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Italo Calvino in Japan, Japan in Italo Calvino. A Cross-cultural Encounter

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A Cross-cultural Encounter

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Contents

Abstract

Italo Calvino (1923-1985) travelled to Japan in the autumn of 1976 and, throughout his career, got acquainted with Japanese literature and culture: this encounter is attested to by the 'Japanese shelf' of his Roman library and by several authorial reflections, but has been granted little attention so far. The aim of this research project is to highlight for the first time the semiotic relevance of Calvino's contact with Japanese cultural alterity, as an epitome of the author's gradual relativisation of Eurocentrism, logocentrism and anthropocentrism. In particular, this study addresses Japanese gardens in light of their role in Calvino's reflections on the interdependency between human and other-than-human. This deconstruction of a hierarchical humanism is discussed by interlacing trans-cultural and post-human coordinates, which illuminate the poetical and philosophical mature formulation of Calvino's age-long ecological awareness. Moreover, if Buddhist meditation, as well as many poetical, artistic and architectural expressions that capture Calvino's attention in Japan can be understood as forms of *praxis* – interrelation of theory and practice –, they are here put in dialogue with the author's development of dialectical materialism over time, especially in his last completed work, *Palomar* (1983). By investigating Calvino's treatment of perspective changes, language, silence, void, time and death in his works, this thesis brings to the fore the manifold contradictions, potentialities and dialectical processes that inform these themes in Calvino's oeuvre, which fruitfully interact with his exploration of Japanese (and in general non-Western) art, literature and thought in the late 1970s.

Acknowledgments

Three years and a few months have shaped this work. Three years and a few months according to clocks and calendars. In my mind, it has all been an enthralling sequence of moments, in which experiences and ideas have nourished one another. In which, above all, many beloved people have shared these experiences with me, and inspired these very ideas. I am grateful for each of such moments, just a few of which I can recall here, to let you know how important even simple things we did or discussed together have been for me.

If my mind has wandered freely throughout this path, it is thanks to the invaluable support of the Northern Bridge Consortium. If, at the same time, I could meander without fearing to lose my way, it is thanks to the invaluable support of somebody who once asked, at the end of my last seminar as an Erasmus student in Durham, if anyone in the room was interested in doing research in the future, and then discreetly looked at me and a friend of mine. Thanks for bringing me here, being a supervisor, a role model and a good friend, and letting me in your family. Thanks to your family, too, especially to the little beacon of joy who was born around the time of me starting this work. Another family has welcomed me in Durham, each member of which has given me more warmth than I could conceive – two members of which, in particular, I look forward to eating bagels and singing ABBA songs with again.

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Latinist, for opening up and keeping both of us cool during one of the strangest periods of our lives; to my flatmate once, true friend since, beautiful soul always.

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Abbreviations

RR1   Calvino, Italo. 1991. *Romanzi e racconti 1*, ed. by Claudio Milanini, Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falcetto, foreword by Jean Starobinski (Milan: Mondadori).

RR2   Calvino, Italo. 1992. *Romanzi e racconti 2*, ed. by Claudio Milanini, Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falcetto (Milan: Mondadori).

RR3   Calvino, Italo. 1994. *Romanzi e racconti 3. Racconti sparsi e altri scritti d'invenzione*, ed. by Claudio Milanini, Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falcetto (Milan: Mondadori).

EP   Calvino, Italo. 1994. *Eremita a Parigi: pagine autobiografiche* (Milan: Mondadori).

AC   Calvino, Italo. 1995. *Album Calvino*, ed. by Luca Baranelli and Ernesto Ferrero (Milan: Mondadori).

S   Calvino, Italo. 1995. *Saggi 1945-1985*, ed. by Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori).

LdA   Calvino, Italo. 1997. *I libri degli altri. Lettere 1947-1981*, ed. by Giovanni Tesio (Turin: Einaudi).

