguarda in quanto è una piega possibile della nostra vita” [“The appearance of the *beasts* in Tozzi’s works is the first sign that this world has ceased to be a pretext for or an incentive to extract, by means of the artistic operation, a landscape or a still life, or maybe a scene where figures and actions are reduced to stimuli for a brilliant, virtuosic exercise of the eye that looks at them; they become, instead, moments of life, compact and complex lumps in a process of becoming in which one eventually recognizes (but only at a later stage) the contours of a destiny that concerns us because it is a possible turn of our lives”] (*Romanzo* 86). In this passage also we can here echoes of Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” (see note 13).

<sup>36</sup> Archibald MacLeish, “Ars Poetica”.

by the use of synesthesia: “Ma la luce della luna si diverte a farmi sentire le civette” [“But the moonlight amuses itself making me hear the owls”] (75); “E allora non comprendevo le violette: ma soltanto il loro odore come una serenata alla luce. E la mia anima sopra quell’odore si ingrandiva fino a sentirmela dentro i miei occhi” [“And then I did not understand the violets, but only their smell like a serenade to the light. And my soul enlarged upon that smell until I would feel it in my eyes”] (53). The latter quotation is especially telling: the verb “comprendere” (comprehend, understand) is used to refer to a flower and to its smell. This can be read as an encouragement to apprehend the text by appealing to the whole human sensorium, not just to intellect.

## 2. From the Paradigm of *Personaggio-Uomo* to a Posthumanistic Narration

Scaling down the role that the reader’s rationality is supposed to play in approaching the text is part of a deep renegotiation of the relation between reader and character. *Bestie* signals a shift from a conception of literature ruled by an entity that Debenedetti synthetically terms *personaggio-uomo* to a conception of literature that I would define as posthumanistic *avant-la-lettre*.

Debenedetti developed the concept of *personaggio-uomo* at a time (mid-1960s) when narrative paradigms were undergoing profound transformations, hindering the almost automatic identification between a human reader and a human character. Brian Richardson describes the literary landscape at the beginning of 1950s as follows:

Narrative literature was about to explode with a wide range of post-anthropomorphic narrators while philosophy [...] was beginning its half-century assault on humanism. [...] [B]y moving beyond merely human narrators, texts begin to tamper with or destroy outright the ‘mimetic contract’ that had governed conventional fiction for centuries: no more can one assume that a first person narrator would resemble a normal human being.<sup>37</sup> (1)

The connection established by Richardson between the dismantlement of the humanistic tenet, on the one hand, and the destruction of the “mimetic contract” and the absence of a “normal human being” as the first person narrator, on the other, can be applied to the analysis of Tozzi’s *Bestie* - even if it dates back to a much earlier period. Both Debenedetti and more contemporary scholars, however, tend to read and interpret Tozzi’s work through humanistic lenses, approaching the text with the expectation of finding a first person narrator who is “merely human”, “normal.” Debenedetti’s concept of *personaggio-uomo*, as its very name reveals, is the embodiment of this particular mimetic expectation.

Debenedetti thoroughly expressed his concept of *personaggio-uomo* in his essay “Commemorazione provvisoria del personaggio-uomo” [“Provisional Commemoration of the Personaggio-Uomo”], written in 1965, which is considered the centerpiece of his intellectual and moral legacy.<sup>38</sup> The title anticipates the tone of the essay, at once celebratory and nostalgic, a tone

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<sup>37</sup> Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> “[D]i tutto questo materiale, la Commemorazione rappresenta l’ultimo prelievo che Debenedetti ci ha voluto ancora far leggere in forma di saggio. [...] Debenedetti si congeda ufficialmente dal suo lettore [...]” [“Of all these materials, the Commemorazione represents the last excerpt that Debenedetti has wanted us to read in the form of an essay. Debenedetti officially takes his leave of his reader”] (Angela Borghesi, ed., “Notizie sui testi,” in *Saggi*, by Giacomo Debenedetti (Milano: Mondadori, 1999), 1614); “Il suo testamento di critico, cioè l’indagine ironico-amara sulla scomparsa del *personaggio-uomo* nella letteratura e nelle arti, individua il fenomeno centrale della nuova

that helps to perform Debenedetti's exorcism: an attempt to ward off the end of the world in the form of the disappearance of humanism, embodied in the entity he defines *personaggio-uomo*.<sup>39</sup>

Chiamo *personaggio-uomo* quell'*alter-ego*, nemico o vicario, che in decine di migliaia di esemplari tutti diversi tra loro, ci viene incontro dai romanzi e adesso anche dai film. Si dice che la sua professione sia quella di risponderci, ma molto spesso siamo noi i citati a rispondergli. Se gli chiediamo di farsi conoscere [...] gira il risvolto della giubba, esibisce la placca dove sta scritta la più capitale delle sue funzioni [...]: *si tratta anche di te*. (“Commemorazione” 353)

[I call *personaggio-uomo* that alter ego, enemy or surrogate, who comes toward us from novels and now films as well, in tens of thousands of specimens, all different from each other. They say his profession is to answer us, but often we are the ones called to answer him. If we ask him to let himself known [...] he turns the flap of his coat, showing a badge where his most fundamental function is written: *it is about you, too*.]

The *personaggio-uomo* can be considered a sort of ideal type whose most perfect embodiment is the character of the nineteenth-century novels, which Debenedetti defines as “il *personaggio* classico, omogeneo, compatto, dalla sagoma d'ingombro balzacchiana” [“the classic, homogeneous, compact character, with its bulky Balzacian contour”] (“Commemorazione” 359), a character to be found “[nel] romanzo francese, inglese e russo del sec. xix” [“in nineteenth-century French, English, and Russian novels”] (*Romanzo* 113). Adjectives such as “homogeneous” and “compact” convey the sense of stability and reliability that is granted by the *personaggio-uomo*'s psychological substance: the “tradizionale protagonista di romanzo” [“traditional character of a novel”] is “onusto di coscienza e di destino” [“laden with consciousness and destiny”] (“Commemorazione” 370); it is a character that can be recognized without fail as the reader's fellow: “vedere un uomo, anche sconosciuto e abbottonato, è sempre incontrare una vecchia conoscenza. Può tacere, nascondersi nel più astruso ermetismo, ci comunica in ogni caso un messaggio, magari in cifra, bene o male ne verremo a capo” [“to see a man, albeit unfamiliar and buttoned-up, is always to meet an old acquaintance. He may stay silent or hide behind the most obscure hermeticism; in any case, he is passing on a message, however cryptic, we'll figure it out”] (“Commemorazione” 367).

The encounter between the reader and the *personaggio-uomo* triggers an immediate process of recognition and identification; not only does the reader recognize a fellow human being, but one that she knows, even if it is a complete stranger, as is evident from the paradox of a “sconosciuto” [“unfamiliar”] that is, at the same time, a “vecchia conoscenza” [“old acquaintance”]: the *personaggio-uomo* is capable of prompting a feeling of empathy in the reader even when it is a mere signifier of their belonging to the same (human) race.

Debenedetti defines his essay as a “commemoration” (however provisional) of the *personaggio-uomo* because he is aware that characters resembling “normal human being[s]” (Richardson) tend to disappear from the most perceptive and innovative narrative works of the 1960s. The essay draws a sustained parallel between narrative and scientific paradigms (a *drôle de ménage* between literature and science, as he calls it); Debenedetti tracks “[la] continua altalena di

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«disumanizzazione» metodologica e teoricistica che segna la cultura letteraria degli anni sessanta” [“His final act as a critic, namely the wry and bitter investigation on the disappearance of the *personaggio-uomo* in arts and culture, pinpoints the crucial phenomenon of the new methodological and theoricising «dehumanization» that marks literary culture in the Sixties”] (Alfonso Berardinelli, *Casi critici: dal postmoderno alla mutazione* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2007), 300).

<sup>39</sup> I will keep in Italian the term *personaggio-uomo*, literally Character-Man/Character-Human Being.

lune di miele e di ripudi” [“the constant alternation of honeymoons and divorces”] between the two disciplines and focuses on a time, the second half of the twentieth century, when Einstein’s general theory of relativity was influencing both scientific and literary epistemology, resulting ultimately in the (d)evolution of the *personaggio-uomo* into the *personaggio-particella*. In tracing the trajectory of literature between these two manifestations of the character, Debenedetti inserts an intermediate stage defined as “the new novel”, and in this context, as I have mentioned earlier, he hails Tozzi as one of the first writers in Italy to challenge a naturalistic model of narrative based on causality, initiating a corrosion of the *personaggio-uomo* that would eventually lead to the ultimate (if provisional) transfiguration of the character.<sup>40</sup> Even if Debenedetti likens Tozzi’s narrative to those of later and groundbreaking authors such as Beckett and Ionesco, he ultimately underestimates the extent of his innovativeness and, to a certain extent, misinterprets his words, in order to present him as the champion of a new narrative that, however detached from naturalism, still refuses to slip into the absence of sense, still retains the ability to indicate a destiny to the reader - a narrative that is still able to serve a full humanistic purpose. The protagonist of this narrative, according to him, is a character that is still fully a *personaggio-uomo* and very far from what Debenedetti names *personaggio-particella*. As I will argue, on the contrary, *Bestie*’s characters and narrative dynamics share more than one trait with *personaggi-particella* and their behavior.

The main characteristic of the *personaggio-particella* is the disruption it causes to the pattern of encounter and recognition between reader and character, ultimately undermining the possibility of transmitting any kind of message to the reader. To describe the experience of the reader facing the *personaggio-particella*, Debenedetti cites a passage from Jean Bloch-Michel’s *Le présent de l’indicatif*, in which the French writer delivers a “*reportage* [...] dal continente dei nuovi personaggi” [“reportage [...] from the continent of the new characters”] (“Commemorazione” 375):

«Vi troviamo innumerevoli oggetti che ci sono estranei perché non hanno alcun senso per noi, e innumerevoli persone accanto alle quali viviamo senza mai poterle avvicinare né comprendere. Falsi rapporti si stabiliscono tra loro, ed esse usano un linguaggio pervertito [...]. [R]imangono estranei l’uno all’altro, mascherati, protetti.» (“Commemorazione” 374)<sup>41</sup>

[«There we find countless objects that are strange to us because they have no meaning for us, and countless people near whom we live without ever being able to get close to or understand them. False relationships are established among them, and they use a perverted language [...]. They continue to be strange to each other, masked, protected.»]

The reassuring presence of the *personaggio-uomo* has been replaced by the alien and disconcerting presence of the *personaggio-particella*, with whom no identification is possible: if the *personaggio-uomo* used its language to forge a relationship with the reader, these “people” cannot even establish any connection among themselves. These characters belong to the same family of those put onto the stage by Samuel Beckett, which show with clarity another feature proper to the *personaggio-particella*;

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<sup>40</sup> The transfiguration of the characters and the commemoration of the *personaggio-uomo* is provisional indeed: in a final (and, in my opinion, quite gratuitous) twist at the end of the essay, Debenedetti cites *La macchina mondiale* by Paolo Volponi, *Il padrone* by Goffredo Parise, and *L’attenzione* by Alberto Moravia (all published in 1965) as proofs that the trajectory of the *personaggi-particella* has already reached its end. “E allora,” Debenedetti concludes, “a chi votarsi se non al vecchio, ma ancora vegeto, solerte, servizievole personaggio-uomo?” [And then, to whom shall we turn if not to the old, but still healthy, diligent, obliging *personaggio-uomo*?] (“Commemorazione” 391).

<sup>41</sup> Debenedetti quotes from Jean Bloch-Michel, *L’indicativo presente*, trans. Unknown (Milano: Bompiani, 1965), 10.

Debenedetti writes: “quel similuomo non ha più né un senso né uno scopo né un progetto che possano considerarsi come un fine” [“that pseudo-man does not have a sense or a purpose or a project that could be considered as an end anymore”] (“Commemorazione” 368).<sup>42</sup> If the *personaggio-uomo* was “onusto [...] di destino” [“laden [...] with destiny”], the *personaggio-particella* cannot even conceive of a purpose, of an objective, let alone a destiny.

The conviction that narrative cannot abdicate its function of mirroring human experience in order to provide it with a sense is shared (at least implicitly) by most Tozzian scholars, but while Debenedetti tries to demonstrate that Tozzi’s characters can still be considered *personaggi-uomo*, others express discomfort as they face a character whose traits are not easily reconcilable with those of a human animal and are possibly shared with other forms of being. A quotation by Petroni conveys both the instinct of the reader to identify with the character and the perplexity provoked by the ontological closeness of human and nonhuman animals: “[C]’è da notare come gli animali, da Tozzi, siano trattati quasi sempre, narrativamente, in modo non diverso dagli uomini: quasi che basti loro essere capaci di sofferenza per essere riconosciuti dal narratore come nostri simili, dotati, come noi, di un’“anima”” [“We must notice how Tozzi, almost always, narratively treats animals as he treats men: as if their ability to suffer would suffice to be recognized by the narrator as akin to us, as endowed with a ‘soul’ as we are.”].<sup>43</sup> The seamless transition from “uomini” [“men”] (as represented by Tozzi) to “nostri simili” [“akin to us”] and “noi” [“us”] captures perfectly the instinct to apply the narrative paradigm of the *personaggio-uomo*; at the same time, this gesture is hampered by the eerie equivalence established by Tozzi between animals and humans, an equivalence with which Tozzi seems to deprive the human species of yet another “privilege” - the possession of a soul. Petroni’s statement that “Se l’essere umano è non diverso dagli altri esseri viventi, e sofferenti, egli non può avere nemmeno il privilegio della conoscenza” [“If the human being is not so different from other living and suffering beings, he cannot even have the privilege of knowledge”], along with the lines quoted above, forms a commentary on the barrier dividing human and nonhuman animals and on the threat to the solidity of said barrier: reason and soul are the two main “properties” that traditionally are assigned exclusively to humans (the former from a rationalistic perspective, the latter from a transcendental perspective), articulating an ontological hierarchy among living beings; vulnerability is the common trait that calls into question the validity of the hierarchy.

By shifting the focus from agency to vulnerability, posthumanism transfigures a principle of exclusion into a common, constitutive ground on which to envision a new way of conceiving the relations among living beings. As Cary Wolfe puts it, “underneath them all [man and non-man; different organizational structures of the living being] [...] is a shared finitude, a shared ‘passivity’ [...] that runs directly counter to the liberal model of the subject as above all a creature of volition, autonomy, and agency” (139).<sup>44</sup>

This is precisely what happens in *Bestie*: Tozzi presents the reader with a narrator/protagonist whose reactions suggest a feeling of empathy with the suffering nonhuman animals. I have already mentioned the vignette in which the narrator breaks into tears at the sight

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<sup>42</sup> Many studies exist on Samuel Beckett’s representation of animals, on his “simultaneous insistence and disintegration of the human/animal distinction” (Tajiri 28); to mention a few, Yoshiki Tajiri, “Beckett, Coetzee and Animals,” in *Beckett and Animals*, ed. Mary Bryden (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 27-39; Steven Connor, “Beckett’s Animals,” *Journal of Beckett Studies* 8 (Autumn 1982): 29-44; Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Think, Pig! Beckett at the Limit of the Human* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Franco Petroni, *Ideologia e scrittura. Saggi su Federico Tozzi* (San Cesario di Lecce: Manni, 2006), 42.

<sup>44</sup> Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 139.

of the dead lizard: in this case, the emotions of the character remain hidden, and the sense of fraternity with the lizard is only a supposition, based on a physical manifestation. The connection between the suffering of an animal and the feelings of the protagonist is much more explicit when he witnesses the casual killing of toads perpetrated by some peasants:

Io andavo da una pianta all'altra senza dir niente, [...] con il cuore doventato [*sic*] mencio. Ma come mi s'empì la bocca di saliva che pareva bava, quando vidi una rospa che pareva un grande involto! E poi che ella mi guardava con quei suoi occhi di ragazza brutta, forse più acuti dei miei, mi sentii venir male. (32)

[I was going from tree to tree without saying anything, [...] my heart was sagging. But how much saliva - who felt like slime - filled my mouth when I saw a she-toad who looked like a big bundle! And since she was looking at me with her ugly girl's eyes, maybe more acute than mine, I felt I was getting sick.]

This brief passage depicts a reciprocal transfiguration: in the moment of empathy, the human animal is animalized, while the nonhuman animal is anthropomorphized. The narrator's remark that his "saliva pareva bava" ["saliva felt like slime"] denotes a semantic shift from humanness to animality: in Italian "bava" belongs to semantic field of animality, either directly or by way of association with occasions when a human being is deemed to be animal-like. The definition of "bava" is: "Saliva, particolarmente viscosa, che cola dalla bocca di taluni animali [...], o di chi è fuori di sé per eccesso d'ira, ma anche, spesso, dalla bocca dei bambini e dei vecchi" [Extremely viscous saliva, that droops from the mouth of some animals [...], or of someone who is mad with rage, or also, often, from the mouth of children and elders]<sup>45</sup>. At the same time, the eyes of the toad (identified specifically as a she-toad) are those of an ugly girl - in Italian, "rospo" is used as a derogatory term for an ugly person. Here the animal is a transfigured into a girl, not simply compared to one: "occhi di ragazza brutta" ["ugly girl's eyes"] is a statement of fact, an attribution, not a similitude. In this moment of empathy, of recognition of the shared vulnerability, the she-toad *is* a girl, and the narrator *is* animal-esque - human and nonhuman animal effect a simultaneous trespassing into the other's camp. The she-toad's physical suffering elicits the narrator's sadness ("cuore [...] mencio," "sagging heart") and also a more physical reaction ("mi sentii venir male," "I felt I was getting sick"). As in the case of the canary and of the green lizard, the ultimate reaction is provoked by the gaze of the she-toad, who stares in the narrator's eyes; her eyes are described as "forse più acuti" ["maybe more acute"] than his. This "acuteness" indicates perceptiveness - once again, *Bestie's* narrator is attributing some sort of consciousness and intelligence to the nonhuman animal. The exchange of gazes denotes a particular attitude of the narrator, that Derrida defines as the willingness to be seen seen: *Bestie's* narrator is pervious to the gaze of the nonhuman other "who have never been *seen seen* by the animal":

If, indeed, they did happen to be seen seen furtively by the animal one day, they took no [...] account of it. They neither wanted nor had the capacity to draw any systematic consequence from the fact that an animal could, facing them, look at them, [...] and in a word, without a word, *address them*. They have taken no account of the fact that what they call animal could *look* at them and *address* them from down there, from a wholly other origin. (382)

<sup>45</sup> *Treccani Vocabolario on line*, s.v. "bava," accessed July 18, 2017, <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/bava/>

*Bestie* is a good litmus test for the implications of a narrative that takes account of the address of the nonhuman animal: in Tozzi's case, the gazes of the animals help dismantling the implicit assumption that, as Richardson puts it, "a first person narrator would resemble a normal human being" - an assumption that lies at the core of the narrative revolving around the *personaggio-uomo*. At the basis of this model of literature is a straightforward identification between reader and human character, seen as an old acquaintance ("vecchia conoscenza"): "si tratta anche di te" ("Commemorazione" 353), "it is about you, too". For the dynamic of the *personaggio-uomo* to work, the narration must serve as a mirror held up to the reader: from this perspective, literature is conceived as an endless gallery of mirrors, reflecting the human reader, albeit deformed.<sup>46</sup> In *Bestie*, the gaze of the nonhuman animal addressing the human narrator inserts itself in this binary exchange, and becomes the literary and literal actualization of a possibility that Derrida suggests in his seminar: "cannot this cat also be, deep within her eyes, my primary mirror?" (418). The gaze of the nonhuman animal acts a mirror that is held up to the narrator as well as to the reader, but the image it reflects defies the expectations of the reader of being in the presence of an old acquaintance, creating instead uneasiness and discomfort, as comments such as Amberson's (on the "horrifying equivalence between animal and man") and Petroni's (on the possibility that nonhuman animals have a soul like humans) show.

The mirror-like nature of the gaze of nonhuman animals is further corroborated by the fact that it possesses a reflective quality that the gaze of fellow human beings completely lacks: the sudden, violent reactions it provokes signal that the narrator's gaze has been captured and returned, the animal silently but actively addressing the human being. By contrast, the gazes directed to the protagonist by his fellow human animals are seldom registered, and their effects prove to be of little consequence.<sup>47</sup>

Something different happens when the main character is looking in a mirror or in a reflecting surface. It happens four times, and these scenes have one element in common: the diegetic absence of the reflected image of the character. In one case, the mirror remains an inert prop (much like the gazes of other human animals): "Sono impaziente: mi guardo le mani, mi specchio ai vetri della finestra. Nessuna stanza è bella come questa [...]" ["I'm impatient: I look at my hands, at my reflection in the window panes. No room is nice like this."] (76). Here the action of looking in the mirroring surface has no narrative consequences; what follows is a description of the dining room. The other mirrors we find in *Bestie* have much more sinister effects:

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<sup>46</sup> In *Romanzo*, Debenedetti writes at length about deformation, about "l'invasione dei brutti" ["the invasion of the ugly"], "la sistematica bruttezza del personaggio-uomo nell'arte e nella narrativa moderna" ["the systematic ugliness of *personaggio-uomo* in modern art and narrative"] (he cites Dostoevsky, Proust, Pirandello, and Tozzi) (*Romanzo* 454); according to him, the traits of the characters are deformed in order to reflect the image of the reader's psyche, her inner angst.

<sup>47</sup> The only time an actual reaction of the protagonist to a human gaze is put in writing, sadness is the reaction: "[O]gni volta che qualcuno mi guardava con quella sua curiosità acuta che m'offendeva, io doventavo [*sic*] più triste" ["Every time someone looked at me with that acute curiosity that offended me, I got sadder and sadder"] (25). Even in this case, two are the elements that makes the reaction very weak compared to the ones we see when a nonhuman animal looks the protagonist in the eyes: first, what is reported is not a singular, specific gaze of a specific person, but a general circumstance that repeats itself; second, on closer inspection, what triggers the reaction of sadness is not gaze itself, but the sentiment of curiosity behind it. The other two times the gaze of the protagonist meets the gaze of another human animal, the reader is not told of any reaction: "La voce di quella ragazza mi faceva lo stesso effetto di quando mi guardava" ["The girl's voice had on me the same effect of her gaze"] (55); "[Mia moglie] si mise a guardarmi fisso. Pareva che i suoi occhi si allargassero sempre di più; ma mi sentivo tanto più forte di lei che non pensavo né meno a offenderla" ["My wife started staring at me. Her eyes seemed to become larger and larger, but I was feeling so much stronger than she that I did not even think of offending her"] (63).

E perché, quand'ella mi teneva abbracciato, io guardavo noi due nello specchio e non sapevo se fossimo di qua o di là da esso? (38-39)

[And why, when she held me in an embrace, did I look at us in the mirror without knowing whether we were in front of or beyond it?]

Il mio alito fa appannare i vetri della finestra, ma lo specchio sembra un abisso che divora tutto. (49)

[My breath fogs up the window panes, but the mirror seems like an abyss that devours everything.]

Il cielo sta per doventare [*sic*] uno specchio: è già impossibile guardarlo. (78)

[The sky is about to turn into a mirror: it is already impossible to look at it.]

Mirrors are either membranes that disconnect the narrator from reality or devices that threaten him inasmuch that he ultimately avoids meeting the reflection of his own gaze. They foster a sense of precariousness and uncertainty about his own standing in space: on which side of the mirror is he staying? The resistance of mirrors to reflecting the image of the human protagonist plays a role in the dismantlement of *personaggio-uomo* because the mirrors, in their relation to the character, function as proxies for the book in relation to the reader: they deflect, rather than reflect, the image of the human.

In *Mirror Gazing*, devoted to mirror scenes in literature, Warren Motte writes: “[R]eading can be conceived as a kind of mirror-gazing. / [A]mong the many things we ‘see’ in literature, one of the salient things is ourselves, writ large. [...] [W]e look for ourselves in the books we read, narcissists that we are [...]” (25-26).<sup>48</sup> The mirrors in *Bestie* prevent the reader from indulging in her narcissistic instincts; they preclude an automatic identification between the reader and a character perceived as fellow “normal” human being - identification that the paradigm of the *personaggio-uomo* would imply. *Bestie* exploits the urge to find an alter ego in the pages of a work of fiction to throw the reader into confusion: how can this narrator be a human being “like her”?

The relevance of the reflective dynamics of the narrative and of the malfunctions of mirrors is enhanced by the fact that *Bestie* is, after all, an autobiography - and what is an autobiography (an ideal one, at least) if not a sustained look in the mirror? It is a peculiar kind of autobiography, without a chronological storyline, without a character introducing himself as the protagonist and explicitly owning the experience presented to the reader. The title does not bear the name of the protagonist or a hint to the content and genre of the work (the protagonist’s life, his deeds); instead, Tozzi titles this work *Bestie*, as if to suggest that the narrator/protagonist is a beast among other beasts, and that the meaning of his story rests upon the inclusion of nonhuman animals in it.

This particular autobiography, which explores the ragged boundary between the realms of human and nonhuman animals and implicitly calls into question the conception of humanness that feeds on a neat rupture between the two, seems to be a possible answer to a question posed by Derrida: “Is there [...] an ancient form of autobiography immune from confession, an account of the self free from any sense of confession? And thus from all redemptive language, within the horizon of salvation as a requiting?” (390) *Bestie* is arguably an autobiography free from any sense of confession, if confession, as Derrida suggests, is “the discourse on the self [that] does not dissociate truth from an avowal, thus from a fault, an evil, an ill” (390). As previously noted, the

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<sup>48</sup> Warren F. Motte, *Mirror Gazing* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2014).



protagonist of *Bestie* is not characterized as having thoughts and feeling of a moral quality: he does not speak of guilt, he is confessing no sins; his matter-of-fact approach, even when describing moments of shame and of violent emotion, can be defined as amoral.

While Derrida points out how Renée Descartes tied together the elements of *cogito*, *bête-machine*, and confessional autobiography (“Between Augustine and Rousseau [...], within the evolving history of the *ego cogito ergo sum*, stands Descartes. He waits for us with his animal-machines. I presume that he won’t interrupt the lineage that, for so long now, has tied the autobiographical genre to the institution of confession”, 391), Bruce Bohrer goes further and argues that the Cartesian postulates are the cornerstone of the very notion of character:

[T]he notion of character, in its originary Cartesian moment, [i]s an instrument for defining and maintaining the species barrier. It is no accident that the *Discourse on the Method* remains almost equally famous for two distinct philosophical postulates: the cogito and the *bête-machine*. These principles emerge hand in hoof from Descartes’s meditations, in symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relation: the former crafts a notion of humanity composed of inwardness and speculation, while the latter denies such qualities to the nonhuman.” (546)<sup>49</sup>

I will devote the next section to showing how *Bestie*’s protagonist represents a challenge to the character built on the Cartesian paradigm. The barrier erected between species is only one among the many that stem from Descartes’ notions of the self and its relation to the world around him, and *Bestie* constitutes a valuable effort to propose an alternative ontological topography.

### 3. Anima, Animality, Animism: Exploring the Boundaries between Spirit and Matter

In *Bestie*, soul (*anima*, in Italian) is mentioned 42 times - an astonishing number, considering that the narration consists of 69 vignettes (occupying 64 pages of small format in the edition I am using). The term is always referred to human beings (usually the protagonist), and not to nonhuman animals; nevertheless, the profile and notion of soul emerging for the pages of *Bestie* hint at a posthumanistic effort: questioning the Cartesian dichotomy of body and mind.

If we accept Bohrer’s suggestion, the traditional concept of character rests upon two other Cartesian notions, *cogito* and *bête-machine*, both intended to create and maintain a rift between human and nonhuman animals. Tozzian critics subscribe to this notion when commenting on the nature of his characters: Amberson writes that “Tozzi’s characters are subject to the primacy of a flesh that, in its schizophrenic intensity, negates all theoretical abstraction” (107); Luperini (as I previously quoted) describes *Bestie*’s protagonist as “ridotto alle funzioni sensoriali e memoriali, in preda a desideri, umori, ricordi, percezioni. Le sue scarse azioni non sono coordinate da alcuna logica [...]” [“reduced to the functions of his senses and his memory, at the mercy of desires, moods, memories, perceptions. His infrequent actions are not governed by any logic.”] (111). Both scholars base their assessment of Tozzian characters on an implicit dichotomy between the sphere of *cogito* (Amberson’s “theoretical abstraction”, Luperini’s absence of “alcuna logica”, “any logic”) and the sphere of bodily functions and instinct (“primacy of [...] flesh”, “funzioni sensoriali” - “sensory functions”). Luperini completes the image of a machine-like human at the mercy of (“in preda a”) external stimuli by drawing the consequences of his behavior: *Bestie*’s narrator lacks that quintessential human quality that is the capacity to exercise free will.

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<sup>49</sup> Bruce Bohrer, “Animal Studies and the Deconstruction of Character.” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 542-47.

Soul, the way it is configured in *Bestie*, subverts the body/mind dichotomy by being transfigured into a whole new entity. The word *anima* already belongs to a rich and complex semantic field and has attained an extremely stratified meaning during its long history, from its ancient and pagan origins to Judeo-Christianity, from Aristotle's doctrine of three types of souls (vegetative, sensitive, and rational) to the Jungian archetype of men's feminine inner personality, to mention just a few appropriations and metamorphoses. All these singular actualizations have one element in common: soul is conceived as an immaterial entity, clearly distinct from body and matter.

The narrator of *Bestie*, instead, describes soul in completely different terms. The passage I quoted at the beginning of this chapter is a perfect example of this departure from the norm: "Mi ricorderò sempre dei bei prati verdi che cominciavano dalla mia anima e da' miei piedi, e finivano quasi all'orizzonte" ["I will always remember the pretty green fields that started from my soul and my feet and ended almost at the horizon"] (27). In this excerpt, the spiritual element *par excellence*, soul, becomes indistinguishable from grass, and shares physicality, materiality with feet and grass.

Other examples of the proteanism of soul can be found in the following passages:

In campagna mi fermavo sotto un albero che aveva i rami troppo schiacciati, e gli offrivo di sorreggerli con la mia anima. (39)

[In the countryside I used to stay under a tree whose branches were all pushed down, and I would offer to sustain them with my soul.]

E la mia anima sopra [l'odore di violette] s'ingrandiva fino a sentirmela dentro i miei occhi. (53)

[And my soul enlarged upon [the smell of violets] until I would feel it in my eyes.]

Ecco la sera, quando le cose della stanza doventano [*sic*] pugnali che affondano nella mia anima. (78)

[Here's the evening, when the things in the room turn into daggers that sinks into my soul.]

The Tozzian soul is an entity that can become enmeshed in matter; it is expandable, it can be wielded; its presence is physically felt by the protagonist. It is earthy and vulnerable, not an ethereal, intangible, and noble element, distinguishing man from beasts.

The properties of the soul must be read in connection with the behavior of the protagonist himself, who is predisposed to melt into the natural elements that surround him. In commenting a passage from a different work by Tozzi (*Ricordi di un impiegato*, 1920), that ends with the words "[L]a mia anima si fa più leggiera; imitando forse l'acqua che corre e pare immobile [...]. Tremo anche io con i pioppi [...]. Non sono doventato [*sic*] erba anch'io per farmi falciare insieme con tutta quella del campo?" ["My soul becomes lighter, maybe imitating water, that runs and seems to stay still. I, too, tremble, with the poplars [...]. Haven't I become grass to let myself be mown along with all the grass of the field?"], Ilaria de Seta writes: "La cornice tra spazio interno ed esterno, dimensione privata e pubblica, soggetto e oggetto, ma anche tra narrazione e descrizione si è dilatata e deformata al punto che l'io narrante è entrato nel quadro e si è immerso nel paesaggio (una forma inedita di panismo 'mistico')" ["The frame between interior and exterior, private and public dimension, subject and object, but also narration and description has dilated and deformed so much that the narrator has entered into the picture and has immersed himself into the landscape

(an unprecedented form of ‘mystical’ *panismo*)”].<sup>50</sup> “Panismo”, which has no equivalent in English, is a sense of communion with nature, that creates a fusional state between a human being and the natural world, and it is often used to define one of the poetic traits of Gabriele D’Annunzio.<sup>51</sup> The feeling of connection with nature, in *Bestie*, completely lacks the symbolic, aesthetic, and mythical components that characterize D’Annunzio’s *panismo*; instead, it manifests itself as an intensely bodily experience, as a feeling of empathy with elements of the natural world, especially when to be evoked is a shared sense of vulnerability and finitude:<sup>52</sup>

E il mio cuore non batte come le manciate di terra che mi getteranno addosso? / O morte che sei bella nei fili alti dell’erba, tremolanti nel vento fresco, e rugiadosi! (51)

[Doesn’t my heart beat like the handfuls of dirt that they will throw on me? / O death, you are beautiful in the tall blades of grass, trembling in the fresh wind, and dewy!]