L   Calvino, Italo. 2000. *Lettere 1940-1985*, ed. by Luca Baranelli, foreword by Claudio Milanini (Milan: Mondadori).

SNiA   Calvino, Italo. 2002. *Sono nato in America... Interviste 1951-1985*, ed. by Luca Baranelli, foreword by Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori).

Introduction

The dry landscape garden at Ryōan-ji Zen Temple in Kyoto is a composition of sophisticated simplicity: rocks and moss emerge from an otherwise empty rectangle of white, raked gravel. The size and shape of rocks vary, but even the most inconspicuous stones generate ripple patterns in the raking around them. Akin to a small, almost neglected stone, dwarfed by more visible, larger rocks, the journey of Italo Calvino (1923-1985) around Japan in the fall of 1976 is hardly granted any space in the landscape of Calvino studies.[1] Greater attention is accorded to the author's experiences in the USSR in 1951,[2] in the USA between 1959 and 1960,[3] in Mexico in 1976,[4] not to mention the vast bibliography dedicated to his contacts with French culture, especially with the city of Paris, where he moved in 1967 and lived until 1980, together with his wife Esther Judith Singer and his daughter Giovanna.[5] The aim of this research is to investigate the visible and invisible lines propagating from that relatively small stone, in Calvino's personal life and career, that is his Japanese experience. Albeit Calvino's stay in Japan only lasted two weeks, the presence of Japan in his own literary and intellectual production is long-lasting and worthy of a thorough reconsideration, which allows us to identify a semiotic and epistemological relevance in this cross-cultural encounter.

A contextualisation of Calvino's contact with Japan, outlined in this introduction, will lay the groundwork for a number of key questions, which will be addressed in five thematic chapters in close dialogue with one another:

1. Does Japanese culture provide Calvino with alternative structural paradigms for rethinking the human **perspective**, in its relationship with the environment and the other-than-human? How does the relativisation of anthropocentrism interact with androcentric inclinations, both in Calvino's and in Japanese narrative?

2. What is the semiotic relevance of Calvino's exploration of a culture of which he does not master the **language**?

3. After his contact with Zen syntheses of apparently contradictory realities, does the author envisage a renewed representation of **void** and **silence** in his own works?

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[1] In addition to Deidier's (1995) and Platzer's (2007) analyses of the three journeys (to Japan, Mexico and Iran) that Calvino describes in the section 'La forma del tempo' of *Collezione di sabbia* (S, 561-625), only Gasparro (2011) dedicates a focused article to Japan as it is represented in *Palomar*. Serra (1996: 13-49; 216-217) refers to Calvino's Japanese experience in her broad examination of the editorial history of *Palomar*, and briefly but scrupulously considers an incidence of the figurative formulary of Eastern meditation over Calvino's last works. Monserrati (2020: 173-186) reads Calvino in dialogue with Parise and Lévi-Strauss, investigating their takes on the themes of race and culture, especially in a Japanese context.

[2] See Scarpa (1990), Pischedda (1995), Mee (2005).

[3] See Marazzi (1997), Castellucci (1999), Mee (2005), Raveggi (2012).

[4] See Biasin (1993), Marfè (2005), Bajini (2011), Raveggi (2012).

[5] See, among others, Daros (1988), Fusco (1988), Regn (1989), Motte (1999), Chiesa (2006).

4. Are Calvino's late reflections on the ontological status of **time** mindful of his contact with Japanese literature, art and thought, which are often based on a subsumption of discontinuous processes into an a-temporal continuity?

5. Ultimately, in his gradual approach to a 'weak structuralism' – a structuralism that is aware of the impracticability of strong coordinates – does Calvino's acquaintance with **death** as conceived in Zen have an impact on his own conception of the end of life, which gradually shapes up to be an 'absent structure' in his mature works, inherently open to non-human and non-Western othernesses?