Ma i miei brividi al tremolio bianco degli ulivi! (56)

[But my shudders at the white trembling of the olive trees!]

Nel bosco cerco l’albero che, tagliato a bara, imputridirà sotto terra con me. (74)

[In the woods I look for the tree that, cut into a coffin, will rot with me under ground.]

When *Bestie*’s protagonist fantasizes about his death, Tozzian *panismo* combines the sentiment elicited by the end of life and the return to a pure material state with the vivid, crude imagery and the harsh physicality connected to it. The character’s destiny is shared with handfuls of dirt and coffins that used to be trees, hinting at the bridging of the ultimate abyss, the one dividing organic and inorganic entities.

*Panismo* can account for some aspects of the relation between the character and his surroundings, but there is another and even more radical way in which the protagonist’s approach to the world challenges the divide between matter and spirit, human and nonhuman realm. In an essay about Tozzi and animals in a modernist context, Damiano Benvegnù writes about the presence of animism in Tozzi’s works: “Tozzi’s literary modernity is [...] tied to the ability of ‘his’ animals to force a regression to a nonmimetic, magical, and quasi-animistic world in which [...] nonhuman animals are at the same time feared and worshipped” (45)<sup>53</sup>. As we have seen so far, the ontological status of nonhuman animals in *Bestie* generates relations with the protagonist that are much more complex than mere sentiments of fear and worship; on the other hand, what I

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<sup>50</sup> Ilaria de Seta, “Con Borgese e Debenedetti: Tozzi, artista di una provincia europea,” in *Federigo Tozzi in Europa*, eds. Riccardo Castellana and Ilaria de Seta (Roma: Carocci, 2017): 91-106; 102.

<sup>51</sup> Sabatini Coletti on line, s.v. “panismo,” accessed July 18, 2017, [http://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario\\_italiano/P/panismo.shtml](http://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario_italiano/P/panismo.shtml): “Senso di comunione, di compenetrazione gioiosa dell’uomo con la natura, spec. come atteggiamento artistico o letterario: *il p. della poesia dannunziana*” [“Sense of communion, of joyful reciprocal penetration of human and nature, especially as artistic or literary attitude: *the p. of D’Annunzio’s poetry*”]

<sup>52</sup> Using the term “natural,” problematic as it is, allows me to hint to everything outside the human realm, be it organic or inorganic. Since the boundaries of the human are in a state of constant flux, however, it is intended that what is to be considered “included” or “excluded” is subject to a continual negotiation.

<sup>53</sup> Damiano Benvegnù, “The Tortured Animals of Modernity: Animal Studies and Italian Literature,” in *Creatural Fictions. Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature*, ed. David Herman (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). 41-64.

consider animistic are his perception of and interactions with inanimate objects (especially objects that are present in his house), as in the following examples:

Ed i tetti hanno la pazienza di stare lì e l'abilità di non lasciarsi andare per riposarsi un poco!  
(70)

[And the roofs have the patience to stay there and the ability not to let themselves go to rest a little!]

[Le cose della stanza] questa sera hanno atteso tutte d'accordo. / Siete sicure di essere sincere?  
(78)

[Tonight the things of the room have waited, all like-minded. / Are you sure you are sincere?]

Quand'io aprivo gli usci avevo paura; e la carta delle pareti aveva un'aria di silenzio quasi timido; non canzonatore o vispo, come altre volte. (82)

[When I opened the doors I was afraid; and the wallpaper had an air of silence that was almost shy, not mocking or lively like other times.]

Benvegnù refers to animism as “regression”, elaborating on Debenedetti’s parallel between Tozzi’s “primitive” approach to psychology (“gli mancano gli adeguati strumenti culturali e informativi” [“he lacks the adequate cultural and informational tools”], *Romanzo* 196) and the reverence of “primitive people” for animals and natural forces, entities that are beyond their comprehension. Animism, however, can be interpreted as something different than a set of delusional beliefs held by backward people, who still have to attain a scientific and advanced grasp on reality. According to Tim Ingold,

[Animism is] not [...] a way of believing *about* the world but with a condition of being *in* it. This could be described as a condition of being alive in the world, characterised by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux [...]. The animacy of the lifeworld [...] is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation.  
(10)<sup>54</sup>

In *Bestie*, Tozzi is carving a literary space in which spirit and substance are seen as one, “prior to their differentiation”. In challenging this differentiation, animism, along with the questioning of another momentous differentiation - that between human and nonhuman animals - further erodes the symbolic order based on the hierarchy of living beings.

Sinéad Garrigan Mattar considers the poems of William Butler Yeats to be infused with an animistic perception of the world around him, and the expressions she uses to describe Yeats’ work would be perfectly apt to comment on Tozzi’s images in *Bestie*: Yeats “combines the physical and the abstract in a single phrase that affirms its connection with both realms even as it obfuscates it” (142), just as Tozzi does in sentences such as “E allora non comprendevo le violette: ma soltanto il loro odore come una serenata alla luce” [“And then I did not understand the violets, but only their smell like a serenade to the light”] (53); Mattar’s conclusion that “Yeats’s sense that animistic forces

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<sup>54</sup> Tim Ingold, “Rethinking the Animate, Re-animating Thought,” *Ethnos* 71 no. 1: 9-20, 10; Debenedetti elaborates on the parallels he sees between Tozzi’s approach to psychology and “primitivism” in *Romanzo*, 196-202.

have an intrinsic, radically anti-anthropocentric power allies him with modern anthropologists” (152) could well have been written for the Tozzi of *Bestie*.<sup>55</sup>

The animistic perception of reality of the protagonist of *Bestie* puts into a different perspective the lack of agency and free will lamented by most Tozzian scholars. According to Bruno Latour, animism reveals the arbitrariness of the notion that the behavior of human animals is distinctively based on freedom and free will, while the “actions” of nonhuman entities are governed by a series of mechanistic systems of causes and consequences: “Let these automatic causal chains do their work and they will build up the cage of nature” (482)<sup>56</sup>. Elaborating on Alfred North Whitehead’s concept of Bifurcation, Latour adds: “For purely anthropocentric [...] reasons, naturalists have built their collective to make sure that subjects and objects, culture and nature remain utterly distinct, with only the former having any sort of agency” (483). The approach to reality displayed by the protagonist of *Bestie* erodes the artificially neat distinction between the mechanistic nature of the actions of nonhuman animals and natural entities and the rational, deliberate behavior of human beings.<sup>57</sup>

Latour’s considerations on animism involve the artificiality of concepts such as “nature” and “culture”, and the hierarchical order of living beings their distinction fosters, issues that I will cover more thoroughly in the next chapters:

Once you begin to trace an absolute distinction between what is deaf and dumb and who is allowed to speak, [...] it is a fabulously useful ploy [...] to establish a political epistemology and to decide who will be allowed to talk about what, and which types of beings will remain silent. (476)

Reading the interactions between the protagonist of *Bestie* and the world around him through the lenses of animism allows me to propose an alternative to Moe’s influential interpretation of the work, outlined in his 1993 essay and cited by both Amberson and Luperini.<sup>58</sup> According to Moe, “an inability to possess and an inability to fix meaning are intimately related in *Bestie* and underlie the structure of the text as a whole” (120), and the protagonist lives in a “condition of dispossession” (121), momentarily compensated at times by a “bourgeois-idyllic situation” (121), as in the following passage:

Quando ci sono io, tutto ciò che è nella mia casa vive con me.  
Io stesso ho insegnato a tutte le cose, scegliendole, come dovevano fare per piacermi e perché io le amassi.  
Queste pareti riconoscono la mia voce; e la loro fedeltà è profonda. (74)

[When I am here, all the things that are in my house live with me.  
I have taught myself to all the things, by choosing them, what they had to do to make me like them and love them.  
These walls recognize my voice; and their loyalty is earnest.]

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<sup>55</sup> Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, “Yeats, Fairies, and the New Animism,” *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 137-157.

<sup>56</sup> Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’,” *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 471-490.

<sup>57</sup> Some contemporary scientists maintain that the very notion of free will does not survive a close scrutiny. Robert M. Sapolsky, a biologist and neurologist who teaches at Stanford, arrives at the simple conclusion that “Free will is an illusion” (Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2017), 594).

<sup>58</sup> Amberson 97, Luperini 116n7.

Moe juxtaposes the situation depicted above, characterized by “a dominion of the subject over the object” (121), to the following, in which “the objects which should be subordinate to the will of the owner take on a terrible autonomy before him” (121):

Tra le stanze c'era un'intesa e un accordo di non dirmi niente: qualche parola che se la passavano quand'io voltavo le spalle. I miei libri facevano di tutto perch'io non li prendessi in mano; le stoviglie del salottino da pranzo erano mute e così tristi che io non mi sarei arrischiato ad adoprarle né meno una; perché mi sarebbero cadute. (82)

[Among the rooms there was an understanding and an agreement not to tell me anything: they exchanged a few words when I turned my back. My books would do anything not to let me take them in my hands; the dishes of the living room were mute and so sad that I wouldn't have dared to use them, not even one, because they would have dropped.]

I argue that this excerpt, along with the ones I quoted above as examples of Tozzi's animism, undermines the neat division between subject and object on which Moe's interpretation rests. Objects possess some agency, and the protagonist can from time to time occupy the position of subject or object. Moreover, these passages give rise to a fundamental question: what form do possession and dispossession take in *Bestie*? Before attempting to respond, I will quote two more passages:

Nessuna stanza è bella come questa; e la mia anima è anche più gaia dell'aria: il limone, i bicchieri, i piatti sono belli perché miei. Il senso di averli e loro stessi sono una cosa sola. Ed è una sola realtà. (76-77)

[No room is as nice as this one; and my soul is even merrier than the air: the lemon, the glasses, the dishes are beautiful because they're mine. They and the feeling to have them are the same thing. It is one reality.]

Ecco la sera, quando le cose della stanza doventano [sic] pugnali che affondano nella mia anima [...]. / Qualche altra volta, mi erano sembrate - libri, tavoli, sedie [...] - poemi immensi. Mai, in nessun modo, sono riescito [sic] ad essere indipendente dinanzi a loro. (78)

Here's the evening, when the things in the room turn into daggers that sinks into my soul [...]. / Other times, they had seemed to me - books, tables, chairs [...] - immense poems. Never, in no way, I was able to be independent in front of them.

The notion of commodification falls short of defining the intimate relation established between the protagonist and the things he owns.<sup>59</sup> The feelings expressed in the two passages above seem to have been taken straight from the pages of William James' *Principles of Psychology*, a work that was

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<sup>59</sup> Especially when it comes to the relation between the protagonist and objects, it is not easy to tell where the boundary between fetishism and animism is. For a discussion on the subject, see Nurit Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited. Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology,” *Current Anthropology* 40, Supplement (February 1999): S67-S91; see in particular S81, and S88-S89.

present in Tozzi's personal library.<sup>60</sup> In reflecting on the nature of self and on the slippery boundary between "me" and "mine", James writes:

The Empirical Self of each of us is all that he is tempted to call by the name of *me*. But it is clear that between what a man calls *me* and what he simply calls *mine* the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves. [...] [A] *man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his*, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends [...].<sup>61</sup>

James' description of self suits well the character's openness to the world and its stimuli. The protagonist of *Bestie* walks around pervious to the gaze of the nonhuman other and to physical and optical sensations, unsure of his place among other beings and entities, uncertain of the nature and boundaries of the self, admitting his inability to grasp the chimera that is the true nature of things (objects, daggers, or poems?), his "inability to fix meaning" (Moe).

A further take on *Bestie's* unconventional conception of wealth and on its often abstract quality, is offered in the next quotation, that may well be a scene out of a Chagall painting:

Io m'ero messo in testa di trovare il violoncello che udivo tra gli alberi del bosco: quando tira vento, non sta più zitto niente! [...] Il violoncello del bosco l'avrei voluto comprare, per darmi l'aria di essere ricco. E suonarlo i giorni di festa della mia anima; ammaestrando un liocorno, color di carta bianca, che prenderei da qualche favola vecchia. (76)

[I had put my mind to finding the cello that I heard through the trees in the woods: when the wind blows, nothing stays silent! [...] I would have liked to buy the cello of the woods to play at being rich. And to play it at the holidays of my soul, training a paper white unicorn whom I'd take from some old tale.]

It would be a mistake not to acknowledge the possible overlapping of animism and fetishism (see note 42): as much as the protagonist "explore[s] [...] a territory beyond the horizon of the reigning social discourse" (Moe 123), Tozzi's fantastical imagery may convey the illusion that "sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social, there already exists a realm of freedom" (Jameson 20).<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, a couple of cages are reconfigured indeed: the "cage of nature" (Latour), and the cage of symbolism that traps nonhuman animals, that become sacrificial offerings on the altar of human anxieties and will of self-representation and self-fashioning.

The quotation above offers us a phantasmagoria in which fantastic and realistic imagery, abstract and concrete elements cheerfully clash. It represents well the hybrid nature of *Bestie's*

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<sup>60</sup> For a complete list of the books possessed by Tozzi, see Costanza Geddes da Filicaia, *La biblioteca di Federigo Tozzi* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2001); James' work, in its Italian translation, is listed on page 134. The influence of the thought of William James on Tozzi is well studied - see Marco Marchi, "La cultura psicologica di Tozzi," *Paragone* 422-424 (April-June 1985): 78-93; and Martina Martini, *Tozzi e James: Letteratura e psicologia* (Firenze: Leo Olschki, 1999).

<sup>61</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), 291.

<sup>62</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

narration and protagonist, with feet firmly planted on ground and gaze often pointed to the sky.<sup>63</sup> *Bestie* forces the reader to let go of the idea of an entity such as a “normal human being” clearly distinguished from her nonhuman companions, and establishes Tozzi as one of the few narrators who are open to be seen seen by nonhuman animals.

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<sup>63</sup> The sky, including the variants *cielo*, *orizzonte*, *turchino*, *azzurro* [*sky*, *horizon*, *blue*, *azure*] (all used as nouns) is mentioned twelve times, and the protagonist looks twelve other times through the windows.



## Chapter 2

### Copernicus Interruptus: Anna Maria Ortese as a Visionary and a Reactionary

[Gli animali] [s]ono piccole persone mute, un immenso popolo muto, e generalmente mite, ma senza un diritto al mondo, e di cui ciascuno può fare ciò che vuole, e lo fa, macchiando la terra di un solo interminabile delitto, per il quale non c'è mai un gastigo [*sic*]. (*Piccole* 113)<sup>64</sup>

[Animals are small mute persons, an immense mute and generally meek people, but without a single right; anyone can make of them what they wish, and they do, staining the earth with a sole endless crime for which there is no punishment.]

Anna Maria Ortese's reconfiguration of the reciprocal definition of human and nonhuman animals was a career-long enterprise. From her first novel, whose title character is an iguana, to the last one, whose title character is a puma, Ortese experimented with the form and substance of what it means to be human and nonhuman animals, submitting her characters to an extensive series of permutations and metamorphoses.

The quotation above, whose precise date is uncertain, but that was written after 1982, encompasses most aspects of Ortese's attitude toward nonhuman animals. The conception of animality behind her attitude is extremely layered, seemingly contradictory; it is an idiosyncratic stance that does not precisely abide either by humanistic or by posthumanistic tenets: the definition, "piccole persone" is at the same time positing nonhuman animals' ontological proximity to humans and remarking a certain comparative smallness; mentioning nonhuman animals' muteness ("popolo muto" ["mute people"]) reiterates the traditional, humanistic divide based on the possession of *logos* or lack thereof, while classifying the killing of animals as a crime ("un solo interminabile delitto, per il quale non c'è mai un gastigo" ["a sole endless crime for which there is no punishment"]) implies a rejection of the idea of human exceptionality that sustains the logic of sacrifice, according to which only the killing of a human animal can be considered a murder.<sup>65</sup>

In this chapter I will analyze how Ortese's conception of human and nonhuman life informs her narrative in the three novels that compose her "animal trilogy": *L'Iguana* (1965), *Il cardillo addolorato* (1993), *Alonso e i visionari* (1996).<sup>66</sup>

In *L'Iguana*, the count Aleardo, dubbed Daddo, is a naïve, good-natured, rich Milanese architect who travels the world to acquire new estate. During one of his travels, he lands on the mysterious isle of Ocaña, inhabited by three scions of a decayed noble family, Ilario, Hipolito, and Felipe Guzman, and a female creature of indefinite name (Estrellita? Perdita?) and age, who appears to Daddo at times as a human being, at times as an iguana. As soon as Daddo sets foot on

<sup>64</sup> Anna Maria Ortese, *Le piccole persone* (Milano: Adelphi, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> Another feature of the nonhuman animals mentioned in this quotation that is worth noticing is their meekness ("generalmente mite", "generally meek"); it conveys an idea of innocence and reveals some idealization on Ortese's part. I will come back to this point in the last section of this chapter.

<sup>66</sup> Anna Maria Ortese, *L'Iguana* (Milano: Adelphi, 1997); Anna Maria Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato* (Milano: Adelphi, 2014); Anna Maria Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari* (Milano: Adelphi, 2017). Two of these novels were translated into English: Anna Maria Ortese, *The Iguana*, transl. Henry Martin (New Paltz, N.Y.: McPherson, 1987), and Anna Maria Ortese, *The Lament of the Linnet*, transl. Patrick Creagh (London: Harvill Press, 1997). Unless otherwise specified, I will use Henty Martin's and Patrick Creagh's translations throughout the chapter.

the isle and makes the acquaintance of its inhabitants, his health and his rational faculties ostensibly start decaying, and he dies after being tried for a crime that may involve deicide.

*Il cardillo addolorato* is set between 1795 and 1804 and starts with the journey to Naples of three Belgian friends, the prince Ingmar Neville (from whose perspective the whole story is told), the artist Albert Dupré, and the merchant Alphonse Nodier.<sup>67</sup> In Naples, they rapidly grow close to the glove maker Don Mariano Civile and his family; Mariano's daughter Elmina and Dupré marry and have two children. Among the myriad characters populating the novel, two more are worth mentioning here: Hieronymus Käppchen, a nearly three-hundred-year old child-like creature who is apparently the only animal, human or nonhuman, for whom Elmina can feel deep affection; and the linnet of the title, who is a constant but invisible and baffling presence throughout the narration, and manifests herself through her chant and through mechanical and living proxies.

The main characters of *Alonso e i visionari* are the narrator, Stella Winter Grotz, and professor Jimmy Op, both American. Alonso is a puma who, almost thirty years before the time when the narration takes place, was found in Arizona by an Italian professor, Antonio Decimo, and brought to Italy, where he kept company with Decimo's sons, Decio and Julio. The novel opens with the mystery surrounding the death of Julio, which soon enough becomes intertwined with the mystery of Alonso's life (and of his possible death). In the course of the narration, the physical and mental state of Jimmy Op rapidly deteriorates.

With her animal trilogy, Ortese constructs a deeply idiosyncratic new model of creatural coexistence; the conceptual elements informing this model are so apparently incompatible that they stay together as in an alchemic combination. Ortese rejects the hierarchical ranking of living beings based on possession or lack of rationality, but she associates the categories of animality and vulnerable humanness with those of childhood and of womanhood, walking a fine line between the renegotiation of orthodox humanistic tenets and the reinforcement of gender normativity. Her novels prominently feature the sufferings of the disenfranchised, represented as mostly passive creatures, whose only hope is to be saved by humans - an attitude that seems to reinforce their inferiority, but the way in which the attempted rescues are enacted represents a complete reversal of the logic of sacrifice on which human exceptionality is based. Moreover, while Ortese's moral and aesthetic principles are strongly informed by a Platonic philosophical framework and by Christian ideals, her gaze on reality is relentlessly Leopardian, lay and unreligious.

Ortese's visionary animal trilogy embodies her unique perspective on life and art and displays her uncanny ability as a narrator: she can materialize narrative universes that obey their own rules and catapult the reader there, with no handholds, at the mercy of her bold, commanding, esoteric voice.

### 1. New Kinships and Human Sacrifice

«[Q]uesta [...] non è una storia di animali, signora Winter [...]. Già, suppongo sia sbagliato parlare di 'animali'. La vita è una.» (*Alonso* 21)

[«This is not a story about animals, Ms. Winter [...]. Right, I suppose it is wrong to talk of 'animals.' Life is one.»]

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<sup>67</sup> Gala Rebane has convincingly established these precise dates in her essay "The Flickering Light of Reason: Anna Maria Ortese's *Il cardillo addolorato* and the Critique of European Modernity," in Gian Maria Annovi and Flora Ghezzi, eds., *Anna Maria Ortese: Celestial Geographies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 356-384. I will comment on the significance of setting the novel in this specific historical moment in the second section of this chapter.

When it comes to the conviction that human and nonhuman lives have the same value, the unequivocal assertions made by Ortese in her journalistic and essayistic production are perfectly consonant with the spirit informing her narrative.<sup>68</sup> In the following pages, I will show what motivates and characterizes Ortese's conception of life as "one", which implies rejecting human exceptionality to include nonhuman animals into a new and more comprehensive community. In Ortese's conception, building this new community comes at a price: human animals are immolated in order to overturn the conventional "logic of sacrifice" (Haraway et al.) at the basis of the anthropocentric conception of society.

Ortese's idea that "la vita è una" ["Life is one"] translates into a radical re-thinking of kinship. Ortese regards all living and potentially suffering beings as part of the same family, and proposes an idea of society whose composition cuts through different species. The following excerpt presents in a nutshell Ortese's vision and the responsibilities on which her new society would be based:

Siamo una famiglia, dobbiamo assumerci le responsabilità di una famiglia. Chi soffre deve essere aiutato subito. [...] Ognuno è responsabile della caduta degli altri, e deve pagare per loro. Siamo coinvolti non per una nostra colpa, ma come membri di una famiglia. Anche se ne fossimo i membri privi di colpa, abbiamo delle responsabilità. Jimmy Op, in *Alonso e i visionari*, vuole *riparare*. [...] / [I]l dolore della natura [...] è immenso: pensiamo soltanto agli allevamenti degli animali, a tutte quelle creature tenute rinchiuso per poterle uccidere, pensiamo al dolore degli animali. [...] Per salvare il mondo c'è bisogno della nostra responsabilità [...]. / Nei miei libri ci sono proposte che appaiono inattuabili, proposte che il mondo rifiuta. (*Nessun male* 13-15)<sup>69</sup>

[We are a family, we have to take responsibilities as a family. Who is in pain must be helped right away. [...] Everyone is responsible for the fall of the others, and must pay on their behalf. We are involved not because of a personal fault, but as members of a family. Even if we were the faultless members, we have responsibilities. Jimmy Op, in *Alonso e i visionari*, wants to *repair*. [...] The pain of nature [...] is immense: let's just think of farms, of all those creatures kept captive only to be killed; let's think of the pain of animals. [...] To save the world, our responsibility is needed [...]. / In my books there are proposals that seem unachievable, proposals that are rejected by the world.]

These lines provide a good example of the characteristic tone of Ortese's prose, implacable and uncompromising, and of her line of thought, which is irreconcilable with the humanistic and liberal ideal of self-determination: "Ognuno è responsabile per la caduta degli altri" ["Everyone is responsible for the fall of the others"]. This conception of responsibility is at the heart of Ortese's subversion of the logic of sacrifice, and informs the actions of the characters in the three novels I am analyzing.

Ortese describes the self-immolation of Jimmy Op as an act of reparation, and his full last name, Opfering, overtly reveals the sacrificial nature of his character: Opfer in German means "sacrifice" and "victim." Guilt and expiation, crime and redemption are the overarching themes

<sup>68</sup> I am referring in particular to the essays now collected in Anna Maria Ortese, *Corpo celeste* (Milano: Adelphi, 1997); Anna Maria Ortese, *Da Moby Dick all'Orsa Bianca* (Milano: Adelphi, 2011); Anna Maria Ortese, *Le Piccole Persone*.

<sup>69</sup> Paolo di Paolo, ed., *Nessun male può dirsi lontano: Anna Maria Ortese, scrittrice morale* (Roma: Empiria, 2014).

in each of the three novels, which share the same plot structure: the reader is accompanied to a scene where a crime has already been committed (*Cardillo*, *Alonso*) or is about to take place (*Iguana*), and witnesses the characters grappling with its aftermath.<sup>70</sup> In each of the novels, one human character becomes the sacrificial victim, sacrificing him- or herself in reparation for the pain that was caused by someone else to the most vulnerable members of the community of living beings. The proxies for these vulnerable members, in the novels, are weaker creatures (either nonhuman animals or humans with animal-like features), whose sufferings and mistreatments Ortese describes in great detail: in *Iguana*, the main proxy is the Iguana and, more symbolically and late in the narration, a white butterfly that represents God fulfills the same function; in *Cardillo*, the main proxy is the three-hundred-year old child Hieronymus Käppchen, but all the children, and, more enigmatically, the linnet are victims and symptoms of the crimes committed against the vulnerable; in *Alonso*, the puma, Alonso is the main proxy, but proxies are also the various children, who either die or are destined to never grow up.<sup>71</sup>

In each novel, the narration makes clear that the human sacrificial victim who gets immolated is innocent - at least, he is not personally responsible for the crimes he is expiating. Of the three sacrificial characters, Aleardo/Daddo is maybe the most guilty of all, because he actually is complicit in the objectification and commodification of vulnerable life, turned into an exotic specimen to exploit for the titillation of the Milanese readers: before leaving for Ocaña, he declares: “«Ci vorrebbero le confessioni di qualche pazzo, magari innamorato di una iguana»” [“«What you need are the confessions of some madman [...] in love with an iguana»”] (17).<sup>72</sup> His naïve and well-intentioned attitude does not preclude him from nonchalantly appropriating lands in a colonialist fashion: “partiva [...] ogni primavera in cerca di terre, dove [...] avrebbe costruito poi ville e circoli nautici per la buona società estiva di Milano” [“[He] set out every spring to look for sites where he would later build villas and yacht clubs for the summer amusement of the best Milanese society”] (16). When, at the end of the novel, he stands trial, Daddo must account for his casual disregard for the injustices of the world:

Pare che la colpa principale dell'imputato fosse l'incoscienza, una specie di fanciullaggine o stupore malinconico, che lo aveva reso estraneo alla terribile realtà del mondo [...]. A causa [...] [del] potere conferito ai denari, si accumulavano delitti ovunque, e lunghe torture e isolamento per coloro che denari non avevano. E sebbene riscattati infine da azioni come quella che aveva compiuto il conte, scendendo nel pozzo, e spezzandosi in tutto il corpo per trarne la misera Iguana, sempre delitti rimanevano. (169)

[The accused's principle guilt seemed to lie in his lack of awareness, a kind of boyishness or melancholic stupor that had left him estranged from the world's harsh reality [...]. In result of

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<sup>70</sup> Both in *L'Iguana* and in *Alonso* it is not actually clear whether a full-fledged crime has really been committed: Daddo is accused of killing God; Elmina is maybe responsible for the death of a goldfinch.

<sup>71</sup> The plot of *Il cardillo addolorato* is very complex; I will tell part of the story whenever it is relevant to my analysis. Gala Rebane provides a succinct and useful summary in her essay “The Flickering Light of Reason,” pages 356-358.

<sup>72</sup> Daddo is immediately ashamed to have this idea: “pentito di quel suo prendersi gioco della malattia e della animalità, due cose per le quali, pur non avendone alcuna esperienza [...], provava [...] una pietà grandissima” [“[he] felt ashamed of himself for making fun of illness and [animality] [...]. [He] felt enormous compassion for both, despite never having had anything to do with him”] (17), but, in Ortese's narrative and moral universe, good intentions do not constitute valid substitutes for action, and guilt by omission is not a lesser crime. This passage is an example of Ortese's irony at its best: Daddo himself will turn out to be the “pazzo” [“madman”], and will soon experience both the malady and the animality that now are supposedly foreign to him.

this power accorded to money, crimes heaped up torture and loneliness as the only lot of whomever had none of it. Even when redeemed by deeds such as the count had performed - descending into the well and shattering the bones of his body while [...] [rescuing] the miserable Iguana - such crimes assumed no other name.]

Although not completely innocent, Daddo is a scapegoat because of the lack of personal accountability and of reasonable proportionality between his personal crimes and the ones for which he is paying; moreover, on the occasion of the immolation he is stripped of his materiality and reduced to a symbol, as always happens to sacrificial victims (I will come back to this aspect in a few paragraphs).

In *Cardillo*, Elmina lives in a constant state of expiation:

[La] condizione di lei nel mondo [era] di castigo e fuga eterna [...]. Dei suoi delitti - se tali erano - [era] del tutto incolpevole. Della sua caduta là in fondo al burrone [...] anche incolpevole. / Pagava, Elmina, per le colpe, forse senza perdono, di un altro... di qualcuno che ella intendeva salvare. (275-276)

[[H]er situation in the world [was] one of punishment and everlasting flight [...]. Of her crimes - if such they were - she was totally innocent. And as for her fall into the bottom of the pit [...] she was guiltless also of that. / Elmina was paying for for the (perhaps unpardonable) sins of someone else... someone she intended to save.]

Like Daddo, Elmina is paying in part for her absentmindedness and indifference - she forgot to feed and water a linnet who (maybe) died as a result; but the sins she is expiating are more serious and far more mysterious than that single crime.<sup>73</sup>

In *Alonso*, Jimmy Op explains the reasons behind his voluntary sacrifice in a series of letters left to Stella Winter, and sloth (*inerzia*) is listed among the capital sins for which he is paying:

«([L]a responsabilità verso il Cucciolo è tutto). / [...] [L]a mia febbre è continua [...], nasce dalla considerazione del nulla - il nulla e i massacri, che fanno la gloria del nostro mondo. Non vi sono medicine, e solo la punizione - nostra, personale - ci reca qualche sollievo.» (201)  
[«(The responsibility toward the Cub is everything.) / [...] My fever is ongoing [...], is born of the contemplation of nothingness - nothingness and massacres, that fill our world with glory. There are no remedies, and only our personal punishment brings some relief.»]

«Pretendo [...] di essere abbandonato da tutti, indicato come complice massimo nella disgrazia del mondo (che è la persecuzione e morte del Cucciolo), e di pagare per la mia inerzia e feroce silenzio [...]» (211)

[«I demand [...] to be left alone by everyone, and singled out as the main accomplice in the disgrace of the world (which is the Cub's persecution and death), and to pay for my sloth and cruel silence.»]

Op's desire to be punished is almost literally fulfilled, since he is arrested and charged with murder. But human justice, incapable of seeing his real crime, namely his complicity in the suffering and likely death of the Cub, accuses him of killing Julio Decimo. Since his real case could never be tried

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<sup>73</sup> As mentioned above, sloth is a serious sin in Ortese's novels.

in a courtroom, Op escapes from his cell only to reach a balcony of the police station, where, under the pouring rain, offers his life in sacrifice for the Cub.

In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway offers a concise account of what the logic of sacrifice is and what its implications are:

Within the logic of sacrifice that undergrids all versions of religious or secular humanism, animals are sacrificed precisely because they can be killed and then ingested symbolically and materially in acts saved from cannibalism or murder of the brother by the logic of surrogacy and substitution. [...] [T]here is a whole world of those who can be killed, because finally they are only something, not somebody, close enough to 'being' in order to be a model, substitute [...], but not close enough to compel response. (78-79)<sup>74</sup>

Ortese's novels reverse the logic of sacrifice in more than one sense. First of all, human animals are the ones being sacrificed: they, and not nonhuman animals, are the surrogates and the substitutes who are dying to atone for crimes committed by someone else - often at the expense of nonhuman animals. Moreover, according the predominant logic of sacrifice, "Every living being except Man can be killed but not murdered" (Haraway 78) - in Ortese's novels, on the contrary, killing nonhuman animals is considered a full-fledged crime. This new status of nonhuman animals is reflected in their resistance to being reduced to mere symbols: not only are they spared the destiny of becoming symbols as sacrificial victims, but the representation of them and their sufferings is complex enough that they are both stand-ins for all the vulnerable and, at the same time, flesh-and-blood literary characters, endowed with a distinct materiality.

Ortese's subversion of the logic of sacrifice from within has a clear antecedent in Jesus Christ, the original Lamb of God. Haraway recognizes the revolutionary potential of Christ's sacrifice: "That Jesus was a sacrifice is intrinsic to the holy scandal of the Good News. Unlike the first Isaac, for whom an animal substitute was provided [...], the Son of Man brought about his own sacrifice [...]. [A]ll of a sudden, Man is subject to a killing that is not murder" (335n20). While Haraway is convinced that "we can do better than [...] the fleshly Son of Man" (335n20), Ortese's enthusiastic (even if unreligious) reverence for Christ's example is consonant with her "lay religiosity" (Rebane 356). Ortese confessedly sees Christ as the prime, unsurpassed model of salvific self-sacrifice: "[Cristo] aveva *voluto* morire, ingoiare la morte come un sole nero, affiché l'umanità [...] non ne avesse più terrore" ["Christ had *wanted* to die, to swallow death like a black sun, so that humankind [...] wouldn't dread it anymore"] (*Moby* 116).

The affinities between Ortese's narrative vocation and the spirit of what she perceives to be Christ's mission encompass both the people who are the object of their concern and the recipients of their message - two categories that tend to coincide. Ortese feels that those who can understand, accept, and embrace both the Gospels and her works are the disenfranchised, those who suffer and despair:

Non si può capire una sola parola dei quattro Vangeli, né tantomeno accettarla [...] se non si viene [...] dai campi inumani del mondo [...], dalla sua iniquità di fondo [...]. Perciò, il Vangelo resta chiuso ai potenti, ai felici, ai sani [...]. E subito [...] è aperto a coloro che non ebbero nulla, [...] che chiamarono e chiamano, senza più risposta. (*Moby* 109).

[One cannot understand a single word of the four Gospels, least of all accept it [...] if one does not come [...] from the inhuman fields of the world [...], from its fundamental injustice [...].

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<sup>74</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Therefore, the Gospel remains closed to powerful, happy, healthy people. And [...] it is immediately open to those who had nothing, [...] who called and call, without hearing any more answers.]

I soli che possono amarmi sono coloro che soffrono. Se uno davvero soffre sa che nei miei libri può trovarsi. (*Nessun male* 11)

[Only those who suffer can love me. If one really suffers, knows that she can find herself in my books.]

In Ortese's account, pain endows creatures who suffer with a form of perception and understanding that allows them to see beyond what is deemed "reasonable": they are the ones able to embrace and act upon Ortese's scandalous proposals, those "proposte che appaiono inattuabili, proposte che il mondo rifiuta" ["proposals that seem unachievable, proposals that are rejected by the world"] (*Nessun male* 15) mentioned in the quotation at the beginning of this section. I will devote the next pages to Ortese's conception of reason and human intelligence; here I want to underscore the connection between pain and lack of reason, on the one hand, and the reversal of the logic of sacrifice, on the other: both Daddo and Jimmy Op's sacrifices are preceded by an ostensible deterioration of their physical and rational faculties. The reader follows Daddo and Jimmy in a trajectory that leads them from being productive and respectable, if eccentric, members of society to being mortally ill and mentally insane: Daddo, the rich, noble architect from Milan, turns into the "pazzo" ["madman"] he had evoked at the beginning of the novel, and Jimmy Op, esteemed professor from the American "Università di H." ["University of H."], becomes "*il Pazzo di H.*" ["*the madman of H.*"] (*Alonso* 189).<sup>75</sup> With inexplicable physical decay and loss of rationality as it is commonly intended, come for these characters illuminations concerning their place in the world, their responsibility toward their fellow creatures, and the value of human sacrifice: in a moment of alienation, describing himself, Daddo exclaims: "«Egli ha fatto dunque qualcosa di buono [...] dunque la sua vita non fu inutile! [...] Egli pagò, finalmente, con la sua moneta più vera! Per la Iguana, egli diede la vita!»" ["«So he did do something good [...] so his life was not useless! [...] Finally he paid, and with his truest coin! He gave his life for the Iguana!»] (169-170). The same thing could be said for Jimmy Op - for the puma, he gave his life.

## 2. The Ridiculous Pride in the Faculty of Reasoning: Ortese's Copernican Revolution

Solo il raziocinio l'animale non ha, né la sua ferocia vandalica, estrema, solo l'orgoglio ridicolo del raziocinio [...], e per questo [...] è considerato cosa, e come tale è trattato. (*Piccole* 115)

[The one thing the animal doesn't have is reasoning, and its vandalistic, extreme brutality; only the ridiculous pride in the faculty of reasoning [...]; this is why [...] he is considered as a thing, and treated accordingly.]

In Ortese's view, the preeminent position occupied by human animals in the hierarchy of beings (a position she does not question) does not resemble a rightful, uncontested dominion, but rather a

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<sup>75</sup> As regards Elmina, the situation is different: no mental decay is perceivable from the narration, but, since the beginning of the novel, as we will see in section 2.1, her "muteness" signals her ontological proximity to nonhuman animals - she is already positioned in an ontological realm very similar to the one occupied by them. In these three novels, all prominent female characters share an affinity with the most vulnerable creatures.

violent occupation. In Ortese's account, rationality arms human animals with a brutality that is the ultimate cause of their power and exceptionality; it is not a faculty that elevates human beings by endowing them with a noble and superior dignity. The phrase "orgoglio ridicolo del raziocinio" ["the ridiculous pride in the faculty of reasoning"] reads as a blunt shrugging off of centuries of human and humanistic pride. In corroding the traditional view of the hierarchy of beings, Ortese performs a subversion from within akin to the one we saw at play with the logic of sacrifice: the dispositif is still in place, but the framework has changed insomuch that the object is transfigured into a different entity. The quotation above also reads as a straightforward instance of reversal of the Cartesian *cogito*: nonhuman animals *are*, even if they do not think; and they are more than objects, more than "things."

These considerations on "raziocinio" constitute just one small piece of the mosaic that Ortese composes with her ideas on the complex relationship between human animals and reason. As we are about to see, Ortese assigns distinctively different meanings to terms such as *ragione* [*reason*], *raziocinio* [*reasoning*] and *intelligenza* [*intelligence*] (these two terms are used interchangeably), and *pensiero* [*thought*]; her take on these concepts informs her peculiar view of a less anthropocentric conception of the world. The distinctions she draws between reason and intelligence reflect her conviction that human animals have illegitimately presented reason as a distinctively human faculty, while reason is a quality that is shared by all living creatures, manifesting itself as a set of laws by which everything on earth must abide:

Per *ragione* io continuo a intendere la conoscenza, o anche la «visione» del vivere, del complesso di leggi - non visibili ma riconoscibili - che rendono possibile la vita. Queste leggi sono il supporto stesso della vita, e il mondo naturale, senza di esse, non potrebbe manifestarsi. Una rosa vive nella legge. Un mandarino, nella legge. [...] Non c'è cosa [...] che aneli a vivere durevolmente, e non accetti e rispetti rigorosamente la legge... Invece, ciò che distinguiamo oggi col nome di intelligenza, ed è appunto [...] preminente caratteristica *umana*, [...] è unicamente il contrappasso della ragione (come insieme di leggi). [...] L'intelligenza si pone ormai chiaramente, in questo tempo di abbaglianti trionfi, non più come *rivale* della ragione, ma come suo successore ed erede. (*Corpo* 138-139)

[*Reason* for me still means the knowledge, or the «vision» of living; the set of laws - invisible but recognizable - that make life possible. These laws are the foundation of life, and the natural world could not manifest itself without them. A rose lives by the law. A tangerine, by the law. [...] Nothing that yearns to live for long fails to accept and strictly abide by the law... What we distinguish today as intelligence, instead, and is a preeminently *human* feature, is only a retaliation against reason (as set of laws). [...] In this time of dazzling triumphs, intelligence does not present itself as a *rival* of reason anymore, but as its successor and heir.]

This lengthy quotation hints at the ethical underpinning of Ortese's intellectual exploration and reiterates the unique position of human animals among the other living entities: they are subject to the laws of reason as every other being, but their intelligence is trying to dethrone reason as the lawmaking force of the world.<sup>76</sup> The exclusive power of human animals to deeply modify the

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<sup>76</sup> Later in the same essay, Ortese writes that intelligence "ha usurpato il regno della *ragione*, e muove contro la *ragione*" ["has usurped the reign of *reason*, and advances toward *reason*"] (143). That the use of intelligence is embedded in the very nature of the human animal is clear from Ortese's biblical reference: "Questo conflitto era già *in nuce*, secondo alcune leggende, e in quanto alla Bibbia, essa è esplicita. L'albero del bene e del male, e l'albero della vita sono stati le



foundational laws of the world has devastating effects on all nonhuman entities: “tutto ciò che sta accadendo [...] - il logorio, lo schianto della Natura e delle sue leggi, lo smarrimento e lo strazio di ogni piccolo figlio della Terra - accade *in nome della intelligenza*” [“Everything that is happening - the strain and crash of Nature and its laws, the dismay and torment of any little child of the Earth - happens *in the name of intelligence*”] (139). The arrogance of human intelligence and its consequences is what propels the ethical drive of Ortese’s work, and sets the backdrop against which the events of her novels unfold: nonhuman animals and their vulnerable human companions are invariably at the mercy of more powerful human animals and are directly affected by the attack moved to reason by human intelligence.

In the context of a reflection on the correlation between reason and the natural world, the phrases “orgoglio ridicolo del raziocinio” [“ridiculous pride in the faculty of reasoning”] (quotation on p. 10) and “in questo tempo di abbaglianti trionfi” [“in this time of dazzling triumphs”] (p. 11) call to mind Giacomo Leopardi’s poem *La ginestra* [*Broom*], the poet’s late ode to the frail, vulnerable broom menaced by the eruption of mount Vesuvius. In the poem, Leopardi contrasts the dignified attitude of the flower with the “fetido orgoglio” [“rank pride”] (line 102) and the “forsennato orgoglio” [“senseless pride”] (line 310) of human beings, so intoxicated by the thought of their exceptionality that they forget their finitude and their frailty.<sup>77</sup> “Si tratta [...] di una rivelazione (l’impotenza, l’infelicità e la nullità dell’uomo nell’universo) totalmente negativa, che viene a colpire [...] qualsiasi forma di vana e folle superbia antropocentrica, laica non meno che religiosa, umanistica non meno che teologica o metafisica [...]” [“It is an utterly negative revelation (the impotence, unhappiness, and nothingness of man in the universe), that inflicts a blow to [...] any form of vain and foolish anthropocentric arrogance - be it lay or religious; humanistic, theological, or metaphysical”] (*Poesie* 988).<sup>78</sup> *La ginestra* is Leopardi’s second-to-last poem, the one in which his denunciation of the stubborn, blind optimism born of the Enlightenment is immortalized in the line in which he mockingly refers to the slopes of Vesuvius - barren and constantly threatened by eruptions - as the perfect emblem of “*Le magnifiche sorti e progressive*” “*the magnificent, progressive destiny*” (line 51) - a line echoed by Ortese’s “tempo di abbaglianti trionfi” [“time of dazzling triumphs”].<sup>79</sup> Ortese considers Leopardi “l’unica voce reale della letteratura italiana, dopo Dante” [“the only authentic voice of Italian literature, after Dante”] (*Corpo* 98), and shares his harsh criticism of human pride, but their opinions diverge as regards the unbalance of power between nature and human beings: for Leopardi, human pride is ridiculous and vain because humans are destined to ultimately succumb to nature; Ortese, a century later, does not question human capacity to tame nature and re-write its laws. Leopardi’s *magnifiche sorti e progressive* are an illusion; Ortese’s *tempo di abbaglianti trionfi* is a reality. For Ortese, the ridiculousness of human pride stems from a moral consideration: human animals are proud of a faculty, intelligence, that is causing pain to all living beings and is dragging nature to the brink of destruction, which will eventually also imply self-

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prime mire dell’intelligenza. Al diavolo l’Eden, sembra aver detto la celebre Coppia: sapere e dominare è tutto” [“According to some legends, this conflict was already in an embryonic state, and it is explicit in the Bible. The tree of good and evil, and the tree of life were the first targets of intelligence. To the hell with Eden, the famous Couple seems to have said: knowing and dominating are everything”] (*Corpo* 139).

<sup>77</sup> The translations of Leopardi’s poems are by Jonathan Galassi: Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Poesie e prose*, ed. Rolando Damiani and Mario Andrea Rigoni, vol. 1 (Milano: Mondadori, 1987).

<sup>79</sup> The biblical epigraph at the beginning of the poem already reads as a quasi-literal obliteration of the Enlightenment: “E gli uomini vollero piuttosto le tenebre che la luce” [“And men loved darkness rather than light”].

destruction: “Naturalmente, l’intelligenza stessa non potrà sfuggire al naufragio della Natura” [“Obviously, intelligence itself will not be able to escape from Nature’s ruin”] (*Corpo* 140).

Also Leopardi’s regard to human and nonhuman vulnerability intersects Ortese’s thoughts. For Leopardi, vulnerability is one of the defining qualities of living beings, human and nonhuman alike. In *La ginestra*, the adjective *frale* (fragile) occurs twice, the first time to describe human condition (“il basso stato e frale”, line 117 [“poor and feeble state”]), the second time to define the broom’s: “più saggia, [...] tanto / Meno inferma dell’uom, quanto le frali / Tue stirpi non credesti / O dal fato o da te fatte immortali” [“far wiser and less fallible / than man is, you did not presume / that either fate or you had made / your fragile kind immortal”] (lines 314-317). While Ortese tends to thematize vulnerability as a condition that makes nonhuman beings and their human counterparts susceptible to human intelligence and power, Leopardi sees vulnerability as a trait that connects all beings and is mostly brushed aside by human animals. The last lines I quoted, which are the lines ending the poem, bring into the picture another element whose consequential presence in Ortese’s work I will analyze later, namely, time and its inexorable advance. Moreover, the Leopardian notion of a human being who is blind to the reality of his mortality because of his physical and intellectual prowess is consonant with Ortese’s idea of human thinking as a gift and a curse - a curse to others but to human animals as well, as we will see below, in the analysis of *Alonso*.

The human and nonhuman animals who populate Ortese’s trilogy both illustrate and challenge humanistic notions of reason that mark the boundary between the two forms of being. In the pages that follow, I will show how the three novels address specific foundational themes and myths concerning reason: in *Iguana*, language can become a signifier of vulnerability rather than one of power and agency; in *Cardillo*, the Enlightenment exhibits its dark, repressive face and triggers a regressive reaction; in *Alonso*, thinking reveals itself as a malady.

## 2.1 *L’Iguana* and a Tentative Reformulation of Logocentrism

In each of the novels composing Ortese’s trilogy, language plays a role in establishing a hierarchical order of beings, but, at the same time, it is subject to the same ontological uncertainty that distinguishes the characters and the world surrounding them.

Both in *Alonso* and in *Cardillo*, muteness is the sign of belonging to the most vulnerable class of beings, and these beings are at times radiant with ineffable sense. In *Alonso*, a letter by Jimmy Op states that humble, mute nature (mute like the puma, Alonso) overlaps with the sacred: “«il sacro [è] [...] l’imponderabile, il senza spiegazione che è nella natura della vita, perfino - anzi soprattutto - dove essa è più umile e muta»” [«the sacred [is] the *imponderable*, the *without explanation* that is part of the nature of life, even - in fact, especially - where this life is utterly humble and mute»] (111); in *Cardillo*, Elmina’s muteness is made known even before the characters and the reader meet her (p. 16), and is later connected to an internal inability or reluctance to establish any kind of connection: “Elmina si serbava sempre sorridente e muta [...], muta di dentro, come non fosse una giovane donna tanto avvenente e dolce, ma una pietra” (24) [“Elmina, the while, remained smiling and silent [...]; inwardly silent, as if she were not a young woman of great charms and sweetness, but a stone”].<sup>80</sup> At the same time, in both novels, a mute or unintelligible nonhuman animal is regarded

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<sup>80</sup> The connection between Elmina and rocks deserves some attention. The narrator immediately adds that it is an “immagine perfino banale, che ricorre tanto spesso nei romanzi a proposito di donne dal comportamento riservato” [“this image of her, banal as it is, and so often to be met with in novels with regard to women of reserved demeanour”] (24), but the presence of rocks in Ortese’s animal trilogy is pervasive and is associated with nonhuman animals and

as a possible source of meaning and truth. In *Alonso*, Stella Winter, the narrator, implores the (maybe) dead puma: “«Oh, buon cucciolo, mio piccolo Alonso [...], [d]acci un segno che qualcosa è vero. E non tutto così orribile e insensato, questo mondo, come ora appare»” (185) [“«O dear cub, my little Alonso [...], give us a sign that something is true. And this world is not so horrible and senseless as it appears now»”]. Similarly, at the very end of *Cardillo*, Ingmar Neville, the character from whose perspective we experience the whole novel, is waiting for the arrival of the Goldfinch for an ultimate, complete revelation: “Benedisse il Cardillo che arrivava, e finalmente gli avrebbe spiegato tutto” (415) [“He blessed the [Goldfinch] even now arriving, who at last would explain it all”]. Neville’s expectations sound particularly baffling when one considers that not only is the Goldfinch never seen throughout the novel, but the only sounds that are attributed to him are the following: “Oò! Oò! Oò! Oh! Oh!Oh!” (333, 376, 415). One can choose to read Stella Winter’s and Neville’s invocations as a sign of openness to the mysterious, comforting spiritual presence of the nonhuman other, or as a sarcastic comment on the notion of language as emanation of reason.<sup>81</sup> I propose to interpret them as failed but honest, if desperate, attempts to establish a connection with the nonhuman other, a nonhuman other who, at the very least, is endowed with the theoretical potential of soothing human pain - a characteristic that, as we are about to see, could arguably make her human.

In *Iguana*, if language functions both as a signal of and a bridge between the gap separating human and nonhuman animals, it is due to the radical in-betweenness of the two main characters. Of all Ortese’s characters, the Iguana/Estrellita is the most hybrid, metamorphic, and ultimately elusive. Always defined by human perceptions, she is seen at times as an iguana, at times as a young girl, at times as an old lady; at times as modest and shy (like a good little girl, “una gentile e affascinante figliolina dell’uomo” [“a genteel and delightful daughter of man”], 124), at times as arrogant and malicious (Serpent-like, condemned to “strisciare e morire” [“crawl [...] and die”], 124). Daddo’s transfiguration is more linear, and involves a progressive loss of certainties and grasp on reality, accompanied by intuitions on possible ways to reconfigure the hierarchy of beings. From his meditations comes a proposal for a new divide between human and animal, a divide revolving

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human animals who are implicitly and explicitly deemed “inferior.” What produces the vision of these creatures as petrified is usually a gaze that yearns for their possession, a gaze that ultimately results in their reification. In *Iguana*, it is Daddo’s gaze that transmutes the poor inhabitants of Ocaña, as soon as he catches sight of them, into “gente impietrita” [“people [...] were petrified”] (25). This gaze, the capitalistic gaze, converts Ilario’s affection for the Iguana into the stones she receives as a salary and condemns her to be immured, and prevents Daddo, until the very end, to be really seen by Iguana, to really meet her gaze. Elmina’s situation is more complex: at the beginning of *Cardillo*, she is on the receiving end of the gaze, she is the prize to be conquered and possessed and the enemy to be defeated by Albert Dupré: “[E]gli [...] era adesso lo stesso Pegaso, adesso Bellerofonte l’ardito - pensò che lei, Elmina, era il Mostro triforme da vincere [...]: era la Chimera meravigliosa” [“he now [...] was Pegasus himself, was indeed that bold Bellerophon - he thought that she, Elmina, was the triform monster [...] that he must vanquish; that she was the wondrous Chimaera”] (24). By the end of the narration, Elmina is held responsible for other characters’ petrification: “«La Chimera di questi luoghi! Già Albert e Babà, a fissarla, sono diventati di pietra!»” [“The Chimaera of these parts! Albert and Ali Baba, in their time, simply by gazing upon her were turned to stone!”] (330). On the Chimeric and Medusean nature of Elmina, see Rebane 368-372 and Adria Frizzi, “Performance, or Getting a Piece of the Other, or in the Name of the Father, or the Dark Continent of Femininity, or Just like a Woman: Anna Maria Ortese’s ‘L’iguana.’” (*Italica* 79, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 379-90); 389n10. In *Alonso*, the puma is at first mistaken for “una [...] collinetta di roccia” [“a [...] little rocky hill”]: “Sembrava una creatura di prima della creazione, calcificata” [“He looked like a creature prior to creation, calcified”] (18). Interpreting these petrifications as projections of a predatory gaze does not discount the possibility that they can also be an extreme form of resistance and self-protection enacted by vulnerable characters who make themselves physically impenetrable.

<sup>81</sup> Scholars seem to have a propensity for the former interpretation; see Rebane 381 and Margherita Pieracci Harwell, “The Enigmatic Character of Elmina: A Thread in a Vertiginous Web,” in *Celestial*, 385-408; 406.

around vulnerability that can be read as a reconfiguration of the Cartesian *cogito*: “I think, therefore I am” becomes “I whine, therefore I am [human]”:

[U]mano è tutto ciò che può lamentarsi, e sub-umano (o animale) tutto ciò che non cura, o addirittura provoca, quel lamento; e perciò l'unica cosa da fare [...], per non correre il rischio di offendere l'umano, era accorrere là dove si udivano lamenti, estirpandone la causa, senza tuttavia punire, anzi soccorrendo, gli stessi che avevano prodotto quella causa, i quali, non essendo più nell'ordine, ma fuori dell'ordine, e contro, senza dubbio essi medesimi pativano. (112)

[[H]uman is everything that can voice a lament, and sub-human (or animal-like) is everything that does not care for, or even provokes, that lament. So the only thing to do [...], not to incur the risk of offending the human, was to rush where laments were heard, extirpating its cause, but without punishing (rather, succoring) those who produced that cause, who, since were not within the order anymore, but outside and even against it, were certainly suffering too.]<sup>82</sup>

In these few lines, Ortese (via Daddo) alters in a subtle but decisive way the well established association between humanness and language. My choice of taking one single character as the spokesperson for the author is motivated by the consonance between Daddo's meditations and the considerations that Ortese lays out in her essays. In this passage, “human” is employed twice, once referring to an incarnate mode of being (“umano è tutto ciò che può lamentarsi”, “human is everything that can voice a lament”), and once as an ideal, as a moral standard to which one ought to live up (“il rischio di offendere l'umano”, “the risk of offending the human”). This two-sided notion of “human” permeates Ortese's thinking: Ortese never questions the disproportion between the human species and the rest of the living beings, and considers humankind as “specie e famiglia-guida, e in modo anche molto clamoroso” [“leader as species and as family, in a rather outstanding way”] (*Corpo* 136). At the same time, as is clear from the above quotation from *Iguana*, she mobilizes the category of human, making it porous and open to accommodate other forms of being: the choice of the demonstrative pronoun “ciò,” which only refers to nonhuman entities, is revealing in this sense.

And yet, Ortese reaffirms the significance of the human/nonhuman divide at the very moment in which she puts it into question, in a gesture that is a perfect instance of her idiosyncratic critique of anthropocentrism. There is still a clear-cut and hierarchical distinction between *animale* and *umano*: not only are the two terms defined in opposition to one another, but *animale* is relegated to an inferior rank (“sub-umano”, “sub-human”). Moreover, “animal” is seen as synonymous with in-human, assuming a negative moral connotation - the opposite of the ideal of “human”. At the same time, however, the boundary has become murky and porous: thanks to the way in which Ortese defines the two categories, the properties of the two sets of creatures are not mutually exclusive; the partition between two realms has become extremely blurry. A living being can well belong to both, and a non-human being can be called human if he complains for the pain. While it is true that this formula provides a theoretical possibility for any being to access the human realm (on condition that it is able to complain), animality is irremediably defined in a negative way, as a category of being provoking pain or unwilling or unable to soothe others' sufferings. Choosing the faculty to complain for the suffering (and not that of suffering per se) as a marker of humanity is

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<sup>82</sup> For this specific quotation, I substantially altered Henry Martin's translation.

rather interesting, because it seems to constitute the idea of non-animality as relational: a whine is a human cry waiting for a non-animal being to receive it and to act upon it.

The same inclusivity allowed by the pronoun “ciò” is granted by the kind of language that, according to Daddo, suffices to claim affiliation to humankind: the ability of *lamentarsi* (a verb that, actually, in Italian describes an action not necessarily as articulate as “complaining” and not necessarily as puerile as “whining,” but something in the middle), is the ability to utter a sound in its most basic form, here intended as a cry for help. This utterance does not need to convey any specific content, it can well be inarticulate; *lamentarsi* is an expression and a verbal actualization of pain that does not require any level of sophistication. Throughout the course of the novel, the reader witnesses Daddo’s trajectory from eloquence to inarticulateness, and his death coincides with the extreme point of what Adria Frizzi calls “the gradual «iguanification» of Daddo”: “This process [...] is apparent in [...] the breakdown in his speech, his growing confusion and disempowerment [...]” (387).<sup>83</sup> Since the very beginning of the novel, the association between the characters’ linguistic prowess and their place in an imaginary hierarchy of beings is very strong: those who are described as occupying lower levels, namely Hipolito and Felipe Guzman and the Iguana are described as “poor in words.”<sup>84</sup> Here is how the narrator introduces the two Guzman brothers: “Quei due uomini - il cui aspetto, nell’insieme, era più quello di mandriani o di servi, che di gentiluomini - [...] ripresero il loro atteggiamento apatico [...], frutto [...] della loro rozza e muta natura, e perciò di un lentissimo movimento della immaginativa” [“These two men seemed more like servants or field hands than gentlemen; they lapsed back into apathy, which was a product of their coarse and mute nature, and therefore of a very slow movement of imagination”]<sup>85</sup> (28). The Iguana’s language is characterized as being made of “strid[i] acutissim[i]” [“high sharp squeal[s]”], “lament[i]” [“wail[s]”] (31), “confuse interiezioni [...] [che] nel balbettio di quell’essere avevano un che di miagolante e, ora, di atterrito” [“a confusion of [...] phrases [that] became a babble in the mouth of the creature, something whining and afraid”] (32). The linguistic competence of these three characters remains a relevant topic in the narration until the very end, when they (who are the only remaining inhabitants of Ocaña, since Ilario leaves after Daddo’s death) are portrayed while they learn how to read and write (181), eventually composing a poem addressed to Daddo. To these attempts at improving their linguistic skills, an opposite process corresponds: Daddo’s progressive loss of his. At the end of his journey - a journey that is physical, spiritual, and existential -, Daddo expresses himself by means of cries (143, 157, 170, 172) and unarticulated utterances (173), like the Iguana at the beginning of the novel. The moment of maximum “iguanification” of his speech coincides with the moment of maximum fulfillment of the “human” as a moral and ontological ideal. Daddo can be seen as having entered a new logocentrism, which lacks the usual logical connections and makes use of non-human cries, but allows him to recognize at the point of death what he has been disowning until that moment.

In *Iguana*, the association of language and reason that is implicit in the concept of logocentrism is questioned in a performative fashion. Sun, whose light is a metaphor for reason and logic, does not bathe Ocaña, which is shaped as a waxing half-moon; it is under the sign of the moon, of an uncanny red (at times green) moon, that almost all the first part of the novel takes place. The access to this dimension of time, dominated by the moon, is evoked by the sibylline lines

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<sup>83</sup> Adria Frizzi, “Performance, or Getting a Piece of the Other, or in the Name of the Father, or the Dark Continent of Femininity, or Just like a Woman: Anna Maria Ortese’s ‘L’iguana.’” (*Italica* 79, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 379-90).

<sup>84</sup> Ilario, who is a poet and shows an eloquence and sophistication that matches Daddo’s, is markedly different from his half-brothers Hipolito and Felipe; he will escape Ocaña by marrying a rich American woman.

<sup>85</sup> In this case, I substantially altered Henry Martin’s translation.

uttered by Hipolito: “«*Porqué o tempo está mutando*»” (40), “«*Porqué a lua está calando*»” (65). The Italian reader not knowing Portuguese will likely interpret the sentences as «Because the time is changing», «Because the moon is waning». But in Portuguese the verb *mutar* does not exist, while the verb *calar* means “to shut up, to hush up; to quieten, to silence”. Therefore, the second sentence should read as «Because the moon is shutting up». And silence is also somehow inscribed in the signifier *mutando*, because of the assonance with *muto*. The sun, vehicle for light, reason (logos), clarity, reliability, does not belong to Ocaña: Aleardo leaves it behind before arriving to the island (22), and its presence there is admitted only if contextually with rain (158). Also the second part of the novel, taking place during the day, maintains the gloomy, indefinite atmosphere set by the silent moon.

I argue that the function of the lines uttered by Hipolito is to give rise to a concrete space of possibility in which both time and language could be re-thought. In this lunar scenery, where the familiar conceptions of time and space, true and false, right and wrong are suspended, and new possibilities for language spring from rich and strange plays between signifier and signified, Ortese tries to reconfigure the divide between human and non-human.

## 2.2 *Il cardillo addolorato*: Ortese’s Critique of the Enlightenment

Altercations among dead people, an old Polish necromancer, a little flying girl, a 300-year-old child-goblin: the novel set in the Age of Reason narrates the most outrageous stories of Ortese’s animal trilogy. The fantastic nature of the novel alone implicitly constitutes a challenge to the ideals of rationality advocated in the Age of Enlightenment, and the contrast between the light of reason and the darkness of chaos and superstition is embodied in the two cities that constitutes the two geographical poles of the narration, Liège and Naples. Three of the protagonists are coming from Liège, but their adventures take place in Naples, a city that exerts on the Belgian prince Ingmar Neville - the character from whose point of view the events are narrated - an obscure fascination: “era incurioso dalla fama di sfrenatezza e di lusso di cui godeva Napoli, [...] e anche dal suo cupo e sanguinoso passato; come da quelle storie non chiare, remote e dolci, di Sibille, di Sirene, di creature femminili in rapporto con gli Inferi...” [“He was [...] intrigued by the reputation for opulence and fast living enjoyed by Naples [...] as also by its dark and sanguinary past; and furthermore by those vague, remote, engaging tales Sybils, of Sirens, of females communing with the Lower Regions...”] (16-17). Neville’s expectations remind the Ortesian reader of the impetus behind Daddo’s journey, of his objectifying gaze, craving the (feminine) exotic and the mysterious as a source of delight.

In her essay “The Flickering Light of Reason,” Gala Rebane traces the correspondence between the fictional events of the novel and the events following the French Revolution, and establishes that *Cardillo* takes place between 1795 and 1804 - the years that saw “the virtual end of the Revolution and the beginning of Napoleon’s ascendance to power” (359). Rebane’s accurate historical contextualization already casts a shadow on a novel whose first chapter promises to tell the “Lieto viaggio di Bellerofonte e i suoi amici verso il sole” [“Joyous Excursion of Bellerophon and his Friends to the Sun”].<sup>86</sup> If we follow Ortese’s reasoning, the repressive and ultimately dictatorial turn of the French Revolution is nothing but the logical consequence of the usurpation of intelligence at the expense of reason. The following quotation, from the essay “Non da luoghi di esilio,” articulates Ortese’s view of the pernicious consequences of the Revolution; I will refer to different passages of this quotation in the rest of this chapter:

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<sup>86</sup> On the parallel Dupré-Bellerofonte and Elmina-Chimera/Medusa, see note 17 and Rebane 368-372.

[Il punto in cui l'intelligenza] ha mostrato i suoi limiti e la pericolosità della [sua] guida [...] [è stato il] momento del suo massimo [...] splendore. [Il] suo luglio, diciamo. Che coincide con un luglio effettivo: il 14 luglio francese. La presa della Bastiglia. Allora fu dichiarata la sovranità divina dell'Intelligenza, usando però la parola Ragione. Ma non era [...] la Ragione, perché la Ragione non agisce, *vede*, solo l'Intelligenza agisce. E l'Intelligenza, paludata di Ragione, aveva giurato di agire, e fondare la libertà democratica: che non è la libertà del Respiro. È semplicemente la libertà di tutti, la libertà senza limite, che alla fine toglie il Respiro a tutti. [...] Così si ballò e si cantò perché i *Re* erano caduti. Non si vide che i *Re* erano simboli, e la loro funzione (che certo andava corretta) enorme [...]. Questa funzione segnava i gradi, i limiti, i ruoli dell'essere. [...] È il fine che porta avanti la libertà del mondo: e il fine doveva essere l'osservanza della Ragione, non la furia dell'Intelligenza. (*Corpo* 142)

[The point when intelligence has shown its limitations and the dangers inherent in its lead was the moment of its maximum splendor. Its July, we may say. It coincided with a real July: the French July 14<sup>th</sup>, the storming of the Bastille. At that time, the divine sovereignty of Intelligence was proclaimed - by using the word Reason instead. But it was not [...] Reason, because Reason does not act - it *sees*; only Intelligence acts. And Intelligence, disguised as Reason, had sworn to act, and to found democratic freedom - which is not the freedom of the Breath. It is simply everyone's freedom, boundless freedom, which ultimately takes Breath away from everyone. [...] So people danced and sang because the *Kings* had fallen. They didn't see that the *Kings* were symbols, that their function (which certainly had to be corrected) was immense [...]. This function entailed marking the degrees, limits, and roles of all beings. [...] It's the end that brings forward the freedom of the world: and the end should have been the observance of Reason, not the fury of Intelligence.]

As Rebane points out, at the heart of *Cardillo* are the consequences of the major contribution of the French Revolution to the affirmation of human dignity, the Declaration of the Rights of Men (1789, re-written in 1793). In the novel, the character who endures the “dark underside” (Rebane 367) of the Declaration is the child-goblin, Hieronymous Käppchen, about whom Neville says: “«La di lui specie non è umana [...], egli è solo un folletto... [...] un'anima persa in questo mondo dopo la dichiarazione dei Diritti dell'Uomo e quindi della sua sovranità»” [“«[H]is species is not human [...]; he is only an elf, [...] a lost soul in this world ever since the declaration of the Rights of Man and of his consequent sovereignty»”] (328). By creating a neat, insurmountable separation between animals endowed with dignity and sovereignty (the human sort) and animals who lack those attributes, the Declaration, fueled by intelligence disguised as reason, sanctions human domination over nature and relegates the disenfranchised to exclusion, turning them into subordinates and outlaws. Käppchen is a 300-year-old child, who (like the Iguana) appears in different guises to different people in different moments: as a child, as a goblin, as a porter boy.<sup>87</sup> A hen feather is attached to his head, as a delicate, quirky vestige of his connection to nature. Käppchen is destined to die if he is not adopted by a married couple: in a novel dominated by supernatural occurrences and unbridled imagination, the rigidity of this requirement, unduly legalistic, is further evidence of the hostility of human institutions to those who do not conform to

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<sup>87</sup> On the metamorphic nature of Ortese's character, see Inge Lanslots, “Beasts, Goblins, and Other Chameleonic Creatures: Anna Maria Ortese's ‘Real Children of the Universe’,” in *Celestial*, 295-322; 295; the strong association between animality and childhood is a constant in Ortese's thought; I will touch on this topic in section 3.

arbitrary rules written by human animals. Human sovereignty manifests itself in its capricious implacability, exiling Käppchen from to the human family and consigning him to death.

There are two other characters in *Cardillo*, namely the goldfinch himself and Elmina, whose diegetic treatment calls into question epistemological and political principles, respectively, that constitute both a premise and a longlasting legacy of the Age of the Enlightenment.

In a world, both diegetic and extradiegetic, in which “la verità è sempre fluttuante e cangevole” [“how fickle and fluctuating is truth”] (85), as the narrator aptly remarks, applying reason to uncover truth(s) becomes a futile exercise. The title character is elusiveness in the flesh - or, rather, in the paper and in the sound. His condition as *addolorato* is in keeping with Ortese’s ethical and aesthetic project, which sees nonhuman animals and other disenfranchised creatures as defined by their fragility and physical and emotional torment. What distinguishes the goldfinch from the other nonhuman animals who appear in the titles of the other two novel, the Iguana and the puma, Alonso, is his elusive, enigmatic nature: he never makes a physical appearance in the course of the narration. Neville never sees it, nor does the reader. A chant repeatedly resounds throughout the narration and is attributed to the goldfinch, but this attribution is an act of pure faith. “A” goldfinch seemingly dies just before the arrival in Naples of the three Belgian gentlemen, due to the negligence of Elmina and her sister Teresa, who had apparently forgot to feed him and give him water.<sup>88</sup> The episode does not happen at the time of the narration, but it is recounted by Elmina after the fact. Elmina is ambiguously connected to the death of another goldfinch, years earlier; accounts of the event and of Elmina’s role in the accident greatly vary. Two deaths are connected to this incident, the death of the goldfinch and the death of a younger sister of Elmina’s; in the case of the goldfinch, however, death may have been followed by resurrection: “«E si dice [...] che durante la notte la creatura, improvvisamente ridestata dal suo sonno [...], aprisse le ali... e volasse volasse...” [“«And it is said [...] that during the night the creature, suddenly awakened from its slumber [...] spread its wings and fluttered... and fluttered»”] (85). And according to Elmina, after the death of the goldfinch, her little sister jumped out of the window “«credendo [...] di resuscitare subito dopo»” [“«believing [...] that she would come back to life at once»”] (91-92). The sorrowful nature of the goldfinch is reinforced by the fact that, every time he is mentioned as an actant in a story, it is because he has died; at the same time, however, the only place where the connection between him and his pain is made, is the title of the novel. His pain is told, never shown. Ortese manages to present the “sorrowful goldfinch” to the reader as an incarnation of suffering and, at the same time, as a completely disincarnate, transcendental symbol.<sup>89</sup>

“The” goldfinch is a complete mystery, and his existence a pure act of faith, but is nevertheless taken for granted by all the characters and deeply affects their lives. This is the logic to which the novel obeys: a logic of the leap of faith, governed by religious narratives and gestures. The goldfinch (reportedly) dies and resurrects; he is an object of devotion and a source of dread, much like the God of the Old Testament; to him prayers are raised, and he is considered the source

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<sup>88</sup> This is a further instance of negligence and sloth, a major sin in Ortese’s view, as we have already seen.

<sup>89</sup> There is only one goldfinch that the reader meets in all its physical substance: it is a mechanical bird that emits the call of the goldfinch. Even from a typographic point of view, its chant is identical to the one that resounds throughout the narration and is attributed to “the” goldfinch (100):

*Oò! Oò! Oò!*  
*Oh! Oh! Oh!*

I argue that this mechanical goldfinch acts like a ghostly stand-in for the Cartesian animal-machine; but, instead of signifying the body-mind divide, it is a symbol of the entanglement of embeddedness and abstraction that permeates Ortese’s animal trilogy: when the sound mechanism breaks, “l’uccello [...] sembrava morto” [“the bird [...] seemed dead”] (152).



for the ultimate meaning. Nothing could be farther from the rational approach advocated in the Age of Reason. The narrative logic of *Cardillo* makes human reason completely futile: exerting rationality is out of the question, “reality” is veiled; the main events and characters around which novels are constructed remain hopelessly elusive. If reason is the instrument to discover truth, in *Cardillo* truth is not only beyond reach, but also beside the point.

If the goldfinch poses an insurmountable epistemological challenge to the tenets of the Enlightenment, Elmina resists them on a political level. Analyses of the character of Elmina have mostly focused on her “muteness” as a sign of “rebellion [...] against the manipulative use of discourse by the potent and dominant order” (Rebane 372).<sup>90</sup> When Elmina does speak, however, hers are the words of a religious zealot and of a staunch royalist:

«La felicità è male [...]. Amare le creature è male. Solo Dio si deve amare, e il Re. Il resto è peccato.» (93)

[«Happiness is evil [...]. Loving other creatures is evil. One must love only God and the King. The rest is sinful.»]

«Io, al male, non credo [...]... se Dio vuole, il nostro fanciullo può guarire... È vero, però, che vi sono malattie che non devono... Dio le manda per la riappacificazione con Esso! Che si compia dunque il destino, e si accetti il comando degli Angeli [...].» (234)

[«Illness is a thing I don't believe in. [...] God willing, this boy of ours may be cured. It is true, however, that certain maladies ought not to be cured, for they are sent by God to reconcile souls with him! So let destiny follow its course, and let us [...] bow down before the injunctions of the Angels.»]

«Sua Maestà [...] non è re di Napoli, né di altri luoghi di questo mondo [...]. Noi dobbiamo dimenticarci l'uno dell'altro, fin quando il Re della vita vorrà così - perché questa è la nostra regola, di obbedire al Re [...].» (385)

[«His Majesty [...] is not the King of Naples or of anywhere else in this world [...]. We must forget each other as long as the King of life so wishes, because this is our rule: to obey the King.»]

The long passage from *Corpo celeste* that I quoted on p. 23 contains the following phrases:

È semplicemente la libertà di tutti, la libertà senza limite, che alla fine toglie il Respiro a tutti. [...] Così si ballò e si cantò perché i Re erano caduti. Non si vide che i Re erano simboli, e la loro funzione (che certo andava corretta) enorme [...]. Questa funzione segnava i gradi, i limiti, i ruoli dell'essere.

[It is simply everyone's freedom, boundless freedom, which ultimately takes Breath away from everyone. [...] So people danced and sang because the Kings had fallen. They didn't see that the Kings were symbols, that their function (which certainly had to be corrected) was immense [...]. This function entailed marking the degrees, limits, and roles of all beings.]

Elmina's devotion to the King and to God (two entities that in this context are not entirely distinguishable, as is clear from Elmina's quotations above) is the logical countermeasure to a world

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<sup>90</sup> On the character of Elmina see also Pieracci Harwell, “The Enigmatic Character of Elmina,” in *Celestial*, 385-408.

devoid of figures endowed with the authority to set limits to the power of human intelligence. Like Ortese, Elmina is not pious: “«mia sorella non è tanto religiosa... in chiesa non ci va mai... [...] il paradiso non la interessa proprio»” [“«My sister is not very religious... she never goes to church [...]. Heaven doesn't interest her in the least.»”] (216), says Teresa, Elmina's younger sister. Elmina's (and Ortese's) *oscurantismo* is expression of a radical distrust of human nature.<sup>91</sup>

In his book on Ortese, aptly titled *La scrittrice reazionaria*, Giuseppe Iannaccone writes about the complex relationship between Ortese and the political establishment of her time, characterized by “il sostanziale isolamento [di Ortese] [...] rispetto agli apparati della cultura italiana di quell'epoca” [“Ortese's virtual isolation from the Italian cultural milieu of the time”] (148).<sup>92</sup> Even if her sensibility and her socially progressive ideas would have aligned her with the Italian left, this affiliation was hindered by “l'ormai irrimediabile frattura tra una matrice culturale segnata da un pervicace storicismo ottimistico [...] e una volontà personale, esattamente contraria, di rassegnata denuncia e di sfiduciata osservazione dell'immutabile” (148) [“the fracture, by that time irreparable, between a cultural matrix characterized by a stubborn historicist optimism and, on the opposite side, a personal dedication to the resigned denunciation and discouraged observation of the immutable”].<sup>93</sup> Iannaccone adds: “Alla dissoluzione dell'oggi, si contrapponeva ieri un criterio d'ordine, non sempre impeccabile eppure capace di salvaguardare l'integrità e la sacralità della vita” [Today's dissolution was contrasted yesterday by a principle of order that, albeit not always impeccable, was able to safeguard the integrity and sacrality of life] (161). The cry of the despotic, arbitrary, wrathful Goldfinch is a lamentation for the loss of a bulwark against the excesses of human intelligence.

### 2.3 Alonso: Reason as Vision; Thought as Malady

Who are the visionaries in *Alonso e i visionari*? What does Ortese mean by *visione* and *visionario*? In Italian, the word *visione* has a plurality of meanings, even opposite to one another: it refers the faculty of vision itself; it refers to a supernatural, dream-like, hallucinatory, or ecstatic image or scene.<sup>94</sup> A *visionario*, on the other hand, unlike in English, is a person who has no contact with reality, who sees or claims to see things that do not exist.<sup>95</sup> The spectrum of meanings covered by

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<sup>91</sup> The Italian word *oscurantismo* is different from and more specific than the English “obscurantism;” it means “Atteggiamento di opposizione sistematica al diffondersi dell'istruzione, al progresso, all'evoluzione sociale; nel sec. 19°, era termine polemico adoperato soprattutto in contrapp. a illuminismo o ad altri termini di valore più assoluto (progresso, civiltà, libertà, ecc.)” [Attitude of systematic opposition to the spreading of education, progress, social evolution; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was used polemically, especially in contrast to Enlightenment or other, broader, terms (progress, civilization, freedom, etc)]. Source: <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/oscurantismo/>, accessed March 24, 2018.

<sup>92</sup> Giuseppe Iannaccone, *La scrittrice reazionaria. Il giornalismo militante di Anna Maria Ortese* (Napoli: Liguori, 2003).

<sup>93</sup> The two interviews that close *Corpo celeste* (the first a real conversation with the writer Sandra Petrigiani (1984), the second a dialogue with an imaginary interviewer (1989)) both touch upon Ortese's relation with “la sinistra:” *Corpo* 112-113; 156-157. These pages are a sign of Ortese's ongoing, painful ruminations about her role in public life.

<sup>94</sup> Definition by Treccani: <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/visione/>, accessed April 21, 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Definition by Treccani: <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/visionario/>, accessed April 21, 2018. All the dictionaries I have consulted agree on the “negative” meaning of *visionario*; Treccani adds a slightly more positive meaning that refers to the artistic realm: “Nella critica cinematografica, invece, il termine è usato con riferimento a registi particolarmente dotati della capacità di creare situazioni e immagini fantastiche, irreali e di forte impatto visivo (di *talento v. si parla*, per es., per il regista F. Fellini del film *Satyricon*)” [In film criticism, instead, the term is used to refer to directors especially good at creating situations and images that are fanciful, unreal, and of great visual impact (for example, we can talk of *talento visionario* for F. Fellini and his film *Satyricon*)].

the term *visione* bridges the distance between empirical reality and transcendence, between fact and fiction, sanity and lunacy, while *visionario* is firmly rooted in transcendence, fiction, and lunacy. As we are about to see, Ortese spends many pages developing her concept of *visione*, but the word *visionario* only appears in the title of her last novel, and is never employed throughout the narration. The title, therefore, casts a subtle destabilizing shadow upon the narration and on the nature of the actions and thoughts of the characters: even the mere act of *seeing* the puma, Alonso, is questioned both implicitly and explicitly.

A passage from the above quotation from *Corpo Celeste* gives a hint of Ortese's personal conception of the faculty of vision in its connection to reason: "la Ragione non agisce, vede, solo l'Intelligenza agisce" ["Reason does not act - it sees; only Intelligence acts"] (23).<sup>96</sup> The target of the gaze of Ortesian reason is clear: "Per ragione io continuo a intendere la conoscenza, o anche la «visione» del vivere, del complesso di leggi - non visibili ma riconoscibili - che rendono possibile la vita" ["Reason for me still means the knowledge, or the «vision» of living; the set of laws - invisible but recognizable - that make life possible."] (*Corpo* 138). Elsewhere, Ortese connects the idea of "vision" with that of a "deep conscience": "Una coscienza profonda esiste [...], e ne fa fede quanto resta - e può rinascere - di veramente assoluto nell'umanità: la sua bellezza morale. [...] Definirei la coscienza profonda, e la sua spinta ordinatrice, v i s i o n e." ["A deep conscience does exist [...], and a proof of that is one thing that remains - and can revive -, the one thing that is truly absolute in mankind: its moral beauty. [...] I would define the deep conscience, along with its ordering drive, v i s i o n] (*Piccole* 24). Ortese's "vision" is a function of reason - a moral as well as an epistemological function, as is often the case with Ortese. It is a meek reason, observant, non-aggressive, and able to impart order on the existent (*ordinatrice*, "ordering").

Op (along with Daddo and, to a certain extent, Ingmar Neville) is a visionary (in the English sense) - or better, he is transfigured into one by the end of the novel. He ostensibly employs *reason*, and not *intelligence*, in his relation to the world. His thought is aimed at unveiling the mechanisms that govern the world, and he urges his fellow human animals to cultivate their "deep conscience": "«[N]oi nascondiamo o cancelliamo senza vergogna la grazia dell'uomo. / Essa non è nella forza [...], ma nell'amicizia modesta, benevola, operante, continua verso tutti i viventi della Terra [...]. / Essa è nella contemplazione delle stelle da cui tale vita giunse»" ["«We shamelessly hide and erase man's grace. / It does not reside in strength [...], but in the modest, benevolent, operative, continuous friendship toward all the beings who live on the Earth [...]. It resides in the contemplation of the stars from which such life came»"] (209).

Op's exhortation comes toward the end of the novel and toward the end of his life. It is at the end (of the narration in which they appear, of their lives) that both Op's and Daddo's visionary powers reach their peak, and in both cases the end seems to be accelerated by the sharpening of their visionary power: "thought," which in Ortese's dictionary is close in meaning to "reason" and "vision", and distant from "intelligence" and "rationality," manifests itself as a malady in those who possess it: "[L]a malattia (così possiamo chiamare il pensiero) che da tempo minacciava il nostro conte [...] è esplosa nei modi tremendi che vedi, rivelando la sotterranea malinconia, la straziata esigenza del reale" ["Malady (so we can call thought), that had been menacing our Count for a while, has exploded in the terrible ways that you see, revealing the covert melancholy, the torturous need for reality"]<sup>97</sup> (161) writes Ortese in *Iguana* about Daddo; and Op's progressive

<sup>96</sup> I suspect that Ortese's insistence on the sin of sloth may somehow be connected to her conviction that reason does not *act*, but *sees*: limiting the duty of "the human" to running to the others' aid, as Ortese seems to imply, leaves ample space to passivity and literally obliterates agency.

<sup>97</sup> The translation of this quotation is mine.

decadence is foreshadowed by the narrator of *Alonso*, Stella Winter, who at the beginning of the novel wonders: “L’inclinazione a pensare, a cercare di capire - la vera malattia umana - mi aveva dunque contagiata?” [“So, had the penchant for thinking, for trying to understand - the real human malady - infected me?”] (24). Op himself asserts that visionary thought is what fuels his illness: “«la mia febbre [...] nasce dalla considerazione del nulla - il nulla e i massacri, che fanno la gloria del nostro mondo»” [“My fever is ongoing [...], is born of the contemplation of nothingness - nothingness and massacres, that fill our world with glory.”] (201). Thought, leading to vision, is both a gift and a curse; reason is a double-edged sword. In Ortese’s novels, visionaries progressively lose their physical and mental health as their visionary powers sharpen, because what they discover about the place of mankind in the universe and about its destiny is hard to bear.<sup>98</sup>

For visionaries such as Op and Daddo (and Ortese), discovering the laws that govern the universe means becoming aware of the grim reality of the condition of human animals. The essay ending with Ortese outlining the concept of “deep conscience” starts with a reflection on the human incapability of being surprised, and continues with a description of the alleged reality of human condition:

La cosa più sorprendente del mondo [...] rimane sempre [...] l’assenza di sorpresa, se non addirittura la sua impossibilità [...]. La sorpresa [...] manca in modo totale [...] riguardo alla assoluta *inspiegabilità* e *novità* di ogni piccola cosa che si presenti non fatta o non istituita [dagli uomini] [...] e [...] radicalmente *inconoscibile*. [...]

[C’è la] tendenza dell’uomo a difendersi con una sorta di passività da uno stato - o condizione di cose - altrimenti insopportabile.

Questa condizione - l’estrema piccolezza miseria e nullità dell’uomo rispetto a ciò che egli, come specie e spesso come singolo, crede o presume di sé - è tanto disperata, che si può ben perdonare all’uomo se non voglia saperne niente, e finga [...] di trovarsi - in questo mondo - nella propria casa. Che sarebbe dell’uomo, se [...] sapesse qualcosa [...] della sua vera condizione? [...]

Dato che [...] mai, o quasi mai, vivendo, l’uomo viene a conoscere la sua reale condizione, e l’orrore della sua sorte - nato dal nulla, perduto nel nulla, non iscritto [...] in nulla dato che nulla, se non una rutilante infinita e inconoscibile materia, esiste -, si sarebbe tentati [...] a credere che quel sortilegio - o incanto o magia del non vedere e non sorprendersi - sia, forse, misericordia. Una, per così dire, naturale protezione (del sapere o vedere) che la vita tesse intorno a se stessa. (*Piccole* 19-20)<sup>99</sup>

[The most surprising thing in the world [...] is always [...] the lack of surprise, if not its impossibility [...]. Surprise [...] is completely lacking [...] with regard to the absolute *inexplicability* and *novelty* of any little thing that is not made or instituted [by men] [...] and [...] radically *unknowable*. [...]

There’s a tendency, in man, to defend himself with a sort of passivity from a state or condition otherwise unberable.

<sup>98</sup> In any case, the ambiguity remains: do some characters lose their sanity because they access the knowledge of the misery of human animals or do they see things that do not exist because they have lost their sanity? My reading strongly supports the former claim, but the latter is a possibility that lingers in the narration.

<sup>99</sup> In *La ginestra*, Leopardi defines the Earth as an “oscuro / Granel di sabbia” [“mere grain of sand”] (lines 190-191), conveying a sense of belittlement and despair very similar to what Ortese expresses in the quotation above. On the parallels between Ortese’s and Leopardi’s bleak views of human condition and the consequences of its knowledge, see also Vilma De Gasperin, *Loss and the Other in the Visionary Work of Anna Maria Ortese* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 56-57.

This condition - the extreme smallness, misery, and nothingness of man as compared to what he thinks or presumes about himself, as a species and often as an individual - is so desperate that one can forgive man if he does not want to know anything about it, and if pretends [...] to be - in this world - at home. What would be of man, if he [...] knew something [...] of his real condition? [...]

Since [...] never, or almost never, while living, man comes to know his real condition and the horror of his fate - born of nothing, lost in nothingness, belonging [...] to nothing because nothing, apart from a glimmering, infinite, and unknowable matter, exists - one would be tempted [...] to believe that that sorcery - or enchantment or magic of not seeing and not being surprised - is, maybe, mercy. A natural (so to speak) protection (from knowing or seeing) that life weaves around itself.]

According to Ortese, the lack of power of vision evident in most human animals is instrumental in achieving a blissful ignorance about human condition. It is unclear to what extent this ignorance is a choice (as the phrase “tendenza [...] a difendersi” [“tendency [...] to defend himself”] seems to imply) and to what extent it is determined by a force that, albeit independent of human will, affects human animals (the “life” that weaves a protective layer around itself); what Ortese’s readers know is what happens to Jimmy Op toward the end of his life, when the “natural protection” from truth slips away. The ultimate vision leaves the American professor to consider the clean shirts that he will leave behind after his death as the perfect symbol of the emptiness and shallowness of his human existence: “«[La] testimonianza di tutta la reale entità di uno stimato cattedratico americano. Camicie in perfetto ordine»” [“«The evidence of the real substance of an esteemed American academic. Perfectly neat shirts»”] (200).<sup>100</sup>

In the essay, “La coscienza profonda,” Ortese never establishes a clear connection between the blissful ignorance of human beings and the development of a “deep conscience.” I argue that the correlation between the two is inscribed in the entanglement of three processes undergone by both Op and Daddo: the growth of their insights, the decline of their mental and physical health, and their developing an inclusive attitude toward nonhuman animals and vulnerable creatures.

The “visionary” perspective from which they come to see human animals and their place in the world enables the conception of a long overdue Copernican revolution: “Secondo una valutazione non tanto approssimativa, l’era tolemaica è finita. Ma non per religioni e ideologie. Queste mettono ancora l’uomo al centro dell’essere” [“According to an estimate that is not too rough, the Ptolemaic age is over. But not for religions and ideologies. They still place man at the center of being”], writes Ortese (*Corpo* 136).<sup>101</sup> Ortese’s ethical and epistemological proposal amounts to a rejection of anthropocentrism, in a literal sense; the displacement of human animals from their traditional function as yardstick for the rest of living beings allows for such a cultural and logical upheaval that the very concept of evolution can be renegotiated: according to Op, human animals are trumping “«[il] tentativo della nostra buona Natura di dare all’uomo dignità animale»” [“«our good Nature’s attempt to endow man with human dignity»”] (206). In Op’s (and, arguably, Ortese’s) view, human animals are deemed to be the defective species, those who should

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<sup>100</sup> Ortese conveys the exceptionality of Op’s intuition when she makes him write: “«non riesco [...] a convincere alcuno della vacuità e durezza del mio vivere intero»” [“I cannot [...] convince anyone of the vanity and hardness of my whole life»”] (200).

<sup>101</sup> This quotation is further proof of Ortese’s idiosyncratic religiosity: even if she writes extensively and with admiration and reverence about Christ and Christianity, her devotion is to the ideas and societal functions that contribute to her vision of a more inclusive world, not to the Christian faith or to the Catholic Church.

bridge the gap separating them from their nonhuman companions in order to be elevated to their level of dignity. Op reads the tender friendship between Decio and Alonso as one of the rare instances in which a human animal does not oppose “«una mutazione profonda e provvida della cara Natura»” [“«dear Nature’s deep and provident mutation»”], a mutation that would lead to a “vulnerabilization” of human animals: “«Tale mutazione risiedeva in una improvvisa inermità [...]. I due fratelli - stati una volta fratelli, ma che il progredire ulteriore, e insieme regredire, della specie umana aveva in seguito divisi - si ritrovavano»” [“«This mutation consisted in a sudden helplessness [...]. The two siblings - siblings once, but then divided by the progression, which was also a regression, of human species - were meeting again»”] (205). In a gesture that constitutes a complete reversal of the concept of “survival of the fittest,” Ortesian nature tries to initiate an evolution of sorts that would create a new middle ground between humanness and animality, based on the recognition of their shared vulnerability.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of human animals and the dignity of their nonhuman companions, when explaining the ideas of deep conscience and vision, and their “moral beauty,” Ortese connects them strictly to the idea of “human”: “La coscienza del profondo [...] <è> una memoria delle «prime cose» preesistenti l’universo, e memoria della idea - di una idea dell’uomo, preesistente all’universo, e una idea dell’uomo o l t r e i tempi dell’universo” [“The deep conscience [...] is a memory of the «first things», preexisting the universe; a memory of the idea, of an idea of man, preexisting the universe, and an idea of man b e y o n d the ages of the universe”] (*Piccole* 23-24). The “idea of man,” here, recalls the concept of “umano” as an abstract moral standard as seen in *Iguana* (p. 17). In Ortese’s works, the negotiation between the ideal and the real is never resolved; “the human” remains a polestar, an abstract principle by which the actual human species is mostly incapable of abiding. Ortese’s idiosyncratic combination of embeddedness and abstraction, real and ideal imbues her poetics as well as her aesthetics and her (im)political thought, as I will show in the next section.

### 3. Christ and Time, Platonism and Embeddedness: Ortese’s Gospel of Justice

Vidi un *Raffaello* di piccole proporzioni. [...] Rappresentava un cielo. E quel cielo [...] capovolgeva ogni idea che avevo sulla realtà, era più vero, più reale di ogni cielo del mondo reale. [...] E la sua straordinarietà era in questo: che *sostituiva* dunque *la prima* creazione con *una seconda*, che si poneva però *come la prima*, perché preesistente a questa, essendo *l’idea* di questa. Diceva [...] al cielo *naturale*: «*Tu vai e vieni. Non resti. Ed ecco, io - Cielo di Raffaello - resto, perché non sono il cielo naturale, sono l’idea di qualsiasi cielo. Così, resto.*» (*Corpo* 97)

[I saw a Raphael of small proportions. [...] It depicted the sky. And that sky [...] overturned every idea that I held about reality, it was truer, more real than any real-world sky. [...] And the extraordinary quality was this: that it *substituted* thus the *first* creation with *a second*, which nonetheless posed *as the first*, by virtue of preexisting it, being its *idea*. It told [...] the *natural* sky: «*You come and go. You do not remain. And here, I - the sky of Raphael - remain, for I am not the natural sky, I am the idea of any sky. Thus, I remain.*»]<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Translation by Flora Ghezzeo (slightly modified by me), *Celestial*, 250.

In her platonism, Ortese does not discriminate between “pure” ideas, such as “the human,” and artistic ideas, such as Raphael’s sky.<sup>103</sup> Artistic representation, for Ortese, is not the copy of a copy, nor (as Flora Ghezzi puts it) “a replica of a shadow” (*Celestial* 250), as Plato would argue: as an idea, Raphael’s sky has the same ontological status as the abstract “idea of human.” What elevates Raphael’s sky above the natural, actual sky is its permanence: natural sky comes and goes - Raphael’s sky remains, always identical, impervious to changes. In the passage above, Ortese does not articulate a general aesthetic theory; rather, she chooses a singular painting and zeroes in on a very specific object, the sky - which is (in its actual manifestation) an inorganic, immaterial, single entity, looming over all the living, imperfect, everchanging beings. Its potential deviation from the idea of sky is much more limited than it would be for any organic and non-organic being, and yet, Raphael’s representation is “extraordinary” because its sky is safe from impermanence, unassailable from the truly mortal enemy that eventually defeats all living beings, human and nonhuman animals alike: time.

If the violence of human intelligence represents a threat to the life and dignity of nonhuman animals and vulnerable creatures in general, time is, in Ortese’s view, the great equalizer: “[I]l mondo [...] si [muove] sempre nel tempo, [...] e [...] il *tempo*, col suo passare e frantumare ogni vita, [è] *dolore*” [“The world [...] always [moves] through time, [...] and [...] *time*, that passes and crashes every life, [is] *pain*”] (*Corpo* 148). “Tutto passa, scorre e dilegua nel nulla: ecco il vero” [“Everything passes, flows, and vanishes into nothingness: here’s the truth”] (*Moby* 105). Ortese’s lay religiosity comes into being as a response to the incessant offense of time; therefore, it is fitting that the title of the essay that more thoroughly presents her reading of the Gospels is entitled “Cristo e il tempo” [“Christ and Time”]. Of Christ she writes:

Egli è [...] donatore di una vita, agli uomini, finora ignota, e solo da alcuni di essi [...] *sognata*: vita inimmaginabile, pura, lieta; vita altissima e soave, il contrario, appunto di quanto si dà nell’ordine della «vita» da cui usciamo [...]. [T]ale contrario della morte terrestre, tale nuovo mondo e fiorire di felicità, è *imperituro*. (*Moby* 105)

[He [...] donates to men a life that so far is unknown, and dreamed by just some of them: an inconceivable, pure, joyful life; a life that’s elevated and agreeable, just the opposite of what is offered in the order of «life» that we leave [...]. Such opposite to terrestrial death, such new world and flourishing of happiness, is *undying*.]

Ortese’s Christianity substantially differs from the official one: most importantly, she makes no mention of the original sin and of the fundamental function of Christ, God incarnate who dies in order to take away the sins of mankind - the foundational principle of Christianity.<sup>104</sup> Ortese’s Christ is solely a source of compassion, solace, hope; he lives and dies to “donate” eternal life to human beings: “[A]veva *voluto* morire, ingoiare la morte come un sole nero, affinché l’umanità [...]

<sup>103</sup> Ortese’s platonism is particularly evident in the following passage: “Il dolore dell’uomo [...], l’agonia della terra e di tutto il Creato presi nelle strettoie del *tempo*, ci dicono che vi fu un’idea del mondo che scese a fecondare la materia del mondo, e creò il mondo, e si perse, per un istante, in esso. [...] Infine andò oltre [...] e il mondo non ebbe più che gli *stampi* delle cose divine [...]” [“The pain of man [...], the agony of the earth and of all the universe, all caught in the strangling hold of time, tell us that there was an idea of the world that descended to fertilize the worldly matter, and created the world, and got lost in it - for an instant. [...] Finally, it moved on [...] and the world remained with nothing but the molds of the divine things [...]”] (*Moby* 111).

<sup>104</sup> One could argue that, in Ortese’s theology, the sacrificial lambs are human animals, who should follow Daddo’s, Elmina’s, and Op’s example and sacrifice themselves in order to atone for their own sins.

non ne avesse più terrore, e fosse salvata dal terrore della ferita destinata, altrimenti, a perderla” [“Had *wanted* to die, to swallow death like a black sun, so that humankind [...] wouldn’t dread it anymore, and could be saved from the terror of that wound that was otherwise destined to doom it”] (*Moby* 116).

It is worth noticing how, in this particular essay, the only nonhuman animals that Ortese mentions are not flesh-and-blood creatures, but rhetorical props in similes (“Si vive e si combatte *per l’attimo*, come sorci” [“People live and fight for the moment, like mice”], 112; “erano perduti, persi come agnelli in un baratro” [“they were disoriented, lost like lambs in a ravine”], 115; “come il piccolo figlio guarda la madre succhiare la ferita inflittagli dal serpente” [“like the little child stares at his mum sucking the wound that the snake inflicted on him”], 116). Since, as we are about to see, a considerable part of the essay is devoted to the relief provided by Christ to human animals tormented by the limits of reason, I argue that Ortese’s omission substantiates the idea that, for her, reason is what ultimately separates human and nonhuman.

If nonhuman animals don’t share the pain induced by the limits of reason, Ortese’s most vulnerable creatures are conceived as if to maximize their exposure to the calamitous action of time. The Iguana is seen as belonging to extremes: either she is seen as very old or as very young, both conditions that entail a particular fragility. Even more evident is the relation between exposure to time and infliction of pain in the characters of Käppchen and Alonso. Both live in eternal childhood: Alonso (supposedly) lives for 30 years, never leaves his status as a cub, and endures deprivation, abandonment, hatred; Käppchen is a desperate, disparaged, ridiculed, hopeless child for 300 years. These two characters and their unnaturally long, harrowing childhoods are the most vivid incarnations of Ortese’s peculiar blend of allegory and embeddedness: Alonso and Käppchen are at the same time rhetorical figures and aching, bleeding, creatures. As Vilma De Gasperin suggests, “Ortese does not conceal the allegorical meaning behind the literal: she melds the two, and the result is highly imaginative, [...] and [...] subversive” (274).<sup>105</sup>

As I mentioned above, if time is an enemy for human and nonhuman animals alike, reason is a gift and a curse reserved to the human species. Endowed with reason, with vision, with a “deep conscience,” the most sensitive among human animals (the Daddos and Ops of this world) are predisposed to develop an acute awareness of the misery of human condition and to wonder about the ultimate causes of things, but their questions are destined to remain unanswered. In Ortese’s gospel, Jesus Christ is brought into existence as a response to the lack of meaning of the universe, by force of sheer logic:

[A] che, tutto *questo*? a che il dolore di tutti i viventi? e se non vi è scopo, finalità alcuna, a che la meraviglia e il dolore della ragione? A che la ragione stessa? [...] Il mistero più grande appare dunque la ragione - sempre più inutile e madre di domande che lasciano intatto l’infinito silenzio di ogni cosa. [...] Il *perché* non c’è mai. [...] In questo orrore della ragione solitaria e inutile davanti al nulla, un giorno appare [...] qualcuno che - dicono - non è mai nato. Forse un’invenzione. Il Cristo.

Con lui, i conti tornano. La ragione [...] trova il suo fondamento e spiegazione alla sua solitudine: non è di qui, *viene di lontano*, dal Creatore [...]. *Non è di qui*. Si spiega perché sia rifiutata dal mondo, e non trovi risposte nel mondo. (*Moby* 113-114)

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<sup>105</sup> Vilma De Gasperin, *Loss and the Other in the Visionary Work of Anna Maria Ortese* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).



[Why all *this*? Why the pain of all living beings? and if there isn't any purpose, any aim, why the marvel and pain of reason? Why reason itself? [...] So, the greatest mystery appears to be reason - more and more useless and mother of questions that leave the infinite silence of everything intact. [...] There is never a *why*. [...] In this horror of the reason, solitary and useless in front of the nothingness, one day someone appears [...], someone who - they say - was never born. Maybe an invention. Christ.

With him, everything adds up. Reason [...] finds the foundation and the explanation of its solitude: it is not from here, *it comes from afar*, from the Creator [...]. *It is not from here*. Here's why it is rejected by the world, and does not find answers in the world.]

Ortese's agnostic religiosity, conceived as a palliative for the pain caused by time and the absence of meaning, is not based on faith, but is presented as if born out of necessity. Christ may even be an invention, but "Con lui, i conti tornano" ("with him, everything adds up") - a logical deduction that would not be out of place next to the patristic arguments for the existence of God. If we follow Ortese's thought process, reason is both the source of and the answer to existential anguish: an abstract logical explanation is what quiets pain. As happens with her embedded allegories, two seemingly mutually exclusive domains - in this case, the metaphysical and the empirical - coexist and communicate.

The series of questions opening the passage above and the dismay in front of "l'infinito silenzio di ogni cosa" find an important precedent in Leopardi's reflection in general, and echo the poem *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* [*Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia*] in particular.<sup>106</sup> Leopardi's *Canto* starts with the inception of a dialogue with the moon ("Che fai tu, luna, in ciel? dimmi, che fai, / Silenziosa luna?" ["What are you doing, moon, up in the sky; / what are you doing, tell me, silent moon?"], lines 1-2), and these two are only the first in a series of questions destined to remain unanswered: "A che tante facelle? / Che fa l'aria infinita, e quel profondo / Infinito seren? che vuol dir questa / Solitudine immensa? ed io che sono?" ["Why all these lights? / What does the endless air do, and that deep / eternal blue? What is the meaning of / this huge solitude? And what am I?"] (86-89). The shepherd paradoxically attributes to the silent moon the knowledge of the answers to all his (and humans') unresolved questions about the finitude, impermanence, and meaning of life:

Pur tu, solinga, eterna peregrina,  
 Che sì pensosa sei, tu forse intendi,  
 Questo viver terreno,  
 Il patir nostro, il sospirar, che sia;  
 Che sia questo morir, questo supremo  
 Scolorar del sembiante,  
 E perir della terra, e venir meno  
 Ad ogni usata, amante compagnia.

Yet you, eternal solitary wanderer,  
 you who are so pensive,  
 understand this life on earth, perhaps,  
 what our suffering and sighing is,  
 what this death is, this last  
 pailing of the face,  
 and leaving earth behind, deserting  
 all familiar, loving company.

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<sup>106</sup> The importance of Leopardi in the development of Ortese's thought, especially when it comes to the notions of time and "the real," is testified by her statement that "Si direbbe, Leopardi, l'unica voce reale della letteratura italiana, dopo Dante. È probabilmente più grande di Dante, perché egli - al cosiddetto reale - non crede più. [...] Getta contro la storia e le sue grandezze la fine polvere della percezione del tempo: nulla è vero, tutto passa, tutto cade, tutto muta" ["Leopardi would seem the only authentic voice of Italian literature, after Dante. He's probably greater than Dante, because he doesn't believe in the so-called real anymore. [...] He throws against history and its illustriousness the fine dust of the perception of time: nothing is true, everything passes, everything falls, everything changes"] (*Corpo* 98). It is also worth noticing that one of the very first pieces by Ortese to be published on a newspaper (in 1939) is a poetic account of her visit to Leopardi's grave, "Pellegrinaggio alla tomba di Leopardi," now collected in *Moby* (11-19).

E tu certo comprendi  
 Il perché delle cose, e vedi il frutto  
 Del mattin, della sera,  
 Del tacito, infinito andar del tempo.  
 [...]
 Mille cose sai tu, mille discopri  
 Che son celate al semplice pastore.  
 (61-72, 77-78)

And certainly you comprehend  
 the why of things, and see the usefulness  
 of morning, evening,  
 and the silent, endless pace of time.  
 [...]
 You know and understand a thousand things  
 that are hidden to a simple shepherd.

In Leopardi's *Canto*, the shepherd's monologue involves two entities, both mute: the moon and the herd. Drawing a parallel between the poem and Ortese's essay "Cristo e il tempo," the moon is in the same omniscient position that God occupies in the essay, and in both pieces nonhuman animals, mute and unaware, are spared the torment of not knowing the answers to philosophical questions. Both the shepherd's and Ortese's quests for meaning end in frustration: the shepherd cannot understand "il perché delle cose" ["the why of things"], for Ortese "il *perché* non c'è mai;" but, while the meditation of Leopardi's shepherd eschews any metaphysical temptations, "Cristo e il tempo" indicates that Ortese finds some solace in the hypothesis of an omniscient God.

Even taking into account some differences, "Cristo e il tempo" remains Ortese's most Leopardian piece: her earnest account of human frailty and philosophical anguish, without any mention of the pernicious effects of the power of human intelligence over vulnerable creatures, is consonant with the sentiment of envy for his herd expressed by the shepherd: "O greggia mia che posi, oh te beata / Che la miseria tua, credo, non sai! / Quanta invidia ti porto!" ["O resting flock of mine, you blessed beings, / who don't, I think, know your misery! / How I envy you!"] (105-107). From the analysis of Ortese's work, however, we know that her envy is limited to the state of unawareness in which nonhuman animals live, because both time and oppression by human animals provoke a pain that is far from being enviable. The power imbalance between human and nonhuman animals is what motivates and informs her conception of and demand for justice:

La Giustizia [...] è essenzialmente la pietà del più giovane e del più antico, dell'assolutamente innocente e dell'incomparabilmente puro; è la reverenza per l'Antenato e il Bambino. Questo Antenato è la Terra, questo Bambino è la Bestia, il *minore* per età o famiglia. Tutto lo scopo [...] dell'Intelligenza [...] era invece questo: dichiarare e dimostrare - con carte false - la *inferiorità*, quando non la insensibilità assoluta, di queste famiglie. E il diritto, ugualmente assoluto, di dominazione e distruzione [...] che l'Uomo (essendo centrale) aveva su di esse. (*Corpo* 151)<sup>107</sup>

[Justice [...] is essentially compassion for the younger and the more ancient, for the absolutely innocent and the incomparably pure; it's reverence for the Ancestor and the Child. This Ancestor is the Earth, this Child is the Beast, the *minor* by age or family. The whole purpose [...] of Intelligence [...], instead, was this: to declare and prove - with false documents - the

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<sup>107</sup> Ortese's choice of the word "Uomo" ["Man"] is one of the signs of an aspect she shares with Simone Weil (I am about to touch upon their affinities): her "regressive gender politics" (Ricciardi on Weil, 80). As already noted (note 9), in her animal trilogy, male characters are those able to access understanding and illumination, while female characters are aligned with nonhuman animals and human children. On the other hand, the representation of female characters avoid the stereotypical image of the sweet, caring, motherly woman: Ortese's women are mostly cold and unsentimental, harsh mothers such as Elmina, unsentimental such as Stella Winter.

*inferiority*, if not the absolute insensitivity, of these families. And the right, equally absolute, to dominate and destroy them [...] that Man (being central) had.]

Deeming nonhuman animals “assolutamente innocent[i]” [“absolutely innocent”] and “incomparabilmente pur[i]” [“incomparably pure”] is the logical consequence of denying them rational faculties, and leads Ortese to idealize them to the point of saintliness: “Le Piccole Persone sono pure e buone. [...] Hanno cura dei loro piccoli - siano belli o brutti, desiderati e indesiderati [...]” [“Small Persons are pure and good. [...] They care for their young - be they good looking or ugly, desired or unwanted”] (*Piccole* 114).<sup>108</sup> Ortese’s Copernican revolution leaves human animals steadily at the center of the system (“l’Uomo (essendo centrale)” [“Man (being central)”], “specie e famiglia-guida” [“leader as species and as family”] *Corpo* 136) and relies on their willingness to take a step back and take responsibility toward animals, human and nonhuman, who live in a state of minority.<sup>109</sup>

Ortese’s commitment to the ideal of justice, her “impolitical” ethics, her atypical blend of platonism and embeddedness, of agnosticism and religiosity, present striking similarities with the philosophical approach and thought of Simone Weil, who has inspired the two most prominent Italian scholars of biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito.<sup>110</sup> The words with which Alessia Ricciardi describes the main aspects of Weil’s philosophical could have been written for Ortese:

Esposito has identified Weil’s work as a crucial, exemplary instance of the “impolitical,” which might be defined as a kind of negative thinking with respect to institutional, ideologically formalized politics, a skepticism that nevertheless eschews nihilism. (76-77)

Weil’s perspective ensues from a uniquely pessimistic understanding of what it means to be human, a conviction that “superhuman virtue” would be required to achieve even “a moderate use of force.” (88)

[Deep is] her skepticism regarding the suggestion that the scientific, secular humanism of modern-day Western culture may provide the foundation of a more just society. (90)

[J]ustice must be an alternative to force, not its corollary” (90).<sup>111</sup>

Like Weil’s, Ortese’s work can be read as making a contribution to the reflection on biopolitics in its broadest sense, as “the expression of a kind of predicament involving the intersection, or perhaps reciprocal incorporation, of life and politics” (*Reader*, 2).<sup>112</sup> Throughout her work, she redefines what dignity is and which animals are endowed with it; she extends the idea of reason beyond the human realm; she reflects on the effects of the disproportion of power between human and

<sup>108</sup> This statement also goes against scientific evidence of animal parents neglecting and killing their young.

<sup>109</sup> Ortese’s reference to “minors” and “inferiors” may be a further implicit criticism of the values and heroes of the Enlightenment, since Kant famously exhorted people to overcome the “state of minority” in his 1784 essay, *Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*

<sup>110</sup> Monica Farnetti cites Weil as regards their reading methods: “Ortese’s understanding of reading shares much with Simone Weil’s ‘desire to read with justice’ [...] and with the ‘probity,’ at once moral and intellectual, that orients Weil’s reading method” (“An Uncommon Reader”: The Critical Writings of Anna Maria Ortese,” in *Celestial*, 444). Weil’s Christian platonism is the subject of the collection of essays *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, edited by E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

<sup>111</sup> Alessia Ricciardi, “From Decreation to Bare Life: Weil, Agamben, and the Impolitical.” *diacritics* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 75-93.

<sup>112</sup> Timothy C. Campbell and Adam Sitze, eds. *Biopolitics: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

nonhuman animals and intimates to substitute force with grace and justice: as Jimmy Op says, “«[N]oi nascondiamo o cancelliamo senza vergogna la grazia dell’uomo. / Essa non è nella forza [...], ma nell’amicizia modesta, benevola, operante, continua verso tutti i viventi della Terra [...]. / Essa è nella contemplazione delle stelle da cui tale vita giunse»” [“«We shamelessly hide and erase man’s grace. / It does not reside in strength [...], but in the modest, benevolent, operative, continuous friendship toward all the beings who live on the Earth [...]. It resides in the contemplation of the stars from which such life came»”] (209).

Introducing Weil’s philosophical contribution, Richard Bell notes: “Simone Weil’s conception of doing philosophy [...] is to see it as a remedial task - as preparing us to see things for which we may otherwise be blinded” (1).<sup>113</sup> Also Ortese’s literary work is a remedial task: she tries to stimulate the power of vision in her readers, who “may otherwise be blinded.” One of the ways to enhance their vision is to bridle time, taming it for the space of the narration. Raphael’s sky is more real than the actual one because it is untarnished by time; in her novels Ortese arrests time, suspends it, even in a literal way: in *Iguana* a letter is dated “37 ottobre / Secolo Attuale” [“the 37<sup>th</sup> day of October / Present Century”] (46), a day can correspond to some years (151), spring and fall, the month of Easter and that of the Dead, are undistinguishable; in *Alonso*, from a certain point on, all the letters are dated “May 18th.” It is as if Ortese is offering to her readers miniaturized, frozen versions of the world, narrative snow globes that they can hold in their hands and contemplate: she knows they would learn the tales of fragile lives, lost creatures, attempted redemptions; she hopes they may sharpen their power of vision.

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<sup>113</sup> Richard H. Bell, *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Lanham : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998).

### Chapter 3

#### Unnatural Histories:

#### Primo Levi's Human-like Machines, Paolo Volponi's Machine-like Humans

La natura l'animale e l'uomo sono [...] intimamente connessi e stretti. Non sono fasi diverse e distinte della creazione del mondo; ma entità comprese nella stessa esplosione e materia interagenti tra loro. L'uomo è l'animale che ha saputo, sopra gli istinti e i programmi della specie, programmi proprio di tipo meccanico che una specie ha, organizzarsi e mutare, adattarsi, scegliere, cogliere, occasioni come frutti [...]. (688)<sup>114</sup>

[Nature animal and man are [...] intimately connected and tight. They are not different, distinct phases of creation, but entities that are included in the same explosion and matter, and that interact with each other. Man is the animal who, above the instincts and the programs of his species (programs of a mechanical kind, that each species has), was able to organize and transform, adapt, choose, grab occasions like fruits [...].<sup>115</sup>

The human characters populating the pages written by Federico Tozzi and Anna Maria Ortese occupy and renegotiate their positions in the constellation of all living beings thanks to a heightened awareness of their vulnerability and to their questioning of reason defined as a property that is exclusive to human animals. They present an alternative to the categorization of beings based on the Cartesian body/mind divide mainly by asserting their bodily presence, their incarnate substance.

In this chapter I explore how the works of Primo Levi and Paolo Volponi contribute to the reflection on the elusive concept of humanness by featuring human characters who define themselves by affinity to or by contrast with nonhuman companions and machines. As the Cartesian postulate of the animal-machine implies, both machines and nonhuman animals (as traditionally conceived) are mere executors of orders, “programmed” to behave in a definite way, either by nature or by their human creators; they both lack free will, a faculty that is crucial to the establishment of identity as defined by the values of liberal humanism: “a coherent, rational self, the right of that self to autonomy and freedom, and a sense of agency linked with a belief in enlightened self-interest” (Hayles 86).<sup>116</sup>

The quotation by Volponi that opens this chapter both establishes a contiguity between human and nonhuman animals (and nature) and clearly indicates a discontinuity: human animals can choose, they can raise above their instincts, they are endowed with a certain degree of freedom. It is a conception of the human/nonhuman divide that applies to Levi as well. We will see that in their fictional works, however, both authors articulate the difference between the two realms in a

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<sup>114</sup> Paolo Volponi, *Romanzi e prose*, ed. Emanuele Zinato, vol. 1 (Torino: Einaudi, 2002). All the translations of Volponi's texts are mine; as for the translations of Levi's works, I used *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* edited by Ann Goldstein (New York, NY: Liveright, 2015), which comprises translations by different authors whom I will mention each time.

<sup>115</sup> In this case and elsewhere, I am translating “uomo” as “man” (and consequently all the possessive pronouns and adjectives as masculine), rather than adopting other solutions, because this translation reflects Volponi's (and Levi's) explicitly gendered use of these words and concepts.

<sup>116</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010).

less clear-cut fashion, and mobilize other dichotomies that carry a crucial epistemological power, such as nature and culture, organic and inorganic.

Even though Levi and Volponi start from fairly similar stances on humanness as contrasted with the machine-like behavior of nonhuman animals, what ultimately distinguishes one from the other is their attitude toward the possibility that human animals may actually lack control, free will, and autonomy - they may be cyborgs, or cyborg-like, according to the definition provided by Katherine Hayles:

Fusing cybernetic device and biological organism, the cyborg violates the human/machine distinction; replacing cognition with neural feedback, it challenges the human-animal difference; explaining the behavior of thermostats and people through theories of feedback, hierarchical structure, and control, it erases the animate/inanimate distinction. (*Posthuman* 84)

As we will see, Volponi is much more open to the possibility of seeing human animals as cyborgs than Levi, who considers any decrease in agency and free will as a fatal menace to the core values of human beings.

Their shared interest in the exploration of the definition of humanness by contrast with animality and mechanization is not the only trait Levi and Volponi have in common. Both appreciate and practice science fiction; in an essay Volponi writes that “la fantascienza è uno dei campi più fertili [per il] frutto letterario” [“science fiction is one of the most fertile fields for the literary fruit”] (1023), and twice in *Corporale* (the novel I will examine) mentions science fiction hinting at its potentiality. He asks his students: “«Leggete, ragazzi, i libri di fantascienza? Sono lo specchio vero [...] della nostra società»” [“«Guys, do you read science fiction books? They are the real mirror [...] of our society»”] (431); and when he thinks about a possible diary, he ponders: “«scrivere di un futuro presunto: [...] abbacinante estenuazione fantascientifica»” [“«writing about a supposed future: [...] dazzling science fictional exhaustion»”] (559).<sup>117</sup> As for Levi, his short stories in *Storie naturali* (the collection that will constitute my main object of study here) belong to that genre.<sup>118</sup> Science fiction opens for them a space where they can let speculations loose and envision possibilities, without being constrained by realistic representation and well-established patterns.

Finally, they both reflect on the concept of nature, on how human and nonhuman animals inhabit it, on how human animals create nature and are in turn shaped by it.

In the following pages, I will focus my attention on a variety of essays and short stories by Primo Levi and on *Storie naturali*, a collection of fifteen short stories he published in 1966 under the pseudonym Damiano Malabaila, Piedmontese for “bad wet nurse.” Afterwards, I will analyze Paolo Volponi’s *Corporale* (literally, *Corporeal*, 1974) and his essay “Natura e animale” [“Nature and Animal”] (1982). *Corporale* is a novel that registers the thoughts and adventures of its protagonist, a man who was born as Gerolamo Aspri but often presents himself as Joaquín Murieta (hence my decision to refer to him as Aspri/Murieta). It follows his relationships with his wife, his sexual interests, his lovers, his fellow party members, and it chronicles the attempted construction of a

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<sup>117</sup> Volponi, *Romanzi*, vol. 1; Paolo Volponi, *Corporale* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014).

<sup>118</sup> Much has been written on the genre of *Storie naturali*, the consensus being that it is science fiction; for reference, see Charlotte Ross, *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment* (New York, London: Routledge, 2011), 90-92; Pierpaolo Antonello, *Il ménage a quattro: scienza, filosofia, tecnica nella letteratura italiana del Novecento*, (Grassano (Firenze): Le Monnier Università, 2005), 97-102; Arielle Saiber, “Flying Saucers Would Never Land in Lucca: The Fiction of Italian Science Fiction. *California Italian Studies*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/67b8j74s>.

nuclear bunker that he calls Arcatana (Arklair). The first and third part of the novel are narrated in the first person; the second and fourth in the third person.

Both Levi and Volponi envision narrative scenarios in which freely experimenting with human and nonhuman characters, but their writing styles could hardly be more different. Levi writes with surgical, Kafkaesque exactness, capable of evoking dystopian scenarios that nonchalantly exude an air of normalcy; Volponi employs a sensuous, lush prose, inventive and unpredictable, loose, possessing a visionary quality.

### 1. Primo Levi and Nonhuman Animals

For Levi, nonhuman animals are an endless source of fascination and inspiration. In my investigation of Levi's conception of animality and its relation to humanness, I examine a variety of texts (pieces published in newspapers, short stories), but a good introduction to his way of mobilizing the categories of human and nonhuman (and nature) is the epigraph to *Storie naturali*. Levi provides a key to interpret the title of the book: the epigraph is a quotation from the sixth book of *Gargantua* by Rabelais, where the narrator comments on Gargantua's birth through his mother's ear, trying to oppose the possible incredulity of the reader by listing the wondrous births of various deities. Finally, as an extreme example of narration of absurdity, the narrator cites Pliny, and he concludes: "Lisez le septiesme de sa *Naturelle Histoire*, chap. III, et ne m'en tabustez plus l'entendement" ["Read chapter Three of the seventh book of his *Natural History*, and don't tease my brain any more on the subject"]<sup>119</sup> (Epigraph). In the introduction to her English translation of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, Mary Beagon writes:

[I]t is precisely the mirabilia of books 7-11 which show the connection between man and the other animals: monstrous births link man with animal, whether through actual cross-species mating or in an animal-like product of human intercourse. Animals sometimes display human-like intelligence and other qualities. The link is ambiguous: rather than portraying man as the highest creation, Pliny sometimes suggests that he is a substandard animal [...]. He rises above animals only in his cruelty, which is refined by his power and intelligence. (42)<sup>120</sup>

As we are about to see, Levi's science fiction and his writing on nature and nonhuman animals in general reads as a series of "natural stories." Human and nonhuman animals (and sometimes machines) are represented as being part of a continuum where the borderline between reality and imagination, natural and supernatural, humanness and animality is continuously renegotiated.

#### 1.1 Animals on a Continuum, but in a Hierarchy

Taenia Solium, the intestinal parasite also known as tapeworm, appears not once, but twice in the work of Primo Levi. The first time Levi's reader encounters the taenia is in *Storie naturali*. According to the story, whose title is "L'amico dell'uomo" ["Man's Friend"], about 15% of the adult taeniae hosted in a human body are capable of arranging their cells in mosaics that, if deciphered by human scholars, are revealed to be desperate messages to their hosts, sometimes even in the form of lyrical prose, pleading for their friendship, lamenting their own obscure destiny. The second

<sup>119</sup> Trans. J. M. Cohen, *Complete Works* 404.

<sup>120</sup> Mary Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal: Natural History, Book 7*, ed. Mary Beagon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015).

time, in a piece published in 1985 in *La Stampa*, “Il salto della pulce” [“The Leap of the Flea”], taenia appears as representative of the category of parasites. Levi distinguishes between human and non-human parasites:

Il parassita umano vecchia maniera doveva essere intelligente, perché era sprovvisto di istinti appropriati: per lui, il parassitismo era una scelta, e i propri artifici li doveva inventare. Il parassita animale, a quanto si sa, è tutto istinto, è totalmente programmato, e il suo cervello è ridotto o assente. (*Ranocchi* 129)

[The old-school human parasite had to be intelligent, because he lacked the appropriate instincts: for him, parasitism was a choice, and he was obliged to invent his own artifices. The animal parasite, as far as we know, is all instinct, totally programmed, and its brain is minimal or absent.]<sup>121</sup>

On an imaginary line connecting the maximum and the minimum closeness of nonhuman animals to “humanness,” the two literary incarnations of taenia can be positioned at the two extreme poles: while the taenia of *Storie naturali* is endowed with the ability of writing, the taenia of the article is brainless and driven by mere instinct. These poles are expression of the Cartesian and humanistic dichotomy between human and nonhuman animals based on the faculty of reason and the ability to express thought through language. The two taeniae standing on the two opposite brinks of the abyss separating human and nonhuman animals are expression of Levi’s apparently double-edged attitude towards the “animal question”: the Levi who dispassionately writes about the brainless taenia seems to follow the path traced by Descartes and Darwin, while the Levi who endows the taenia with the gift of language is taking a Benthamian path by appealing to human and nonhuman animals’ shared vulnerability. Crucially, pain is manifested through language, both by the taenia and on the page; language causes humans to feel closer to other animals and suggests a lessening of the ontological divide between them. Levi’s fundamentally logocentric perspective allows him to bring to light how discursive practices shape the pervious boundary between humans and other creatures.<sup>122</sup>

Levi’s texts provide ample evidence of his position in regard to the contiguity of humanness and animality: in the essays and newspaper pieces in which he presents his point of view as a scientist, in accordance with the Darwinian vision of evolution, he thinks of human and nonhuman animals as being part of a continuum, but decisively distinguished by the ultimate cause behind their actions: nonhuman animals are driven by instinct, while humans act according to reason. In a piece about beetles, “Gli scarabei” [“Beetles”], he writes:

[L]a loro tecnologia è ingegnosa ma rudimentale e istintiva; da quando il pianeta sarà loro, dovranno passare molti milioni di anni prima che un beetle particolarmente amato da Dio, al termine dei suoi calcoli, trovi scritto sul foglio [...] che l’energia è pari alla massa moltiplicata per il quadrato della velocità della luce. (180)<sup>123</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Trans. Antony Shugaar, *Complete Works* 2114.

<sup>122</sup> As far as I can tell, the dark side of logocentrism (the automatic relegation to inferiority of all language-less beings) is never directly thematized and problematized in Levi’s works. I will touch upon this issue later in this chapter.

<sup>123</sup> Primo Levi, *L’altrui mestiere* (Torino: Einaudi, 1985).



[[T]heir technology is ingenious but rudimentary and instinctive; from the day they take over the world, many millions of years will have to pass before a beetle particularly beloved of God completes his calculations and finds, written on a piece of paper [...], that energy is equal to mass multiplied by the speed of light squared.]<sup>124</sup>

The “inventiveness” of the beetle is outsourced to nature, which has provided it with instinct, while, Levi seems to imply, human intelligence puts our species above all the others in the hierarchy of living creatures. The choice of the expression “trovare scritto sul foglio” [“to find written on a piece of paper”] (rather than “scrivere sul foglio” [“to write on a piece of paper”]) is telling of the depth of Levi’s skepticism about the possibility of a beetle ever (re-)writing the theory of special relativity; the hint to divine intervention is further proof of how unlikely the coming of Einstein-like beetle is.

A rare glance into the mind of a nonhuman animal is offered by the short story “Trattamento di quiescenza” [“Retirement Package”], from *Storie naturali*. In the story, a virtual reality device called Torec can make its users relive the same experience of the subject that recorded it by wearing a special helmet when living it personally. It is a totalizing experience: the user feels the same physical sensations, the same emotions, and thinks the same thoughts as the original subject. When the protagonist uses the Torec to relive the adventure of an eagle, this is what his mind experiences:

la mia mente era in una condizione di torpore, di paralisi. Percepivo soltanto una tensione, uno stimolo simile a quello che solitamente si prova dietro allo sterno, quando si ricorda che «si deve fare una cosa» e si è dimenticato quale: dovevo «fare una cosa», compiere un’azione, e non sapevo quale, ma sapevo che la dovevo compiere in una certa direzione, portarla a termine in un certo luogo [...]. (*Racconti* 173)<sup>125</sup>

[my mind was in a condition of torpor, of paralysis. I perceived only one tension, a stimulus that one usually feels behind the sternum, when you remember that you «must do something» but have forgotten what you must do. I had to «do something,» to carry out an action, and I didn’t know what, but I knew that I had to carry it out by heading in a certain direction, bringing it to a conclusion in a certain place [...].]<sup>126</sup>

Through this quite ingenious representation of (his own version of) the workings of an eagle’s mind, Levi vividly illustrates what blind instinct is: the compulsion to carry out a series of tasks whose ultimate purpose remains concealed. Levi is representing the eagle as a Cartesian animal-machine: a blind executioner of pre-ordained actions upon which it does not have any kind of control.

In Levi’s fictional and non-fictional works, the mere fact of being (supposedly) led by instinct rather than by reason creates such a deep rift between nonhuman and human animals that it may be difficult to believe that he could conceive of a continuum comprising the two. Instead, the opposite is true.

For Levi, an empirical indication of the ontological contiguity not just between these two categories of beings, but among every single thing on Earth, is their common chemical composition. In the last chapter of *Il sistema periodico* [*The Periodic Table*], whose title is “Carbonio”

<sup>124</sup> Trans. Antony Shugaar, *Complete Works* 2188.

<sup>125</sup> Primo Levi, *Tutti i racconti*, ed. Marco Belpoliti (Torino: Einaudi, 2016).

<sup>126</sup> Trans. Jenny McPhee, *Complete Works* 568.

["Carbon"], Levi tells the story of a single carbon atom, "traveling" from the air to a plant, from the plant to carbon dioxide, then to glucose, until finally, after many stages, it becomes part of Levi's brain. The epic of the carbon atom transfigures what is an arid chemical fact into an ode to the interconnectedness of all living beings: "noi animali e noi piante, e noi specie umana" ["we animals and plants, and we human species"<sup>127</sup>] (*Racconti* 573). The chapter also shows how looking at the world from a scientific perspective can lead to humbling realizations about humankind: "la nostra stessa presenza sul pianeta diventa risibile in termini geometrici" ["our very presence on the planet becomes laughable in geometric terms"<sup>128</sup>] (*Racconti* 573).

According to some interpretations, another sign that Levi is thinking of all animals as contiguous is the ontological mobility of human characters. As Pierpaolo Antonello notices, the very notion of a continuum suggests the possibility of shifts in the hierarchy of beings.<sup>129</sup> In the early works of Levi, devoted to the Holocaust, the idea of animality is often used to signal the regression of the human being who is prisoner in the Lager to a previous stage of evolution. A good example is Elias, whose profile is traced in *Se questo è un uomo* [*If This Is a Man*]: "Elias è naturalmente e innocentemente ladro: manifesta in questo l'istintiva astuzia degli animali selvaggi"<sup>130</sup> ["Elias is naturally and innocently a thief: in this he shows the instinctive cunning of wild animals"<sup>131</sup>] (*Opere* I 93). In a very short passage the main differences between human and nonhuman animals are outlined: Elias, like nonhuman animals, is not subject to moral laws, because his actions are driven by instinct, not by reason. He's innocent because he cannot distinguish between right and wrong: "a nulla servirebbe punirlo dei suoi furti: essi rappresentano per lui un atto vitale qualsiasi, come respirare e dormire" ["it would serve no purpose to punish him for his thefts: to him they represent a vital act, like breathing or sleeping"<sup>132</sup>] (*Opere* I 93).

Even though they show how human and nonhuman animals are part of a continuum, both "Carbon" and the description of Elias further prove that Levi subscribes to the Cartesian paradigm when it comes to equating humanness (and a higher place in the hierarchy of beings) with the possession of the faculty of reason. However, Levi's and Descartes' views unquestionably diverge when considering the legitimacy of inflicting pain to nonhuman fellows and, more in general, the ethical and epistemological relevance of our shared vulnerability.

## 1.2 Letting the (Suffering) Nonhuman Animals Speak

In "Un testamento" ["A Will"], a short story from the collection *Lilith* [*Lilith and Other Stories*], Levi explicitly rewrites the Cartesian *cogito*, substituting "thinking" with "suffering:"

È probabile che quel sapiente francese di cui mi sfugge il nome, e che affermava di essere certo di esistere in quanto era sicuro di pensare, non abbia sofferto molto in vita sua, poiché altrimenti avrebbe costruito il suo edificio di certezze su una struttura diversa. Infatti, spesso chi pensa non è sicuro di pensare, [...] il suo pensiero [...] gli sfugge di tra le mani [...]. Ma invece chi soffre sì, chi soffre non ha dubbi mai, chi soffre è ahimè sicuro sempre, sicuro di soffrire ed ergo di esistere. (*Racconti* 733)

<sup>127</sup> Trans. Ann Goldstein, *Complete Works* 942.

<sup>128</sup> Trans. Ann Goldstein, *Complete Works* 942.

<sup>129</sup> Pierpaolo Antonello, *Ménage*, 90-92.

<sup>130</sup> Primo Levi, *Opere*, ed. Marco Belpoliti, vol. 1, 2 (Torino: Einaudi, 1997).

<sup>131</sup> Trans. Stuart Woolf, *Complete Works* 92.

<sup>132</sup> Trans. Stuart Woolf, *Complete Works* 92.

[It's likely that that French sage whose name escapes me and who declared that he was certain he existed inasmuch as he was sure he was thinking didn't suffer much in his life, because otherwise he would have constructed his edifice of certainties on a different foundation. In fact, often those who think aren't sure they're thinking, [...] their thought [...] slips their fingers [...]. But those who suffer, yes, those who suffer have no doubts, those who suffer are, alas, always certain, certain they are suffering and *ergo* exist.]<sup>133</sup>

In this story, Levi does not refer his reformulated *cogito* to nonhuman animals, but his attitude toward their sufferings is clear in the essay, “Contro il dolore” [“Against Pain”]: “Gli animali devono [...] essere rispettati [...] perché una norma scritta in noi [...] ci intima di non creare dolore, né in noi né in alcuna creatura capace di percepirlo” [“Animals must be respected [...] because a rule engraved within us [...] requires that we avoid creating pain, either in humans or in any other creature capable of feeling it”<sup>134</sup>] (Op II, 675). This conviction is not confined to his theoretical essays; in his works, whenever a nonhuman animal has a chance to express herself through language, she often does so to convey the pain she is feeling and to appeal to human empathy, as in the case of the taenia lamenting the obscurity of her condition that I have mentioned at the beginning of the chapter.

In Levi's body of work, the privileged space in which nonhuman animals are “free” to speak are his poems. In the collection *Ad ora incerta* [*At an Uncertain Hour*] (1984), the reader hears from crows and a spider, from a mole and a snail, from an elephant and an ox. In the poem on (and of) the ox, whose title is “Pio” [“Pious”], the animal does not just speak, but takes advantage of the occasion to expose the violence inherent in its reduction to the quintessential quiet, benign creature:

Pio bove un corno. Pio per costrizione,	Pious bull my ass. Pious under duress,
Pio contro voglia, pio contro natura,	Pious against my will, pious against nature,
Pio per arcadia, pio per eufemismo.	Pious in Arcadia, pious by euphemism.
[...]	[...]
[I]o m'inchino al giogo, pensi quanto contento.	[...] I bend to the yoke, imagine how gladly.
[...]	[...]
O pensa che io non veda, qui sul prato,	Oh think that I don't see, here in the meadow,
Il mio fratello intero, erto, collerico,	My brother whole, erect, enraged,
Che con un solo colpo delle reni	Who with a single shudder of his flanks
Insemina la mia sorella vacca?	Inseminates my sister cow?
Oy gevàlt! Inaudita violenza	Oy gevalt! Unheard-of violence,
La violenza di farmi nonviolento. <sup>135</sup>	The violence of making me nonviolent. <sup>136</sup>

Leaving aside for a moment the problem of ventriloquization, this poem can be read as the protest of the ox against the violence of domestication, both physical and linguistic. The violence of castration is doubled in the reduction of the animal to a symbol. The poem is a direct reply to Giosuè Carducci's “Il bove” [“The Ox”], which reads: “O che al giogo inchinandoti contento / L'agil opra de l'uom grave secondi” [“Unto the yoke with grave contentment kneeling, / To man's

<sup>133</sup> Trans. Ann Goldstein, *Complete Works* 1488.

<sup>134</sup> Trans. Antony Shugaar, *Complete Works* 2059.

<sup>135</sup> Levi, *Ranocchi* 201.

<sup>136</sup> Trans. Jonathan Galassi, *Complete Works* 1975-1976.

quick work thou dost thy strength impart”<sup>137</sup>). The joy of the ox in serving the man is due to the teleological conception of its existence: it was placed on the earth for the purpose of serving human animals. The gaze of the ox, alert and well aware of his surroundings in Levi’s poem, in Carducci’s is also depicted in a totally different manner: “Ei t’esorta e ti punge, e tu co ‘l lento / Giro de’ pazienti occhi rispondi” [“He shouts and goads, and answering thy smart, / Thou turn’st on him thy patient eyes appealing”], “E del grave occhio glauco entro l’austera / Dolcezza si rispecchia ampio e quieto / Il divino del pian silenzio verde” [“In the grave sweetness of thy tranquil eyes / Of emerald, broad and still reflected dwells / All the divine green silence of the plain”]. The eyes of Carducci’s ox are the perfect correlative to the lack of agency displayed by the animal: they are represented as meekly reacting to the man’s stimuli, or while reflecting the green field all around, as if in contemplation of the quiet order of things of which the subserviency of the ox is part.

Carducci’s forced taming of the ox is an instance of that process of metaphorization to which humans subject other animals, a process of which Levi is fully conscious and in which he is complicit (the following quotation is from the essay “Romanzi dettati dai grilli” [“Novels Dictated by Crickets”]):

È un’antica osservazione, antica già al tempo di Esopo [...], che negli animali si trovano tutti gli estremi. [...] [L]o scrittore non ha che da scegliere, [...] gli basta attingere a piene mani in questo universo di metafore. Proprio uscendo dall’isola umana, troverà ogni qualità umana moltiplicata per cento, una selva di iperboli prefabbricate. (*Ranocchi* 114-115)

[It is an age-old observation, ancient even in the time of Aesop [...], that it is possible to find all extremes in animals. [...] A writer need only choose, [...] it is enough for him to draw liberally on this universe of metaphors. It is precisely by leaving the human island that he will find every human trait multiplied by a hundredfold, a forest of prefabricated hyperboles.]<sup>138</sup>

### 1.3 Interspecies Encounters, Interrupted: Levi’s Empathetic Logocentrism

To be fair, Levi’s exact and acute observations about animals never qualify as “prefabricated hyperboles”, and when writing his most “realistic” pieces, Levi is very careful not to project human thoughts and feelings onto the animals, abiding by the rules that he outlines in “Romanzi dettati dai grilli”: “Etologi e pavloviani ci hanno severamente ammoniti a non attribuire agli animali meccanismi mentali umani, a non descriverli con linguaggio antropomorfo” [“Ethologists and Pavlovians have sternly warned us not to attribute human mental mechanisms to animals, not to describe them in anthropomorphic language”<sup>139</sup>] (*Ranocchi* 114). Nevertheless, his journalistic pieces on animals are almost always an occasion to draw parallels between “their” behavior and “ours”, between “their” instinctual shrewdness, product of evolution, and “ours”, product of reason and individual intelligence. Even though those pieces are not, strictly speaking, classifiable as “fables”, they share the same fundamental characteristics of fables as defined by Jacques Derrida: “Above all, it would be necessary to avoid fables. We know the history of fabulation and how it remains an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication. Always a discourse of man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and as man” (405). The ox and

<sup>137</sup> Giosuè Carducci, *Poems of Giosuè Carducci*, trans. Frank Sewall (London: Osgood, McIlvaine &, 1893), 77.

<sup>138</sup> Trans. Antony Shugaar, *Complete Works* 2076.

<sup>139</sup> Trans. Antony Shugaar, *Complete Works* 2075.

the taenia, ventriloquized by Levi, are domesticated as well - Levi's yoke is lighter and gentler than Carducci's, but a yoke nonetheless.

The anthropomorphic taming manifests itself also (and maybe especially so) when an encounter between human and nonhuman animals seems possible and the human animal feels a sincere sympathy for the nonhuman other. In a piece written for *La Stampa* in 1985, "Ranocchi sulla luna" ["Little Frogs on the Moon"], Levi recounts his experience as a child trying to breed frogs starting from tadpoles. When finally tadpoles transform into little frogs, Levi thinks:

non erano più larve, ma ranocchi, gente come noi, con due mani e due gambe, che nuotavano «a rana» con fatica ma con stile corretto. [...] Ne mettevo uno sul palmo della mano: aveva un muso, un viso, mi guardava strizzando gli occhi, poi spalancava la bocca di scatto. Cercava aria o voleva dire qualche cosa? (*Ranocchi* 108)

[they weren't tadpoles anymore, but little frogs, people like us, with two hands and two legs, who swam frog-style, struggling a little but with good technique. [...] I would put one on the palm of my hand: she had a muzzle, a face, she would look at me winking her eyes, then she would suddenly open her mouth. Was she looking for air or did she want to say something?<sup>140</sup>]

The first sentence gives the reader pause: those little frogs are "people like us", and, in a bizarre game of mirrors, they are deemed pretty good at swimming "a rana" - literally "like a frog, frog-style," the official Italian term for breaststroke style. It is not easy to tell where the anthropomorphization of the frogs ends and the animalization of humans begins.

The second sentence is equally dense. As Emmanuel Levinas in particular has remarked, the face and especially the eyes constitute an important locus of encounter with the other, and from the exchange of gazes originates a complex web of moral considerations and conundrums: sympathy is conveyed through the gaze; gazes between sentient creatures, their reciprocation or lack thereof, give rise to different kinds of moral and affective configurations. In the passage the "muso" ["muzzle"] quickly becomes "viso" ["face"], suggesting a growing ontological closeness. It is at this point, in the frog's human-like face, that Levi wonders whether the animal is about to speak. But she does not - and the narrator suddenly looks away from the frog and changes subject: a real exchange is prevented by the frog's incapability of using human language.

The frog does not speak, but the taenia of *Storie naturali* does (in "L'amico dell'uomo"). Her presence is noteworthy not only because she is able to address a message (a message that the human host will refuse to read once deciphered), but also for the content of the message:

«Le nostre parole silenziose non trovano ascolto presso di voi, semidei superbi. Noi, popolo senz'occhi né orecchie, non troviamo grazia presso di voi. Ed ora [...] [a]ndrò in silenzio, secondo il nostro costume [...] Non chiedo che un dono: che questo mio messaggio ti raggiunga, e venga da te meditato e inteso. Da te, uomo ipocrita, mio simile e mio fratello.» (*Racconti* 17)

[«Our silent words get no hearing from you, arrogant demigods. We, a population without eyes or ears, are not appreciated by you.

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<sup>140</sup> Translation mine.

And now [...] I'll go silently, as is our custom [...]. I ask but one favor: that this message of mine may reach you and be reflected upon and understood by you. By you, hypocritical man, my equal and my brother.»<sup>141]</sup>

It is tempting to dismiss these words as pure *divertissement*, and the grand finale where the taenia appeals to the human host borrowing the lines of Charles Baudelaire seems to lend some fuel to this claim. Still, the plea of the taenia is the cry of a creature that is doomed to oblivion and disdain because its system of communication is not intelligible to another and more powerful species. And what if the position of taeniae with respect to humans were not so different from the position of humans with respect to other (still unknown) living beings? The very short story by Fredric Brown, “The Sentinel,” chosen by Levi for his anthology *La ricerca delle radici* [literally, *The Search for the Roots*] presents precisely this scenario.<sup>142</sup> This is the end of the story:

Then I saw one of them creeping towards me. I aimed my weapon and opened fire on it. The enemy gave that strange horrible cry that all of them used to utter. Then a deathly silence. It was dead. The cry and the sight of the dead body made me shudder. In the course of time, many of us had become accustomed, took no notice of that; but not me. They were horrible disgusting creatures, with only two legs, two arms, two eyes, that sickening white skin and without scales!

The strange body of the human animal provokes the same disdain and disgust in the alien that we can feel in front of a snake or a taenia. Moreover, now the human being is the one uttering a “strange horrible cry”, a sound as indecipherable for the protagonist of the story as those emitted by animals are for human beings.

The choice of this story cannot surprise the reader of Levi: Fredric Brown performs the same gesture to which Levi has accustomed us, a heartfelt attempt at displacing the point of view, at changing the perspective, at walking in the other's shoes - in the other's hoofs. Levi looks at the other that is the nonhuman animal with genuine sympathy, and lends his voice to produce a surrogate that be intelligible to human ears. One of the corollaries of looking at the nonhuman other from this anthropocentric and logocentric perspective is the expectation of some sort of response, so that participating in the language game becomes a necessary condition for an exchange of some kind. The unintelligible cry of the human in Brown's story echoes the cries heard by Daddo in *L'Iguana*, but it solicits a completely different response: for Ortese, inarticulate cries for help are enough to establish one's belonging to humankind and one's right to be rescued; in Levi, on the other hand, empathy is triggered only when the creature who suffers is able to speak the same language of the potential rescuer.

In Levi's pages, nonhuman animals achieve visibility and narrative and ontological thickness only when they communicate in some way, or when their behavior or the situation in which they find themselves triggers an anthropomorphic identification. And even when, as in the case of the frog, the seed of a contact between human and nonhuman beings is planted, the lack of communication is enough to prevent any sort of exchange whatsoever: the human looks at the non-human animal, but the reader has no notice of any gaze arriving in return. As Derrida would put it, Levi is not seen seen by the animal, and is not able to accede “to a thinking [...] that thinks

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<sup>141</sup> Trans. Jenny McPhee, *Complete Works* 464.

<sup>142</sup> *La ricerca delle radici* (1981) is an anthology compiled by Levi featuring texts and authors that he deemed especially relevant or close to his heart.

the absence of a name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation” (*Animal* 416).

Not surprisingly, Levi’s logocentrism plays an important role also in his reflections on the idea of humanness as it undergoes new adjustments when faced with the advent of the machines.

## 2. Chronicles from a Near Dystopian Future: The NATCA Machines

There is a common thread connecting all the *Storie naturali* in which human animals interact with machines: the presence of Mr. Simpson, an American who lives and works in Italy as a sales representative for the American company, NATCA (the acronym remains unexplained). Simpson presents every machine to the characters and the reader, usually describing its features with competence, excitement, and pride. Simpson’s attitude and his narrative parable, the characterization and the reactions of his clients when presented with the machines, and the ways in which they ultimately interact with and exploit them - all these elements, along with the specific tasks these machines are set to perform, contribute to define the narrative status of machines in Levi’s stories.<sup>143</sup>

A brief overview of the machines presented in *Storie naturali* shows the range of their functions. The first one to appear in the collection is the Versificatore (“Il Versificatore” [“The Versifier”], 18), whose purpose is to compose poems after the necessary details (title, occasion, tone, poetic meter, etc) are electronically input. The second machine is the Mimete (“L’ordine a buon mercato” [“Order at a Good Price”], “Alcune applicazioni del Mimete” [“Some Applications of the Mimete”]), that duplicates anything - from a photograph to a human being. In “La misura della bellezza” [“The Measure of Beauty”], Simpson presents the Calometro [Calometer], an instrument that calculates the beauty of any human being by comparing her to “universal” incarnations of beauty (Elizabeth Taylor and Raf Vallone are the two models chosen to calibrate the first models, depending to the gender of the subject). The last machine to feature as a co-protagonist of a story (many others are just mentioned in passing, as we shall see) is the Torec (short for Total Recorder, in “Trattamento di quiescenza” [“Retirement Package”]): by wearing a helmet, its users can live secondhand experiences that were recorded by other living beings (human or nonhuman), complete with all the sensorial perceptions and the feelings they elicit. Experiences range from launching with a parachute to massacring Vietcong - a prototype of what nowadays (in 2018) we would call a virtual reality device.

Levi’s machines impinge on the most intimate feelings, and act as surrogates of human animals, relieving them of the necessity of personally engaging in a series of activities whose experience and outcomes constitute the core of human identity. As a result, memories become interchangeable and divorced from personal experience; aesthetic judgment is the verdict of a chain of algorithms; language is revealed as a mere combinatory process.

In what follows, I will analyze the machines invented by Levi in *Storie naturali* focusing my attention on three issues they raise: the nature of the relation between language and embodiment; the way in which machines and sex represent a challenge to the humanistic tenet of the autonomy of the self; and the consequences of the fetishization of human and nonhuman reason.

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<sup>143</sup> Of the six NATCA stories in *Storie naturali*, five have a first-person narrator and one (“Il Versificatore”) is written in form of a play. We can assume that this first-person narrator is always the same character thanks to subtle references to previous stories; for the same reason, we can infer that the aforementioned narrator is (very likely) identifiable with the Poet who is a character in “Il Versificatore.”

## 2.1 “The Versifier:” Language, Corporeality, and the Machine

This story, the third in the collection, is written in the form of a play. The main character, identified as the Poet, introduces Simpson to the reader when he asks him to bring the Versifier to deal with his dullest assignments. The other characters are the (female) Secretary and Giovanni, a NATCA workman.<sup>144</sup> After the Versifier has proved its ability and “human-like” sensibility in composing various kinds of poems, we learn, in a final twist, that it is actually the author of the whole story.

The final revelation leads to the most overtly posthuman moment in the whole collection, a moment in which the boundary between human animal and machine collapses all at once: in revealing who the author of the story is, the narrator undermines two cherished bastions of human exceptionality, namely language and artistic creativity. The Poet seemingly offers the reader a reminder of the power and beauty of artistic creativity just before the arrival of the Versifier (but after he has already taken the decision to call Simpson):

«Esiste una gioia, nel nostro lavoro, una felicità profonda [...], la felicità del creare, del trarre dal nulla, del vedersi nascere davanti [...], come per incanto, qualcosa di nuovo, qualcosa di vivo che non c’era prima... (*Freddo ad un tratto*) Prenda nota, signorina: “come per incanto, qualcosa di nuovo, qualcosa di vivo che non c’era prima, puntini”: è tutta roba che può servire.» (22)

[«There is a joy to our work, a profound happiness [...], the happiness of creating, of extracting something from nothing, of watching [...], as if by magic, the birth of something new, something alive that wasn’t there before... (*Suddenly indifferent*) Take this down, miss: “as if by magic, something new, something alive that wasn’t there before, dot, dot, dot” - it’s all stuff we might be able to use.» (422)]

The Poet’s sudden coldness, together with his remark: “è tutta roba che può servire” [“it’s all stuff we might be able to use”], deflates the idealistic tension of his declaration, revealing its trite and insincere nature, and, most importantly, equates his poetry with a product of mechanistic and calculated operations rather than of human inspiration - an endeavor that could be easily carried out by a machine. The Poet hints at a different kind of artistic creation when he laments that composing occasional poems subtracts time from more authentically artistic pursuits: “«Mai un momento di libera ispirazione»” [“«Never a moment for spontaneous inspiration»” (418)] (19); the fact remains that we never read a single line of his supposedly more inspired poetry. Even if the Poet ominously proclaims “«Non sono un versificatore»” [“«I am not a versifier!»” - meaning, as Jenny McPhee translates, “a dabbler, a poetaster” (419)] (20), the kind of poetry he writes suggests just the contrary.

The mere writerly abilities of the Versifier are just one of the factors that lead to the erasure of a neat distinction between human animals and machines; the content of its poetry and the reactions it provokes are also relevant. The characters and the stage directions notice the “humanness” of the Versifier’s behavior in moments of discomfort and sorrow; at first, the stage directions seem to project human feelings when describing the Versifier’s pauses and mechanical noises while it is processing a particularly convoluted poetic passage: “in dissolvenza tra rantoli” [“fades while wheezing”], “riprende con fatica” [“starts up again with great effort”], “con evidente

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<sup>144</sup> Giovanni’s only line is: “«Dov’è la presa?»” [“Where’s an outlet?” - 422] (23). All the stories in *Storie naturali* were translated by Jenny McPhee.



sollievo” [“with evident relief” (429)] (29); the characters echo the directions: “«Ha notato come si è ripreso nel distico finale, quando si è sentito fuori dai guai? Umano, proprio»” [“«Did you notice how it picked up steam again when it got to the final couplet, when it felt it was out of the woods? It was positively human»” (429)] (29). The second time the Versifier is deemed “human” comes when, prompted by the secretary to compose a poem on a free topic, it produces a lyrical lamentation of its impossibility of having a sexual intercourse with a woman: “Una ragazza da portare a letto:/Non c’è nulla di meglio, mi hanno detto./Non mi dispiacerebbe far la prova/[...]/Ma per lei, poveretta, che tortura!/Quest’intelaiatura è troppo dura [...]” [“A girl worth taking to bed:/There’s nothing better, it’s said./I wouldn’t mind trying, too/[...]/But for her, poor thing, what torture!/My frame is rock hard, for sure [...]” (432)] (31-32).<sup>145</sup> The Secretary overcomes the initial embarrassment, comments, sighing: “«Poverino!»” [“«Poor thing!»”], “«Simula bene... simula bene il comportamento umano»” [“«It imitates well... it imitates human behavior quite well»” (432)] (32). Judging from these episodes, the connection between the perceived humanness of the machine and its emotional suffering is clear; therefore, it is only fitting that what decisively convinces the Poet to buy the Versifier is another instance of authentic suffering transposed into poetry. While composing a sonnet on the topic, “Autunno in Liguria” [“Autumn in Liguria”] (34), the machine suddenly starts changing subject while emitting worrying sounds (“Forte ronzio, fracasso, fischi, disturbi, scrosci” [“A loud drone, shattering, whistles, jamming, roaring”]):

Due connessioni si sono bruciati	Two connections ignite into one hot flare
Siamo bloccati sulla rima in «atti»	We seem to be blocked by rhymes made up of “air.”
E siamo diventati mentecatti	And we have become like beggars so beware
Signor Sinsone affrettati combatti	Mr. Sinsone is aware of the scare
Vieni da me con gli strumenti adatti	Come now with your tools and set right this affair
Cambia i collegamenti designati	Change the fuses with this here serial numbar
Ottomilaseicentodiciassati	Eighthousandsixhundredandseventeenare
Fai la riparazione. Tante gratti. (35)	And please do take care when you make the repair. <sup>146</sup>

The Versifier is calling for help, frantically asking for specific “body parts” to be substituted (precisely, the pieces numbered 8617): its poetry is expression of discomfort, it is strictly connected to its physical vulnerability. Moreover, the Versifier’s moment of helplessness seems to prompt the emergence of a way of connecting thoughts that cannot strictly be considered rational; here is how Simpson explains the Versifier’s distortion of his name into “Sinsone:” “«Simpson» si ricollega etimologicamente a Sansone [...]. La macchina non poteva saperlo, naturalmente: ma in quel momento di angoscia [...] ha provato il bisogno di un intervento, di un soccorso, e ha stabilito un legame tra il soccorritore antico e il moderno” [“«Simpson’ is etymologically connected to Samson [...]. Naturally, the machine couldn’t possibly know that: but in that agonizing moment [...] it felt the need for some kind of intervention, of rescue, and it established a link between ancient and modern saviours» (436-437)”] (36). The process Simpson is describing is remarkably similar to the workings of the human unconscious: in a moment of profound distress, the Versifier resorts to information of which it is not (consciously?) aware.

<sup>145</sup> See Ross 108-111 for an analysis of the heteronormativity and of the automatic replication of power relations in this story - the Versifier, as a creator, is automatically considered male, and the Secretary viewed as a sexual prey.

<sup>146</sup> 435.

This episode is a further indication of the special status of the Versifier among all the NATCA machines; it is the only one that can be actually considered “sentient” (Ross 108-112), showing both to be receptive to external stimuli and endowed with some degree of awareness. All the other machines are mere prostheses, they substitute human animals in the completion of precise tasks, but the attention of the reader is never drawn to their potential humanness; the reason is, as Derrida would put it, their “absence of word.” Levi’s attitude toward languageless machines is the same as that toward nonhuman animals: lacking the faculty to speak traces an insuperable chasm between them and human animals. In the speculative and ironic narrative realm of *Storie naturali*, the Versifier achieves a degree of ontological and sentimental closeness to human animals that no living, breathing nonhuman animal ever attains in his works.<sup>147</sup>

The 1985 essay “La poesia può andare d’accordo col computer?” [“Can Poetry Get Along with the Computer?”] represents a coda of sorts to “The Versifier.”<sup>148</sup> In the essay, Levi ponders the hypothesis that computers may, one day, be able to compose poems. He considers the age of computers and their rapid progress, and seems to concede the possibility of a computer-poet: “Ergo può fare tutto; ergo può anche poetare” [“Therefore, the computer can do anything; therefore, it can even write poetry”<sup>149</sup>] (*Opere II* 1265). Then, amongst many hesitations (“so bene che è imprudente fare previsioni negative” [“I’m well aware that making negative forecasts isn’t prudent”]; “sperando di non dire sciocchezze” [“hoping not to say something foolish”], “non saprei darne una dimostrazione rigorosa” [“I can’t provide a rigorous explanation”], *Opere II* 1266) he retracts his claim almost completely: “oso affermare che non sarà mai costruito un computer che secerna [...] poesia originale e valida” [“I venture to state that a computer that can produce [...] original and worthy poetry will never be built”]. He contrasts the activities that computers are able to perform (logical operations and random choices) with the elements that are essential for “worthy poetry,” which are seemingly opposite to what computers can offer: “la poesia è maggiore della logica e del caso” [“poetry is more than logic and chance”]. The reader of *Storie naturali* notices how, among the elements he lists, a couple were actually mastered by the Versifier: “associazioni profonde o sottili ma necessariamente nuove, richiami ad archetipi” [“deep or subtle but necessarily new associations; references to archetypes”] - but the essay is set in the real world, not in the realm of science fiction. After ending the essay on the certainty that poetry has nothing to fear from computers, Levi adds a *post scriptum*: “ho emesso il responso oracolare e adesso mi cresce dentro il sospetto di aver parlato per gelosia e per paura. Per luddismo: con lo stesso spirito con cui gli operai seguaci di Ned Ludd [...] distruggevano le nuove macchine tessili per timore che diminuissero i posti di lavoro” [“I answered like an oracle; now I begin to suspect that I spoke out of jealousy and fear. Like a Luddite, in the same spirit in which [...] the followers of Ned Ludd, afraid that their jobs would be lost, destroyed the new weaving machines” (2694)] (*Opere II* 1266-1267). The tone of this passage is light and the *post scriptum* was probably added for comic effect, but if we consider this conclusion together with the hesitations and adjustments of Levi’s thought

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<sup>147</sup> One partial exception, on whose significance I will come back later, is the taenia, but it is because she can write elaborate poems addressed to her host.

<sup>148</sup> Levi explicitly refers to this story in the essay “Lo scriba” [“The Scribe”] (1985), on the experience with his first personal computer. It is worth noting how he relates the Poet’s decision to buy and use the Versifier: “Venticinque anni fa avevo scritto un racconto poco serio in cui, dopo molte esitazioni deontologiche, un poeta professionale si decide a comprare un Versificatore elettronico e gli delega con successo tutta la sua attività” [“Twenty-five years ago, I wrote a humorous short story in which, after extensive ethical misgivings, a professional poet finally makes up his mind to buy an electronic Versifier and successfully hands off all his work to the machine”] (843-844). Actually, there is no trace of any ethical misgivings in the story; maybe Levi is compensating for the Poet’s deontological shortcomings.

<sup>149</sup> Trans. Alessandra Bastagli and Francesco Bastagli, *Complete Works* 2693.

throughout the essay, another interpretation is possible. Levi's confession that "jealousy and fear" may have led him to dismiss the menace of the computer-poet reads as an implicit denunciation of the propensity of human animals to relate to others through the filter of their self-attributed exceptionalism. Levi's daring imagination and intellectual honesty seem to converge on the conclusion that a Versifier may appear one day, and write "original and worthy poetry."

## 2.2 Machines and Sex as Threats to the Autonomy of the Self

The playful tone employed by Levi in narrating the story of the Versifier contrasts with the bleak existential and narrative parable of Mr. Simpson, the American NATCA representative.

While "The Versifier" deals with ontological and aesthetic concerns, the other NATCA stories get to the core of the moral issues surrounding the coexistence of human animals and machines; the focus of attention are not the machines themselves, but rather the human inclinations to which they pander and the behavior of human subjects after they come in contact with them.

Three are the most notable characters in the NATCA stories: the narrator, Simpson, and a friend of the narrator's called Gilberto. Gilberto recklessly modifies the machines to satisfy his desires: he builds a larger Mimete to duplicate his wife without her consent; he re-calibrates a Calometer using himself as standard of beauty. As Charlotte Ross writes, "He is the personification of an amoral, thoughtless approach to scientific and technological development that does not allow time to predict and account for potential dilemmas" (135). Gilberto is depicted as the epitome of self-interest and disregard for the consequence of one's actions; the sentence that perfectly exemplifies his attitude is the following:

[Gilberto è] un uomo pericoloso, un piccolo prometeo nocivo: è ingegnoso e irresponsabile, superbo e sciocco. È un figlio del secolo, [...] un simbolo del nostro secolo. Ho sempre pensato che sarebbe stato capace, all'occorrenza, di costruire una bomba atomica e di lasciarla cadere su Milano «per vedere che effetto fa». (67-68)<sup>150</sup>

[[Gilberto is] a dangerous man, a noxious little Prometheus - ingenious and irresponsible, brilliant and silly. [...] [H]e is a child of the century [...], a symbol of the century. I always believed him capable, if circumstances permitted, of building an atomic bomb and letting it fall on Milan «to see what would happen.» (466)]

The narrator's explicit condemnation of Gilberto's behavior is likely to divert the attention of the reader from the narrator's ethical shortcomings. After all, is the narrator the first to hint at the possibility of using the Mimete to duplicate a human being: "Era disponibile un Mimete più grosso, da 5 litri, capace di duplicare un gatto? o da 200 litri, capace di duplicare..." ["Was there a bigger Mimete available, a 5-liter size - capable of duplicating a cat? Or a 200-liter size, capable of duplicating..."] (458) (58). At this request, Simpson pales and protests: "«io non sono disposto a seguirla su questo terreno. [...] Io [...] credo nell'anima immortale, credo di possederne una, e non la voglio perdere»" ["«I do not want to pursue this line of inquiry any further with you. [...] I believe in the immortal soul, believe myself to be in possession of one, and do not want to lose it»"] (58). The narrator tries to manipulate the reader by making an accomplice of her; the attempt at

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<sup>150</sup> The combination of the pair of adjectives "superbo e sciocco" with the reference to the current century is a hint to Leopardi's *La ginestra*.

leading the reader to adopt the narrator's point of view is all the more forceful because of the first person narration. The narrator's ideas and his contempt for Simpson's "sciocchi scrupoli moralistici" ["silly moralistic scruples" (459)] (59) show that he is no better than Gilberto, but his disavowal of their moral equivalence suggests how easily human animals trick themselves into self-deception: they could never be trusted with machines that would titillate their worse instincts and increase their potential to do harm, Levi suggests.

Until the end, Simpson seems to be cut from a different and better cloth than the rest of the characters; his reaction to the narrator's idea to use the Mimete to clone human animals is one of the instances in which he proves to be considerate and principled. This is why when, at the very end of the collection, he falls victim to the allure of the Torec, his demise crushes any hope for a positive and productive interaction between human animals and machines in the universe of *Storie naturali* (and, perhaps, beyond).

In the last story, "Trattamento di quiescenza", Simpson becomes a guinea pig for the Torec, the virtual reality device that allows its users to experience secondhand feelings and adventures lived and recorded by other subjects, human or nonhuman. Simpson becomes addicted to the intense vicarious emotions provided by the device and loses everything: "il lavoro, il sonno, la moglie, i libri" ["his job, his sleep, his wife, books" (570)] (175). The only other activity he can still enjoy is reading *Ecclesiastes*:

Nell'*Ecclesiaste* [...] ritrova se stesso e la sua condizione: «... tutti i fiumi corrono al mare, e il mare non s'empie: l'occhio non si sazia mai di vedere, e l'orecchio non si riempie di udire. Quello che è stato sarà, e quello che si farà è già stato fatto, e non vi è nulla di nuovo sotto il sole»; ed ancora: «... dove è molta sapienza, è molta molestia, e chi accresce la scienza accresce il dolore.» (175)

[In *Ecclesiastes* [...] he finds himself and his condition: «All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full... the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. The thing that hath been, it is which shall be; and that which is done it that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.» And more: «For in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.»]

Commenting on the use of this passage from *Ecclesiastes*, Ross writes: "Although this statement might be interpreted as a license for intellectual laziness, here it is incontrovertibly employed as a criticism of recklessly accelerated scientific development, as the double meaning of 'scienza' - 'knowledge' and 'science' - is used to full effect" (138). While I agree with Ross that Levi is not advocating for intellectual laziness, I also argue that the second quotation from *Ecclesiastes* must be read in connection to the first one; taken together, they constitute the perfect conclusion to the story and to the whole collection, as a commentary on the human pursuit of knowledge as an irrepressible urge, for better or for worse. The effects of Torec and the behavior it engenders are similar to those of a drug: for the addict, awareness of the harm it causes is not effective in dissuading from its use. Levi seems to suggest that the pursuit of knowledge and science is similarly fated: awareness of the ills of science cannot stop human thirst and curiosity, which are as unstoppable as rivers running to the sea.

The last paragraph of the story, which comes after the one quoted above, criticizes the vicariousness of the experiences provided by the Torec: "la saggezza di Salomone era stata acquistata con dolore, in una lunga vita piena d'opere e di colpe; quella di Simpson è frutto di un complicato circuito elettronico" ["the wisdom of Solomon was painfully acquired during a long

life full of good deeds and misdeeds; Simpson's is the fruit of a complicated electronic circuit" (571)] (175). I propose to read this ending in contrast with the very first story, "I Mnemagoghi" ["The Mnemagogos"], where a newly minted doctor arrives in the remote little town where he is going to become the primary physician, and meets the old colleague he is about to replace. The colleague presents him with a collection of vials in which he has distilled carefully curated blends of scents, which he has called "mnemagoghi" [mnemagogos], which means "memory evokers" (409), each of them capable of making him relive the emotions that one person, situation, or event has once evoked in him. Each scent, like each memory, is strictly personal: "«sono inevitabilmente personali. Strettissimamente. Si potrebbe anzi dire che *sono* la mia persona, poiché io almeno in parte, consisto di essi»" ["«they are inevitably personal. Strictly so. One might even say they *are* me, since I, at least in part, consist of them»"] (9).<sup>151</sup> The specificity of the memories - their Proustian quality - and their intimate connection to the doctor's life and identity are a sharp contrast with the generic, lendable, infinitely commodifiable experiences offered by the Torec.<sup>152</sup>

The significance of Simpson's addiction to the Torec is illuminated by Hayles' considerations on virtual technologies:

Only if one thinks of the subject as an autonomous self independent of the environment is one likely to experience panic [when faced with virtual technologies]. [...] This view of the self authorizes the fear that if the boundaries are breached at all, there will be nothing to stop the self's complete dissolution. By contrast, when the human is seen as part of a distributed system, the full expression of human capability can be seen precisely to *depend* on the splice rather than being imperiled by it. (*Posthuman* 290)

In *Storie naturali*, Levi's characters are terrified at the prospect of losing control; Simpson's addiction is just a particularly conspicuous example of a more general tendency that often manifests itself in the anxiety about sex. The title of one section from chapter 4 of Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* could nicely summarize the general outlook emerging from the collection: "The Argument for Celibacy: Preserving the Boundaries of the Subject" (108).<sup>153</sup> A kind of argument for celibacy (more precisely, against sexed reproduction) is actually made in a story of *Storie naturali*: in "Il sesto giorno" ["The Sixth Day"], Ormuz, member of a committee entrusted with defining the features of the soon-to-be-born creature called "human being," implores his colleagues to save humanity from the troubles caused by sexed reproduction, strongly advocating for parthenogenesis instead: "«il sesso è [...] in primo luogo una spaventosa complicazione, ed in secondo, una fonte permanente di pericoli e grane»" ["«sex is initially a terrifying complication and subsequently a permanent source of dangers and problems» (547)"] (150). In the stories, anxiety toward sex is ubiquitous. In "Trattamento di quiescenza", the narrator almost attacks Simpson after he suggests him to try a

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<sup>151</sup> Another interesting contrast between the mnemagogos and the Torec is their mode of consumption: the mnemagogos "vanno usati con parsimonia, se non si vuole che il loro potere evocativo si attenui" ["they have to be sparingly, if we don't want to diminish their evocative powers" - 409] (9), while "Il Torec non dà assuefazione, purtroppo: ogni nastro può essere fruito infinite volte, ed ogni volta la memoria genuina si spegne, e si accende la memoria d'accatto che è incisa sul nastro" ["Unfortunately, with the Torec you don't build an immunity: every tape can be used an infinite number of times and each time one's actual memory is turned off, and a secondhand memory is activated" 570] (175). In order to enjoy the delicate effects of the mnemagogos one has to exert frugality, while the Torec allows and even invites unrestrained consumption.

<sup>152</sup> Commodification will be a major theme in Levi's next collection of short stories, *Vizio di forma* (1971).

<sup>153</sup> Ross's chapters on Levi's science fiction (the second part of her book *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment*, from 89 onwards) are mainly devoted to the exploration of sexuality and embodiment; Arielle Saiber reflects on sexuality and science fiction in the Italian context in her essay "Flying Saucers..."

Torec tape labeled with the name of a famous actress; the tape, recorded by the actress during a sexual encounter, would have offered the narrator a vicarious sexual experience with another man. In “Il Versificatore”, the Secretary violently reacts when the machine starts writing its free-themed poem, because the topic (“Una ragazza da portare a letto,” literally “A girl with whom to sleep”) feels inappropriate and personally targeting her, since she is the only woman in the room; in “Quaestio de Centauris”, the centaur Trachi’s “unquenchable sexual urges [...] can be read as a manifestation of [...] a violent sexual desire which we struggle to control since it troubles the veneer of our narratives of civilization” (Ross 151). Sex, in *Storie naturali*, is always a menacing presence, a reminder of our looming closeness to nonhuman animals, of how precarious the boundaries of the self are; both sex and NATCA machines place the characters on the slippery slope evoked by Hayles: when “the boundaries are breached at all, there will be nothing to stop the self’s complete dissolution.”

### 2.3 Coda: “Un vago senso di disagio” - Humans Become Machines

For someone reading “Trattamento di quiescenza” in 2018, a moment could strike as especially uncanny: it is the moment in which a human animal is transfigured into a machine by another machine. The machine in question is not the Torec, but is mentioned by Simpson (without revealing its name) in a digression about the “new frontier” (156) for NATCA inventions:

«L’anno scorso [...] hanno sfornato tutta una serie di apparecchi di misura che dovrebbero sostituire i test d’attitudine e le visite di assunzione [...]. Il candidato entra, *percorre un tunnel come un’auto da lavare*, e quando esce dall’altra parte è già stampata la sua scheda con la qualifica, il punteggio, il profilo mentale, l’IQ [...], le mansioni da proporre e lo stipendio da offrire.» (156, emphasis mine)

[«Last year [...] they churned out a series of measuring devices as substitutes for aptitude tests and hiring interviews [...]. [T]he candidate enters, *goes through a tunnel like a car in a car wash*, and when he comes out the other side, his file is already printed with his qualifications, his classifications, his mental profile, his IQ [...], his proposed duties, and the salary on offer.» (553, emphasis mine)]

This is the only machine for which Simpson feels an instinctive repulsion: “mi [dà] perfino un vago senso di disagio” [“they even give me a vague sense of unease”] (156).<sup>154</sup> If Simpson were among us today, he would find that his uneasiness is shared, among others, by Cathy O’Neil, author of *Weapons of Math Destruction*, a book published in 2016 on the ever growing power of the algorithms:

Ill-conceived mathematical models now micromanage the economy, from advertising to prisons. These WMDs [Weapons of Math Destruction] [...] [are] opaque, unquestioned, and unaccountable, and they operate at a scale to sort, target, or “optimize” millions of people. By confusing their findings with on-the-ground reality, most of them create pernicious WMD feedback loops.<sup>155</sup>

<sup>154</sup> Simpson has some scruples about the Mimete as well, but only after the protagonist suggests possible sinister evolutions for the machine.

<sup>155</sup> Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 12.

The Versifier is yet to be developed, but a few less spectacular and seemingly more innocuous machines are already conditioning our cyber lives. Social media, for instance, with their systems of likes and automatic prioritizations, not only act as Calometers, but can even condition presidential elections.<sup>156</sup> Donna Haraway saw that the origins of cyborg could be troublesome, but chose to be optimistic: “The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins” (293).<sup>157</sup> While, as Haraway pointed out, “Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (316), if the new cyber reality is erected on the same hierarchies and power structures that feed on those dualisms, both structures and dualisms can only be replicated and reinforced. Levi was firm in opposing the fetishization of human reason and its perverse outcomes; fetishizing the rationality of the machine is producing its own set of monsters.<sup>158</sup>

### 3. Paolo Volponi: The Introjection of Nonhuman Animals and the Explosion of the Self

The enterprise in which Gerolamo Aspri/Joaquín Murieta, the protagonist of *Corporale*, engages for half a novel, is the construction of a bunker capable of protecting its dwellers from a nuclear catastrophe. The name Aspri/Murieta gives to the bunker is Arcatana (Arklair) - a name whose first part evokes both an epoch-making and calamitous event threatening the existence of all living beings and the act of saving all animals, human and nonhuman alike. The second part of the name, on the other hand, contradicts the artifactual nature of the object: unlike Noah’s ark, this is also a lair, an animal-made shelter. Accordingly, with *Corporale*, Volponi offers an attempt to reconcile animality and humanness, and this spirit is evident from some of the tentative titles he had conceived for the novel: *Animale* [*Animal*], *Segnali dall’animale* [Signals from the *Animal*], *La traccia dell’animale* [*The Trace of the Animal*] (*Romanzi* 1137), *Liberare l’animale* [*Liberating the Animal*] (Ferretti 2); in all these cases, the “animal” of the title would have referred to the human protagonist. In the following sections I will investigate the nature of Volponi’s particular blend of humanness and animality, clarifying the role played by the nonhuman other in Volponi’s narrative and theoretical works.<sup>159</sup> I will then reveal why Volponi’s animal-like character is none other than a cyborg under false pretenses.

#### 3.1 Appropriation and Gendering of the Nonhuman Other

A good point of departure is the essay, “Natura e animale” (“Nature and Animal”), written in 1982. The essay is a passionate account of the progressive disappearance of nature and nonhuman animals from the lives of human beings: according to Volponi, in the world in which he lives they are obliterated or domesticated, reduced to pure resources, commodified; nobody is able to feel any genuine connection with them anymore, with the exception of poets. The first part of the essay

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<sup>156</sup> It is not difficult to spot in pop culture and current events facts that may well have come straight from Levi’s science fiction stories; here I will mention the social-media-like devices at the center of the episode “Nosedive” (2016) of the science fiction anthology series *Black Mirror* as grandnephews of the Calometer. The role of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica in the 2016 American elections may have surprised even Primo Levi.

<sup>157</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 291-324.

<sup>158</sup> On Levi and the necessity to limit and regulate science, see Ross 128-129; Antonello 103-115.

<sup>159</sup> Gian Carlo Ferretti, *Volponi* (Firenze: Il Castoro, 1972).

reads as a nostalgic tribute to a time when nature and animals played an active role in the lives of humans - as companions, but mostly as valuable opponents, as entities to vanquish in order to survive. In describing the lost relationship between human and nonhuman beings, and the kind of “poetic relation” that poets can still entertain with animals and nature, Volponi’s imagery is tinged with sexual undertones: “L’animale era soprattutto un compagno che si cercava, che si voleva stretto, confidente, che si poteva possedere come penetrare, mangiare, assorbirne la forza, la purezza, cacciarlo e catturarlo, proprio per possederlo; ucciderlo piuttosto che vederlo scappare” [“Most of all, the animal was a companion which one sought; which one wanted close, a confidant; which one could possess as well as penetrate, eat, absorb its power, its purity; hunt and capture it, precisely to possess it; kill it rather than see it fleeing”] (*Romanzi II* 688); poets can still see nature as “un corpo grandissimo, aperto, bellissimo, penetrabile, però, amabile, possedibile” [“an immense body, open, beautiful, but penetrable, lovable, possessable”] (687), and each nonhuman animal as “anche dolce corpo anche conquistabile” [“also sweet body also conquerable”] (688).

The combination of eroticism and violence that transpires from these considerations on nature and nonhuman animals replicates the dynamics of desire that are often at play in narrative works. The gendered nature of the desiring gaze is the object of the fifth chapter of *Alice Doesn't*, where Teresa De Lauretis describes the “mythical-textual mechanics” (118) according to which

the hero must be male, regardless of the gender of the text-image, because the obstacle, whatever its personification, is morphologically female and indeed, simply, the womb. [...] Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter.<sup>160</sup> (119)

The characteristics that Volponi attributes to nature and nonhuman animals are those stereotypically employed to describe women: beauty, sweetness, and availability, not to mention their “penetrability.” Nonhuman animals and nature play a supporting role to the main human (supposedly male) actants (they can be their “confidants”), when they do not offer resistance: in this latter case, they are the enemies to beat, a space to conquer and occupy. Their status as “enemies” does not deprive them of agency, but does imply that their defeat (be it in the form of appropriation, killing, or taming) represents the desired narrative outcome, the hoped-for happy ending. They are regarded, in the words of De Lauretis, as “matter,” specifically as mere bodies (nature is “un corpo grandissimo” [“an immense body”], 687; nonhuman animals are “anche dolce corpo” [“also sweet body”], 688).

Even in a society where the physical proximity with nonhuman animals is lost, human animals find a way to prevail in the perennial confrontation with them, by appropriating and introjecting their force and their spirit:

[L]a natura e l’animale [...] sono stati assunti, introitati, spinti giù, sedimentati, assorbiti dalle interiora, dalla mucosa dell’animo dell’uomo che dentro di sé si è [...] immagazzinata ogni elemento, aspetto, suono, voce della natura, i venti, le spiagge, fiumi, le foreste [...], come per fortificarsene [...]. Insieme s’è introiettato anche l’animale, tutti i suoi istinti, la sua voracità [...], le piume, i singulti, gli assalti, gli amori, le stagioni, gli agguati. (692-693)

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<sup>160</sup> Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1987). While I find De Lauretis’ general argument very compelling, in addition to being pertinent to Volponi’s specific case, I argue that the phrase “regardless of the gender of the text-image” runs the risk of pre-determining the interpretation of any narrative actualization, due to an essentialistic view that borders on circular reasoning.



[Nature and animal [...] have been assimilated, introjected, pushed down, sedimented, absorbed by the entrails, by the mucosa of the soul of man, which has stockpiled inside of itself every element, aspect, sound, voice of nature, winds, shores, rivers, forests [...], as if to fortify itself with it [...]. It has introjected the animal also, all its instincts, its voracity [...], feathers, sobs, assaults, loves, seasons, ambushes.]

The act of introjecting nonhuman animals resembles ritual cannibalism, a violent way to assimilate the qualities of the enemy.<sup>161</sup> It can be read as the ultimate acknowledgment of the worth of the opponent, but undeniably signals how unilateral the relation between human and nonhuman animals is: although, as we read in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, Volponi sees the two realms as existing in a continuum (“La natura l’animale e l’uomo sono [...] intimamente connessi e stretti. Non sono fasi diverse e distinte della creazione del mondo; ma entità comprese nella stessa esplosione e materia interagenti tra loro” [“Nature animal and man are [...] intimately connected and tightly so. They are not different, distinct phases of creation, but entities that are included in the same explosion and matter, and that interact with each other,”] 688), nonhuman animals are the unilateral recipients of an objectifying and predatory gaze.

The representation of nonhuman animals in *Corporale* is consistent with the conception of animality expressed in the essay. The nonhuman animals Aspri/Murieta meets share two main characteristics: they are mostly generic specimens and they live in a state of subservience to their human counterparts.

A prominent setting in the second part of *Corporale* is the zoo, where Aspri/Murieta’s encounters with the caged nonhuman animals are sources of inspiration: “anch’io ad un certo punto potrei isolarmi, fare i conti con me stesso, trovare un giaciglio [...], una tana. [...] Tana, capanna, buco [...]. E [...] vorrei ritrovare infinite mosse e possibilità e tanti muscoli, se guardo gli orsi, e perfino la coda e la prensilità dei piedi” [“at a certain point I could isolate myself as well, deal with myself, find a pallet [...], a lair. [...] Lair, shack, hole [...]. And [...] I would like to retrieve countless gestures and possibilities and many muscles, if I look at the bears, and even the tail and the prehensility of the feet”] (170-171).<sup>162</sup> Aspri/Murieta’s admiration for the features of the bears, the lions, the birds, the monkeys translates into a desire to replicate their habits and their physical qualities, in order to construct a new body and a new identity. Espace, the female dog whom, as we are about to see, he names, possesses limbs he would like to integrate into the provisional and everchanging collage that is his desired body: “vorrei avere qualcosa di Espace: i suoi lunghi muscoli, il suo posteriore stretto da corridore: impiegare due ore per andare di corsa a Rimini e tornare” [“I would like to have something Espace has: her long muscles, her tight backside, as a runner: running to Rimini and coming back would take two hours”] (513). The self-referential character of this appropriation is made explicit at the end of the scene at the zoo: “Aspri si tolse dalla contemplazione degli orsi e di se stesso” [“Aspri moved away from the contemplation of the bears and of himself”] (171). The same narcissistic drive, later in the narration, motivates Aspri/Murieta’s impromptu and failed attempt to free the lions from their cages: “mise mano al chiavistello e [...] adagio adagio, esaltato dal riconoscimento di se stesso, cominciò a sfilarlo” [“he put his hand on the latch and [...] started to pull it out, nice and slowly, exalted because he recognized himself”] (287). What the zoo offers to the protagonist is an occasion to ruminate on

<sup>161</sup> Laurence Goldman, *The Anthropology of Cannibalism* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1999), 16.

<sup>162</sup> The choice of the verb “ritrovare” [“retrieve”] frames this fantasy as an imaginary return to the origins; here the tail is not charged with the negative implications that I will examine in section 3.2.

his identity and his desires; nonhuman animals are holding a mirror to him, and all he can see in it is a possible version of himself: their gazes never intersect, no confrontation with their alterity takes place.

If the canaries that Aspri/Murieta keeps caged at the site of the Arcatana as live predictors of earthquakes - and that he unceremoniously throws away when they are agonizing or dead (581) - confirm the exploitative character of the relation he establishes with nonhuman animals, the story of how he names the dog Espace also further proves its gendered nature. In the second part of the novel, Aspri/Murieta and Overath become part of a racket gang that counts, among other activities, drug trafficking and illegal dog fights. The only nonhuman animals who have names in the novel are the dogs whom the gang employs in fights; their names, chosen by the gang members, are purely functional, since they have to evoke feelings in the potential bettors: “«Pensate alla cagna *Paura* contro la quale tutti punteranno»” [“«Think of the dog *Fear*, against which everyone will bet»”] (232), says Overath. Other names are *Rabbia* [Rage], *Peste* [Plague], *Cattiveria* [Cruelty]: “«Queste sono universali categorie della mente di ciascuno, di tutti, sotto qualsiasi clima e regime, muovono il mondo»” [“These are universal categories of everybody’s mind, under any climate or regime, they make the world go round”] (235). Some time after the mass naming of the dogs has taken place, Aspri/Murieta chooses the dog *Paura* as his favorite and re-names her Espace. The name comes from an erotic photograph that the dog trainer has just shown him: on the photograph, a nude Tunisian woman lies down with her legs open, holding in a hand a curved dagger with an undecipherable incision (293). Aspri/Murieta decides that the incision reads as the French word “espace,” and a few moments later assigns that name to the dog: “«Espace, [...] la chiamerò Espace, come la tunisina»” [“«Espace, [...] I will call her Espace, as the Tunisian woman»”] (294). In one single gesture, he renames both the woman (whose real name remains unknown) and the dog - exercising the symbolic power that male human animals have had starting from Genesis. This episode connects female human and nonhuman beings in their status as objects of erotic, unilateral enjoyment and appropriation; it is only fitting that the reason behind the choice of the name reveals to be functional to the self-reflection of a male hero who is trying to establish his trajectory in life: “Espace [...]: da tutte le azioni dell’ultimo periodo proprio una specie di spazio sfondato l’aveva separato. Gli occorreva quindi organizzarsi [...] in modo da poter dominare [...] la serie degli avvenimenti e indirizzarla verso il fine” [“Espace [...]: a sort of broken-through space was just what had separated him from all his actions of the last period. He needed to get organized then [...], in order to be able to dominate [...] the series of events and direct it toward the goal”] (296).

Another circumstance revolving around the act of naming hints to a further affinity between female human and nonhuman animals. In both the first and the second part of the novel, Aspri/Murieta’s love interests are women called Ivana. Neither of them is described in enough details to be easily identifiable, but since the “first” Ivana seemingly dies during a storm (her body is never found) in the first chapter, it is reasonable to believe that the “second” Ivana is a different woman. Choosing the same name for these two different and barely distinguishable characters conflates the two, depriving them of their singularity, making them the expressions of the protagonist’s version of the eternal feminine. A question that the dog trainer asks the protagonist confirms this impression: “«Ma non sei tu che chiami le donne tutte con lo stesso nome?»” [“«Aren’t you the one who calls all women by the same name?»”] (294).<sup>163</sup> Neither Ivana nor

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<sup>163</sup> In the third chapter, as we are about to see, the name does change, and the protagonist’s love interest is called Imelde. Two of the tentative titles for *Corporale* were *Olimpia* and *Id e Olimpia* [*Id and Olimpia*]; it is possible to argue

nonhuman animals are endowed with what Derrida defines “unsubstitutable singularity” (*Animal* 378); on the contrary, they are “representative[s], or ambassador[s], carrying [an] immense symbolic responsibility” (*Animal* 378). Nonhuman animals, in Volponi’s narrative and nonfictional universe, are strictly relegated to the symbolic realm; they elicit admiration, envy, and nostalgia because they are living vestiges of an evolutionary past free of reins and obligations: “felice irresponsabilità che l’uomo invidia. [...] Irresponsabilità [...] di chi non ha gli obblighi che sono invece imposti dalla società, dalla cultura, dall’essere diventato un presuntuoso regnante eretto, che cammina su due piedi e con pensiero, progetti, lingua, ecc.” [“happy irresponsibility that man envies. [...] Irresponsibility [...] of those who do not have the obligations that are imposed by society, by culture, by having become a boastful erect sovereign, who walks on two feet and with thought, projects, language, etc.”] (*Opere II* 688). Nonhuman animals’ “irresponsibility” is strictly connected to the prevalence of instinct over reason; it is not by chance that two of the entries in Aspri/Murieta’s “new vocabulary” (in addition to “Garibaldi,” “selve” [“forests”], “alberi” [“trees”], and “strada” [“road”]) are “animale=id” [“animal=id”] (436) and “id=animale sconosciuto” [“id= unknown animal”] (437), equating animality with the most instinctual part of human psyche.

While Volponi’s representation of animality is completely blind to the gaze of the nonhuman other and falls prey to humanistic platitudes, the central role played by corporeality and by the protagonist’s “inner animal” as active epistemological tools constitutes a clear challenge to the Cartesian body/mind divide. The next section is devoted to the analysis of the role of corporeality in *Corporale*.

### 3.2 Mutations and Hybridity: The Bomb as a Threat and as a Palingenic Dream

The equation between animality and instinctuality is evident in the representation of the protagonist; he asserts his presence in the diegetic landscape by obsessively pursuing the satisfaction of his sexual appetites, which at times transfigures him into a nonhuman animal in heat: “Corsi per Urbino, [...] ma seppi che in giro non avrei trovato nessuna prostituta. Questo rese ancora più forte il mio desiderio. Fui spinto a correre per tutta la città [...]: annusavo, ansavo, ritornavo su me stesso e giravo” [“I ran through Urbino, [...] but I realized that I wouldn’t have found any prostitute around. This made my desire even stronger. I was forced to run all around the city [...]: I sniffed, I panted, I would come back to myself and turn”] (350). In every chapter Aspri/Murieta sleeps with every woman he fancies, he masturbates, he is physically “pulled” by his penis (in the quotation above he is “forced” to run around to find a prostitute).<sup>164</sup> The protagonist and the other characters are often portrayed as they eat, they defecate and urinate and vomit; their bodies sweat copiously; their smell is often noted. Aspri/Murieta employs the whole human sensorium to make sense of the world around him; in particular, and especially in the first part, the smell of someone or something compels him to get close to that person or thing. The descriptions of bodies and bodily discharges, and the details of the sensations transmitted by the senses - even by those usually considered to be less “noble” and more animalesque and primeval such as smell and taste - are contiguous to political and philosophical reflections, so as to suggest not only a comparable

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that Olimpia may have acted as a figure for generic femininity in the same way in which the word “Animal” in other tentative titles may have stood for generic animality.

<sup>164</sup> Aspri/Murieta’s penis is most often called “vasel.” I could not find any explanation or precedent for this term, therefore it seems to have been invented by Volponi; the only plausible derivation I could imagine is from the term “vasello:” “usato anche come termine anatomico, piccolo vaso sanguifero” [“used also as an anatomical term, little blood vessel”]. <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/vasello/>

narrative value and dignity, but also a thinning of the distinction between nature and culture. The next passage, from the very first pages of the book, reads as a declaration of poetic intent; it comes right after a scene where Aspri/Murieta goes into a café following the smell of a man:

Nel mezzo del cammin... il contatto con il proprio corpo è completo com'è vigile: segue ogni piccolo evento, fisso a tutte le pieghe e ripercussioni su tutte le fibre e su ogni lembo, e fino alla formulazione e poi alla evidenza di un pensiero critico e quindi di una storia e di una diagnosi anche a proposito dell'evento più piccolo, quale può essere un singhiozzo. (6)

[Midway upon the journey... the contact with one's own body is complete as is alert: it follows any small event, fixed to all the creases and the repercussions on all the fibers and on every limb, until the formulation and then the evidence of critical thinking and therefore of a story and of a diagnosis even about the smallest event, such as a hiccup.<sup>165</sup>]

This passage, which starts by quoting what is arguably the most famous *incipit* in Italian literature, from the quintessential canonic title, establishes a connection between body and thought (“pensiero critico” [“critical thinking”]), and between body and storytelling (“una storia” [“a story”], “una diagnosi” [“a diagnosis”]). Even Dante, the author-narrator-character of the *Divine Comedy*, starts his opus by hinting at human mortality, and evoking age by means of a figure whose signifier is the physical act of walking - “il contatto con il proprio corpo” [“the contact with one's own body”], Volponi indicates, is ineluctable and inseparable from aesthetic invention. Another passage connecting abstract and concrete, corporeal and theoretical, thoughts and body and writing is the following: “i pensieri mi sgorgano dalle vene, sono ormai una prova e una necessità del corpo. Spesso [...] mi pare di aver trovato insieme a un preziosissimo sangue, un principio vero; il verbo” [“thoughts run from my veins, they are a proof and a necessity of the body by now. Often [...] it seems to me that, with a most precious blood, I also found a real principle; the verb”] (84).

In *Corporale*, sensuous perceptions acquire a thick, material-like quality: “Il sole a quell'ora viene giù a sghimbescio, d'inverno molle pure lui: fruscia come sciarpa merdosa o come merda sciarposa” [“At that time the sun comes down crookedly; in winter it, too, is flaccid: it swishes as a shit-like scarf or as scarf-like shit”] (264); time makes its presence felt by appealing to senses: “le trafitture delle lancette dell'orologio” [“the cuts of the hands of the clock”], “Fuori il tempo scroscia” [“outside time pours down”] (267); light is an animate element that sculpts the objects and darkness swallows them up: “Il [...] sacco di luce giuocava già con il colore e con le correnti d'aria del cielo dentro e fuori i vuoti del campanile” [“The [...] sack of light was already playing with the color and with the wind streams of the sky, inside and outside the voids of the belfry”], “I pergolati, le strade e le case erano ormai cancellati dall'oscurità [...]. I rumori invece [...] frugavano dappertutto, come se tutto ciò che era scuro fosse vuoto” [“Vines, roads, houses were already erased by darkness [...]. Noises instead [...] rummaged everywhere, as if everything that was dark were empty”] (70); “Ebbe paura di quel buio che stringeva la stanza dilatandosi come una materia misteriosa” [“He became afraid of that darkness that constricted the room by expanding like a mysterious substance”] (285-286). This sort of enhanced synesthesia causes perceptions to feel almost tangible; as a result, as happens in Tozzi's *Bestie*, objects and natural phenomena participate in the narration in an active way, as if redistributing agency and causing human animals to be one among many actants - I will come back to this point later in this chapter.

<sup>165</sup> “Midway upon the journey” is the *incipit* of Longfellow's translation of the *Inferno*.

According to Daniele Fioretti, Volponi makes a case for equating animality, corporeality, and humanness:

[W]e see a revaluation of the corporeal aspects of human life as a way to experience the world. Paradoxically, for Volponi, man is more ‘human’ when he is ‘corporeal,’ or in other words, when he is deeply in touch with his body and totally aware of his animality. The revaluation is closely connected to animality and to the hybridization of the human being. (151)<sup>166</sup>

Aspri/Murieta is without any doubt a human animal of a peculiar kind, but his degree of humanness as related to his animality and corporeality is actually difficult to assess without a baseline. If, for instance, we take as working model of (narrative) “human” Debenedetti’s *personaggio-uomo*, Aspri/Murieta can hardly fit the definition; instead, he is related to those *personaggi-particella* deprived of destiny and purpose: his sole objective is to survive, possibly to mutate; his whole enterprise (building the Arcatana) implies embracing the absence of any possible known future. Corporeality and animality deprive the protagonist of any sense of purpose; in fact, they lead him to live in the moment, to act in order to satisfy his urgings, limiting his horizon to the “here and now.”

If we were to think of the protagonist’s redefined humanness, enriched by corporeality and animality, as a possible ethical and political tool to oppose commodification and the technological progress that has led to the inevitability of the atomic bomb, we would not be satisfied with its effectiveness, as Emanuele Zinato notices:

il corpo e la natura non si fanno solo metafora della resistenza ultima dell’animalità alla bomba ma anche di una più vasta lacerazione sociale che non risparmia le ragioni dell’inconscio. [...] La natura, in *Corporale*, non può divenire vero rifugio, così come il corpo è impossibilitato a tradursi in vera alternativa alla mercificazione globale e alla frammentazione tecnologica.<sup>167</sup> (43)

[body and nature become metaphors not only of the ultimate resistance of animality to the bomb, but also of a wider social laceration that does not spare the motivations of the unconscious. [...] Nature, in *Corporale*, cannot become a real refuge, just as body cannot possibly convert into a real alternative to global commodification and technological fragmentation.]

I argue that the main reason for which embracing corporeality (and, I would add, animality) as an antidote to commodification is destined to fail, is Volponi’s very model of the relationship of humans to nature and nonhuman animals, which is predicated on the same exploitative logic it may try to counteract. The actions of Aspri/Murieta in *Corporale* are consistent with Volponi’s approach to the nonhuman other as outlined in the essay “Natura e animale:” he preys on nonhuman others and fellow human beings (especially of the female variety, as we are about to see), and aims at appropriating their strength.<sup>168</sup> As regards his positioning himself in relation to

<sup>166</sup> Daniele Fioretti, “Foreshadowing the Posthuman: Hybridization, Apocalypse, and Renewal in Paolo Volponi,” in *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, ed. Deborah Amberson and Elena Past (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 145-158.

<sup>167</sup> Emanuele Zinato, *Volponi* (Palermo: Palumbo, 2001).

<sup>168</sup> Among the female characters, only Imelde is able to resist effectively to the protagonist’s attempt at introjecting her.

the external world, Aspri/Murieta is still very much the male human keeping his place at the center of the narration and of the universe.<sup>169</sup>

Fioretti's statement that *Corporale* proposes a "reevaluation of the corporeal aspects of human life," and that this reevaluation is connected to animality and hybridization, deserves a closer inspection as well. It is true that the novel makes a case for the inclusion of corporeality as part of the human experience, even suggesting the interconnectedness of sensuous perceptions and theoretical production; but the idea of Aspri/Murieta's imagined hybridization cannot be abstracted from the context in which it takes shape: the terror of and the obsession with the atomic bomb casts its long shade from the epigraph, which is a quotation from Elsa Morante's *Pro o contro la bomba atomica* [*For or against the Atomic Bomb*]: "La nostra bomba è il fiore, ossia la espressione naturale della nostra società contemporanea, così come i dialoghi di Platone lo sono della città greca, [...] e i campi di sterminio, della cultura piccolo borghese burocratica già infetta da una rabbia di suicidio atomico" ["Our bomb is the flower, scilicet the natural expression of our contemporary society, just as Plato's dialogues are expression of the Greek city, [...] and extermination camps of bureaucratic, petit bourgeois culture already infected by a rage of nuclear suicide"] (*Corporale*, epigraph).<sup>170</sup> The tone and imagery of Morante's passage is consonant with the spirit informing *Corporale*: the bomb is a "flower" organically growing from specific historical, political, and economical circumstances; it is as inevitable as the loss of hope in contemporary society. Commenting on the creation of *Corporale*, Volponi mentions the fear of the bomb as the first idea behind its conception: "Doveva essere la fobia psicanalitica di un uomo che teme un'esplosione atomica e che si prepara a diventare una cosa diversa, a mutare anche biologicamente, a risorgere magari con un occhio solo, con la coda, le squame, senza le braccia" ["It had to be the psychoanalytic phobia of a man who worries about an atomic explosion and gets ready to become something different, to mutate even biologically, to resurrect perhaps with one eye only, with a tail, with scales, with no arms"] (*Giorno* 3).<sup>171</sup> Aspri/Murieta's openness to mutation and hybridization is a reaction to a catastrophic event and a surrender to the idea that any form of resistance would be futile; it is an emergency plan, the only way to survive the Apocalypse:

«Lo sa che gli abitanti di Hiroshima ancora non credono agli scienziati che continuano a dire che non nascerà niente di diverso, nessun mostro, né uomo, né pianta? [...] Io sono pronto a mutare: voi no. E così vi fregherà la bomba che avete prefabbricato: la quale esplodendo metterà in atto regole e reazioni diverse da quelle della vostra bella comunità.» (261)

[«Do you know that residents of Hiroshima still don't believe scientists, who keep saying that nothing different will be born - no monster, neither man nor plant? [...] I am ready to mutate: you people are not. And the bomb you have prefabricated, that's how it will fool you: by exploding, it will put in place rules and reactions different from those of your fine community.»]

The quotation above indicates Aspri/Murieta's willingness to mutate, which sets him apart from his fellow humans, but also suggests that the nuclear explosion may result in a palingenesis: the "rules and reactions" of the new world would be of a different kind. At the end of the novel,

<sup>169</sup> In the next section we will see that this centrality is not uncomplicated, since Aspri/Murieta's identity and selfhood are fundamentally compromised.

<sup>170</sup> Volponi's own obsession with the atomic bomb is evident from plot elements of other novels of his; most notably, the earth-shattering explosion at the end of *La macchina mondiale* (1965), and the premise to *Il pianeta irritabile* (1978), set in a world devastated after a nuclear apocalypse.

<sup>171</sup> Corrado Stajano, "Questo pazzo signor Aspri," *Il Giorno*, February 21, 1974, 3.

however, no bomb explodes. Aspri/Murieta holds his very last conversation with a young, nameless doctor friend who seems to be a younger version of himself, and who delivers the words that close the exchange: “Non ci sarà nessuna fine del mondo. Non c’è più il teatro sufficiente e nemmeno gli attori. Non c’è la grandiosità necessaria” [“There will be no end of the world. There isn’t an adequate theater or actors. There isn’t the necessary grandiosity”] (639). A few paragraphs later, Aspri/Murieta disappears, the world does not suddenly end; after being deprived of any hope in the present of civilization, the reader is also left with no hope for a mutated, hybridized future. The doctor’s remarks can also be read as a disenchanting meta-literary commentary on the power of invention and on the inability of literature and art to effect change in the world.

One last clue about Volponi’s complex position on hybridity and animality comes once again from the essay “Natura e animale.” Volponi identifies the advent and eventual dominance of Christianity as one of the major factors determining the separation of human animals from nonhuman animals and nature:

[I]l cristianesimo non ha un gran rapporto con la natura, diciamo un rapporto profondamente conoscitivo, con la natura, di interesse e qualità scientifici, tant’è vero che fa delle sue bellezze addirittura delle tentazioni e dei peccati e che allontana l’animale e lo condanna all’imperfezione di essere, poverino [...], del tutto diverso dall’immagine di Dio, e quindi piuttosto diabolico, coperto [...] di orridi peli, zanne, corna, portatore di artigli, ecc., e soprattutto della coda; e la coda è la caratteristica principale del diavolo. [...] Quella era l’elemento di assoluta identità che non poteva essere mai celato. (691-692)

[Christianity does not have a great relation with nature, let’s say a deeply cognitive relation, of scientific interest and quality; in fact, it even makes nature’s beauties into temptations and sins, and pushes away the animal and condemns it to the imperfection of being, poor thing, [...] completely different from God’s image, and therefore rather diabolic, covered [...] in hideous hairs, fangs, horns, bearer of claws, etc., and especially of the tail; and the tail is the main feature of the devil. [...] That was the element of absolute identity that could never be concealed.]

Volponi’s critique of the approach of Christianity to nature and nonhuman animals revolves around its irrationality and its moralistic undertones. Christianity does not see nonhuman animals as they are; its gaze automatically transfigures them into emblems of imperfection and moral distance from God. The tail is the element that identifies the animal: diabolic and disgusting, meant to provoke both a moral and a visceral physical reaction. The tail reappears at the end of the essay, which, unlike *Corporale*, ends with the vision of a post-atomic world where human animals have disappeared and evolution has led species to adapt to the new ecosystem. In this new environment, the descendants of rats “have become the world’s leading carnivores” (Econ), and Volponi comments:

È come se dentro ciascuno di noi il vecchio topo unto, di fogna, quello che fa schifo e dà ripugnanza anche ai poeti, la parte più brutta dell’animale introiettato, prendesse il sopravvento, mutandosi del tutto in questo, nei suoi aspetti più repellenti e celati, per la sua diabolica, unta sessualità irrefrenata [...]: da farci spuntare a poco a poco la più immonda e la più sfacciata delle code. (697-698)<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Volponi elaborates on a book review that he read (and saw) in *The Economist* (“Nature Books,” Review of *After Man*, by Dougal Dixon. *The Economist*, January 9, 1982, 85). It is the review of *After Man* by Dougal Dixon, an illustrated

[It is as if inside everyone of us the old sewer rat - greasy, disgusting and repugnant even to poets, the ugliest part of the introjected animal - gained the upper hand, by mutating completely into this thing, in all its most repellent and concealed aspects, for its diabolic, greasy unrestrained sexuality [...]: so much so that it would make us grow, little by little, the most obscene and impudent of all tails.]<sup>173</sup>

In closing the essay, Volponi adopts toward nonhuman animals the same attitude for which he has just blamed Christianity: he charges one of them in particular, the rat, with being morally and physically repellent - both attributes that depend on a purely human perspective, devoid of any “scientific” objectivity. From the Christian *repertoire*, Volponi borrows also the image of the tail, vivid representation of the repulsion the rat is meant to inspire, diabolic aura included.<sup>174</sup> The essays ends with one last exploitation of the nonhuman animal, the reduction to a symbol for rhetorical effect.

The adjective is “irrefrenata” [“unrestrained”] to describe the sexuality of the rat is of particular interest as we move to the next section. What distinguishes human animals from their nonhuman companions, according to Volponi, is the ability to “raise above the programs of their species,” programs such as their instincts. In *Corporale*, the behavior of the protagonist and the relations he entertains with the world around him seem often to lack this peculiarly human characteristic.

### 3.3 What if We Were Never in Control? Humans Become Cyborgs

[I]o cerco soltanto un confine di ciò che è vero intorno e addosso a me: mi sforzo, come questo motore sull’autostrada, di dire che cerco un rapporto con la realtà. [...] La mia esistenza è meccanica, rovesciata in tanti esemplari, rotti, rifiutati. (158)

[I’m just looking for a boundary of what’s true around me and on me: I’m trying, like this engine on the highway, to say that I’m looking for a relation with reality. [...] My existence is mechanical, spilled into many samples, broken, rejected.]

The atomic bomb is not deployed in *Corporale*; what does explode, however, are the conventional notions of identity, subjectivity, and autonomy that inform the humanistic idea of a human being, which translate for instance into the Debenedettian notion of *personaggio-uomo*. The quotation above shows Aspri/Murieta struggling to pinpoint the separation between himself and the world, trying to carve his own space among the objects, beings, elements surrounding him. The split between Gerolamo Aspri and Joaquín Murieta (the party affiliate and the revolutionary, the social man and the lonely wolf), and their ambiguous coexistence, are only the most evident signs of instability of

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book that was meant to popularize evolution by imagining a post-nuclear future world populated by species that have evolved from the ones existing now. The review is pretty succinct and matter-of-fact, it does not convey any sense of terror nor mentions any details about the sexuality of the animals. Volponi has seemingly elaborated on the image reproduced in *The Economist*, representing the fight between a falanx (descendant of rats) and a rabbuck (descendant of rabbits).

<sup>173</sup> The grammar constructions in this passage are fairly shaky in the original as well. I tried to reproduce the spirit of the Italian original without explaining too much.

<sup>174</sup> I would argue that with this ending Volponi in a sense deflects responsibility for the most repugnant aspects of human nature from human animals to the introjected nonhuman ones.



the protagonist's identity.<sup>175</sup> Moreover, by equating a human animal to an engine and by hinting at the mechanical nature of his existence, the narrator erodes the barrier between organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, a dear friend and esteemed colleague, whose opinions Volponi sought and cherished, wrote one of the most acute, if critical, commentaries on *Corporale*.<sup>176</sup> According to Emanuele Zinato, his alarmed criticism revolved around the dissolution of the character as a clear unit and the consequent impossibility of narrative as realistic representation:

Pasolini considerò pericolosa ed eccessivamente «impura» la giustapposizione di affastellamento autoanalitico e di affollamento ideologico: non vide di buon occhio l'alternarsi gemellare, accanto ad Aspri, del ribelle Murieta. Omissioni, balzi logici e temporali, equivalenze e sostituzioni generavano inoltre continui effetti [...] di alterazione del processo di focalizzazione [...] interna, caro a Pasolini. Distruggendo l'unità psicologica del personaggio, Volponi finiva col dissolvere cioè l'istanza realistica della narrazione [...]. (*Romanzi I* 1144)

[Pasolini considered dangerous and excessively «impure» the combination of self-analytic bundling and ideological teeming: he did not view favorably the alternation of Aspri and the rebel Murieta. Moreover, omissions, logical and temporal leaps, equivalences, and substitutions generated continuous effects [...] of alteration of the process of internal [...] focalization, dear to Pasolini. By destroying the psychological wholeness of the character, Volponi ended up dissolving the realistic quality of the narration [...].]

As Pasolini's criticism implies, the entire novel can be read as an exploration of Aspri/Murieta's "psychological [non-]wholeness;" the reader never really knows the motivations behind his actions - sometimes they can be ascribed to instinctual drives; other times, he acts according to signs and cryptic messages that he finds around him (signs whose interpretation is not shared with the reader) and that transform him into a sentient machine looking for instructions to follow, and sometimes pausing while he waits for the universe to send him an indication on how to proceed:

Sul margine esterno delle pietre sono segnati i punti cardinali. Questo ulteriore segno non mi ha sorpreso: anzi ha immediatamente aperto il mio animo alla felicità del mio progetto. (365)  
[On the external edge of the rocks, the cardinal points are marked. This further sign hasn't surprised me: actually, it has immediately opened my soul to the joy of my project.]

Il viaggio fu lento perché Gerolamo cercava segni lungo la strada. [...] [Q]uel marzo era di un verde cupo, con delle linfe autunnali che l'invernata non aveva estinto. Questa [...] gli si parò davanti come la prima prova di una verità importante, ancora velata dalle scorie del fondo dal quale proveniva, ma sicura. La prova di una specie di superamento del reale, almeno per come lui l'aveva considerato. (577-578)

[The journey was slow because Gerolamo was looking for signs along the road. [...] That March was a gloomy green, with autumnal saps that winter had not extinguished. This [...]

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<sup>175</sup> An existence that is characterized as "rovesciata in tanti esemplari, rotti, rifiutati" ["spilled into many samples, broken, rejected"] has lost (or has never had) that uniqueness and wholeness that usually defines the liberal humanistic subject. These many discarded parts may well be on the assembly line, which reinforces the affinity between human animals and inorganic products.

<sup>176</sup> For a history of the reception of *Corporale*, see *Romanzi I*, 1157-1167.

suddenly appeared in front of him as the first proof of an important truth, still veiled by the residues of the bottom from which it came, but certain. The proof of a kind of overcoming of reality, at least in the way he had considered it.]

Meglio aspettare un assestamento e prepararsi a coglierne i significati. (586)  
[Better to wait for an acclimation and get ready to catch its meanings.]

L'onda dei colori [...] forma[va] una scrittura intorno alla torre. Gerolamo alzò gli occhi e porse attenzione a quel codice. (610)  
[The wave of colors [...] was forming some writing around the tower. Gerolamo raised his eyes and paid attention to that code.]

I segni si susseguivano ed egli era svuotato dal fervore delle circostanze e dal timore che potessero mutare. (635)  
[Signs were coming in succession and he was emptied by the frenzy of the circumstances and by the fear that they could mutate.]

Given Aspri/Murieta's machine-like characterization, it is hardly surprising that the only enterprise in which he completely succeeds is becoming a master of billiards, a game based on precise geometries and entirely predictable outcomes:

[E]ro bravo, funzionale, come una macchina. Le palle mi ubbidivano come parte del mio corpo e quando andavano a collocarsi secondo l'ordine che autonomamente il mio corpo aveva deciso, ne avevo una soddisfazione concreta. [...] Le palle del bigliardo mi ubbidivano totalmente [...]. La stecca era un organo estroflesso [...]. (534-535)

[I was good, functional, as a machine. The balls obeyed me as part of my body, and when they would go to place themselves according to the order that my body had autonomously decided, my satisfaction was concrete. [...] Billiard balls obeyed me completely [...]. The cue was an extroflexed organ [...].]

The cue becomes a prosthesis and a proxy, at one with Aspri/Murieta's body, ready to receive instructions and act accordingly, precisely like its handler. The protagonist's passivity intensifies toward the end of the narration, as does the pleasure he takes in this condition; when, after a serious injury, he is hospitalized, he revels in his condition of immobility, accepting to become an object in the hands of others: "Si sentiva l'oggetto docile di questa tabella ben congegnata. [...] Affidato al letto, sentiva di far parte della stanza con l'inerzia di un materiale" ["He felt like the docile object of this well devised chart. [...] Entrusted to the bed, he felt that he was part of the room with the inertia of a material"] (588). This condition offers "una sicurezza ignota" ["an unknown safety"] (588), "il gusto di ritrovarsi, [...] un disegno grossolano di sopravvivenza" ["the pleasure to find himself again, [...] a rough design for survival"] (589). The last time the reader sees Aspri/Murieta, a few paragraphs before the end of the novel and right after the discussion with the young doctor that I mentioned above, he leaves the hospital, limping, walking with a stick, and disappears into the night.

Volponi's characterization of Gerolamo Aspri/Joaquín Murieta as a character who questions his very boundaries, who moves around in a sort of undecipherable dance with the universe, who ultimately relinquishes his control on the world around him, has been read by

scholars as a symptom of alienation in a rapidly modernizing post-war Italy: “Il trauma della ‘modernizzazione’ e la tragedia della cosiddetta sinistra, vecchia e nuova, assediano Aspri, lo spingono come un naufrago ad assicurarsi della consistenza del proprio corpo e a tastare attorno a sé le cose” [“The trauma of ‘modernization’ and the tragedy of the so-called left, old and new, besiege Aspri, push him like a castaway to make sure of the solidity of his own body and to feel the things around him”] (Zinato 45). Both diegetic and extra-diegetic elements (Volponi’s prominent position at Olivetti, his active role in the communist party, the palpable political disillusionment portrayed in *Corporale*, where many pages are devoted to the satirical depiction of the contradictory dynamics and ideals of the party) corroborate Zinato’s interpretation: Italy’s industrialization and the inadequacy of party politics to offer answers to the problems born of the new social structure undoubtedly play a role in the ontological disaggregation of the protagonist. However, I argue that Aspri/Murieta’s substantial passivity, vulnerability, and lack of stable identity hint at a more radical negation of the autonomy of will and consciousness and harbor the potential to subvert the phallogocentric order of the relationships between living beings. The following scene describes the interaction between the protagonist and Imelde, who is his love interest in the third and fourth part of the novel:

Ormai il mio vassel le apparteneva e lei lo manovrava autonomamente quando voleva. Rinunciare all’attenzione e al controllo di quella essenziale punta della mia educazione e del mio pensiero mi liberava di tanti [...] motivi di primato e aumentava la mia libertà dalla mia vecchia organizzazione [...]. (474-475)

[By then, my vassel belonged to her, and she maneuvered it autonomously when she wanted. Giving up the attention and control of that essential point of my education and my thought freed me of many [...] reasons for primacy and enhanced my freedom from my old organization [...].]

By relinquishing control and possession of his penis, Aspri/Murieta finds himself (and, I would add, the human and nonhuman others surrounding him) freed of his “motivi di primato” [“reasons for primacy”]. Imelde, who, unlike Aspri/Murieta’s nameless wife and the two indistinguishable Ivanas, has a very distinct personality, engages the protagonist in a sentimental (and sexual) re-education. Referring to phallus-driven sexual dynamics as “essenziale punta della mia educazione e del mio pensiero” [“essential point of my education and my thought”], he succinctly hints at the inextricable connection between established sexual hierarchies and structures of thought. This scene and its implications are at odds with the dynamics between genders and between human and nonhuman animals as they are proposed and represented in *Corporale* and in the essay “Natura e animale;” nonetheless, they point to an alternative order in which the revolutionary potential of posthuman perspective as proposed by the likes of Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, and Cary Wolfe has been fulfilled:

In the posthuman view, [...] conscious agency has never been “in control.” In fact, the very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are constituted. Mastery through the exercise of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures. [...]

[S]ubjectivity is emergent rather than given, distributed rather than located solely in consciousness, emerging from and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it. (Hayles 288, 291)

Aspri/Murieta's lack of control exposes how illusory the idea of autonomous will and subjectivity is; his openness to the environment lead him to accept lessons even from the flora and the inanimate world: the persimmon tree can be a teacher to him: "Avrei dovuto comporre la mia attività secondo la sua semplice lezione" ["I should have organized my activity according to its simple lesson"] (345), as well as the rain: "Dovetti arrendermi alla pioggia, ai suoi fasci d'acqua, e [...] ammirarla [...]. Lavorava con una bravura che [...] lasciava vedere la felice partecipazione di tutte le forze [...]. Io [...] m'infiammavo sotto la sua lezione e capivo come avrei dovuto agire nei prossimi giorni" ["I had to surrender to the rain, to its bundles of water, and [...] admire it [...]. It worked with such skill that [...] it let one see the happy participation of all the forces. [...] I [...] was aroused by its lesson and understood how I should have acted in the next days"] (531). In *Corporale*, agency is distributed among human and nonhuman animals, flora and natural elements.

It looks like Aspri/Murieta is not actually able to "raise above the programming of the species;" his "choices" are the results of a series of data exchanges with the world outside him; his identity is the result of a complex and everchanging process of negotiation. He is a cyborg after all.

One further, crucial element that contributes to the construction of his identity is the narrative structure in which he is immersed, as a character as well as a representative of the human species.

### 3.4 Don Quixote on a Rocking Horse: Narrative as an Identity-Making Device

The first time Don Quixote is evoked in *Corporale*, a colleague of Aspri/Murieta's is describing the mayor of Urbino, defined as "Don Chisciotte prima e dopo, senza le avventure" ["Don Quixote before and after, without adventures"] (386). Toward the end of the novel, the protagonist is confined to a hospital bed and forced to wear a device ("un apparecchio") made of two tubular splints, one for each leg, connected by an iron bar, which forces him to keep his legs spread open. He asks for and obtains a rocking horse in order to be able to look outside the window: "Sarebbe stato a cavallo sul letto [...]. Salire e scendere sarebbe stato usare l'apparecchio e quindi dominarlo" ["He would have ridden the horse on the bed [...]. Climbing and dismounting would have meant using the device and therefore dominating it"] (605). When a visitor sees Aspri/Murieta climbing on the horse, he describes it as "un rudimentale cavallo a dondolo, roba da orfanotrofio. Vide il professore issarsi sulla cavalcatura e batterla con una mano per ammansirla e guidarla" ["a rudimentary rocking horse, good for an orphanage. He saw the man climbing on the mount and beating it with a hand to tame it and guide it"] (630). The contrast between the point of view of the protagonist, who feels that the rocking horse would enhance his agency by allowing him to "dominate" the device, and the point of view of the visitor, who sees the rocking horse as a poor, sad object that would be fitting for an orphanage, strengthens the image of Aspri/Murieta as a modern Don Quixote: the protagonist of *Corporale* riding a rocking horse on a hospital bed is the caricature of a parody, a worthy heir of the Spanish knight who rides a nag to fight windmills. Like *Don Quixote*, also *Corporale* is a study of a subject who, rejecting the conventional rules of society, tries to establish a relation to the world, and a meditation on the role of narrative in shaping identity.

Volponi explicitly invites the reader to reflect on how experience is filtered and interpreted through literary paradigms: thinking of a caption for his platonic flirt with the first Ivana, he comes

up with “avventura balneare ma di tipo sublime-petrarchesco. O meglio ancora a voler essere onesti: come la crescita di un individuo è influenzata da brani esterni” [“seaside adventure, but of a sublime-Petrarchan kind. Or better, to be honest: how the growth of an individual is conditioned by external fragments”] (159). Here “brani” may refer to fragments of a text and to shreds of human bodies - the two possible interpretations linger in the head of the reader.

*Corporale* is, among other things, a *Bildungsroman* in which the usual dynamics through which the protagonist finds his place in the world and develops his identity are pushed to the extreme.<sup>177</sup> In the standard coming-of-age story, the male hero defines and refines his identity through the rivalry with other male characters and his desire/love for women. Aspri/Murieta is no exception: his dearest friend and fiercest enemy is Overath, a German party comrade whose approval he constantly seeks, and for whom he harbors feelings of love and hate.<sup>178</sup> Hate can become so intense that Aspri/Murieta concocts elaborate and detailed plans to kill Overath (537-539); love, too, reaches high peaks, for instance when Overath confesses his love for his friend - who instantly connects the declaration to the definition of his own identity:

«Tu hai sempre pensato che io fossi pederasta e hai sempre goduto della convinzione che io fossi innamorato di te e [...] che io ti bramassi limitandomi a gustare con gli occhi la tua bellezza. Ebbene io sono e non sono pederasta, come tutti [...]» [...] Murieta [...] [a]nche adesso non vedeva chiari i meccanismi della sua identità. (256)<sup>179</sup>

[«You have always thought that I was homosexual and you have always reveled in the idea that I was in love with you and [...] that I longed for you, limiting myself to enjoying your beauty with my eyes. Well, I am and I am not homosexual, like everyone.» [...] Murieta [...] even now didn't clearly see the mechanisms of his identity.]

As regards women, as already mentioned, all the female characters for whom the protagonist yearns for end up in his arms without fail.

The dynamics behind friendships, rivalry, and romance are amplified to the extreme, made as visible as possible to be then exposed when Aspri/Murieta characterizes his life as a young adult as follows: “era stato un filmone hollywoodiano-sovietico-realisticheggiante, che aveva cercato di raccontare un'altra volta ciò che tutti sanno sulla organizzazione di una vita contro... per il trionfo di... cartine vecchie e con una formula vecchia e stupida [...]” [“it had been a hollywood-sovietic-

<sup>177</sup> I am deliberately using the masculine pronoun here because the dynamics I am writing about have been created for male heroes.

<sup>178</sup> What follows are some passages where Volponi seems to play deliberately with the topos of the male friendship/rivalry: “Occorre la sfida con Overath” [“The challenge to Overath is needed”] (428); “Ma risorgeva e si collocava [...] il bisogno di ucciderlo” [“But the need to kill him [...] would resurrect and go into place” (referred to Overath)] (539); Overath says of Aspri/Murieta that he is “«Proprio come i grandi seduttori che tutti i sedotti hanno sempre creduto di dominare a loro agio»” [“«Just like the great seducers whom all the seduced have always thought to dominate with ease»”] (214). Overath here is hinting to his own relationship with the protagonist, as is proved by the second Ivana's subsequent comment: “«Tu ti lasci dominare da lui, qualche volta»” [“«You let yourself be dominated by him sometimes»”] (214). The hyperbolic quality of the relationship between Overath and Aspri/Murieta participates in the process of erosion of the autonomy of the self as its dynamics trace the “triangular” desire that was theorized by René Girard. The threesome involving Aspri/Murieta, Overath, and the second Ivana (228-229) is almost visual evidence of the triangle.

<sup>179</sup> A note on the term “pederasta”: the word originally designed an adult having a sexual relationship with an adolescent, but in its modern usage was used to define a male homosexual. I am fairly certain that the latter is the meaning meant by Volponi. (<http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/pederastia/>)

realisticky blockbustery movie, which had tried to tell one more time what everybody knows about organizing a life against... for the triumph of... old maps and based on an old stupid formula”] (475).<sup>180</sup> Aspri/Murieta lays bare the formulaic nature of narrative conventions as identity-making machines. Literary conventions and models are revealed to be the ultimate prostheses that allow individuals to live in the illusion of being the autonomous, self-determined protagonist of their own lives, while, unbeknownst to them, they are only interchangeable extras whose names will eventually fill the ellipses in a pre-determined script.

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<sup>180</sup> Aspri/Murieta is in his mid-thirties during the narration; the sentence refers to his life after he graduated from the university.

## Conclusion

### **We Animals, We Cyborgs. We Plants? Or: Taking Human Animals Down a Peg**

noi animali e noi piante, e noi specie umana  
(Primo Levi, )<sup>181</sup>  
[we animals and plants, and we human species  
(Primo Levi, )]<sup>182</sup>

In a 2013 article in the *New Yorker*, Michael Pollan introduces the readers to a new threat to human exceptionalism: plants.<sup>183</sup> An Italian plant physiologist, Stefano Mancuso, is the proponent and leader of a controversial new discipline that he calls “plant neurobiology.” The controversy starts from the very name of the discipline, since “neuro-” is a prefix usually reserved for creatures endowed with a brain. Mancuso maintains that plants do not need brain to demonstrate their intelligence:

Today [...], at least on the scientific level, it’s clear that the difference between plants and animals is not qualitative but quantitative. [...] The most recent studies [...] have demonstrated that plants are sentient (and thus are endowed with senses), that they communicate (with each other and with animals), sleep, remember, and can even manipulate other species. For all intents and purposes, they can be described as intelligent. (156)<sup>184</sup>

The debate surrounding Mancuso’s proposed discipline sounds very familiar to the animal studies scholar, as well as the idea that the difference between animals and plants is not qualitative, but quantitative. Once again, zeroing in on a precise definition of consciousness and rationality, choice and free will, make these concepts slip through the fingers like sand. When Pollan asks, “isn’t the root responding simply to the net flow of certain chemicals?”, a colleague of Mancuso’s replies that “our brain makes decisions in the same exact way.” Stripped of their mystique, for many scientists (among them, Robert Sapolsky, mentioned in Chapter 1) agency and free will are just phantoms, while our actions are the mechanical products of an extremely complex series of algorithms.

As Michael Pollan puts it, Mancuso is “determined to win for plants the recognition they deserve and, perhaps, bring humans down a peg in the process.”

With all their differences, their hesitations, their contradictions, Tozzi, Ortese, Levi, and Volponi are all intent on taking humans down a peg. Their works may fall short of some of the requisites for posthumanism, but all of them show a desire, or an instinct, or a need to tamper in some way with the hierarchy that sees human animals at the top. Tozzi’s characters achieve a fusional state with the natural elements, interact with inorganic entities, are seen by nonhuman animals. Ortese’s human characters sacrifice themselves to save the most vulnerable creatures. Levi is never

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<sup>181</sup> *Racconti* 573.

<sup>182</sup> Trans. Ann Goldstein, *Complete Works* 942.

<sup>183</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/23/the-intelligent-plant>

<sup>184</sup> Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, *Brilliant Green*, trans. Joan Benham (Washington-Covelo-London: Island Press, 2016).

seen seen by actual animals, but in his poetry nonhuman animals find a voice that powerfully denounces their physical and symbolical subjugation. Volponi's *Aspri/Murieta* accepts the loss of control, agency, and subjectivity, and lets Imelde free him of his phallogocentric privilege.



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