Calvino's trajectory intersects Japanese culture, and the multifarious set of influences and questions that it prompts, in the late 1970s. At that time, the author is residing in Paris, partially distanced from the politics of Italian years of lead, and he is in a period of creative standstill, after the publication of *Il castello dei destini incrociati* in 1973. His Japanese travels can be considered as an epitome of this personal condition. Not only do they develop as an exploration of that silence that is then looming over Calvino's narrative production, contextually offering its semiotic subversion, in the shape of a creative relativisation of logocentrism. But they also summarise Calvino's mature ideological detachment from contemporary history: not far from Roland Barthes's approach to Japan in *Empire of Signs* (originally published in 1970), in Calvino's texts Japan undergoes a semiotic, non-ideological reading, consistent with his gradually increasing reaction to his past political activism.[6] As opposed to the predominance of committed *reportages* of Italian writers travelling around the East in the late 1950s and 1960s (Pellegrino 1985: 85-153), and differently from Calvino's own previous journeys in USSR and USA, with their distinct ideological load (Mee 2005), Japan stands as a non-political, aesthetical function in Calvino's mature discourse, which progressively distances itself from overt forms of *impegno*.

Yet, studying the encounter between Italo Calvino and Japanese culture allows us to address one of the most heated political issues posed by the present time. To wit, the Janus-faced question of a global society that is only apparently certain of stable and recognisable boundaries, but in fact grows increasingly aware of the uncountable exchanges, dialogues, and porosities that inform any identity. By questioning the assumed *italianità* of Calvino's work and offering a trans-cultural backdrop against which to read it, this research aims to problematise the very notion of Italian canonicity. Our understanding of an author who is deemed to epitomise Italian contemporary literature proves to be more compelling once put in dialogue with non-Italian influences. In particular, while recognising that Calvino tends to accommodate to forms of essentialisation of Japanese culture, as they are concurrently proposed in Japan and Europe – albeit within different agendas – in the second half of the twentieth century, it is instructive to analyse how the author ends up being captivated by Japanese aesthetics and philosophies. In other words, starting from a debatable dynamic of abstraction of the cultural specificities of Japan, Calvino's works emerge as incomparably richer from the displacement of the Self-Other binary that they themselves unravel.

'Chi è ciascuno di noi se non una combinatoria d'esperienze, d'informazioni, di letture, d'immaginazioni?' (S, 733), Calvino asks at the end of 'Molteplicità', the fifth of his Norton Lectures,

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[6] Calvino took part in the resistance movement (Falaschi 1976; Milanini 1997) and consequently joined the Italian Communist Party (Ajello 1979; Spriano 1986), but following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's purges and war crimes, and in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's suppression of the uprising in Hungary in 1956, he started criticising PCI's and Togliatti's absent reaction to such events, eventually deciding to resign from the Party in 1957 (McLaughlin 1998: 58). Since then, his disillusionment grew over time, as did his detachment about all things political in his journalistic production (Ferretti 1989: 143).

also known as *Lezioni americane* (1988). Japan represents one of the combination of experiences that a number of other Italian authors had around the second half of the twentieth century, as Michele Monserrati (2020: 137-192) has examined. Tiziano Terzani (1938-2004) declares he is enchanted by 'questo cerchio di segni che evocano silenzi che voglio capire' (2016: 12) since his first travels to Tokyo in 1965, followed by a long sojourn in Japan between 1985 and 1990 as a news correspondent for *Der Spiegel*. His articles have been collected in the volume *In Asia* (1998), a selection of reportages from East Asia spanning from the 1960s to the end of the 1990s. A distinctly ethnographic mark, combined with a narrative flow and a rich photographic appendix, characterises instead the memories of Fosco Maraini (1912-2004) in *Ore giapponesi* (1957).[7] Here the ethnologist, photographer and writer relates his lifelong acquaintance with Japan, where he first lived together with his family between 1938 and 1945,[8] subsequently returning there between 1953 and 1956 and even taking up residence from 1963 to 1972, when he divorced his first wife Topazia and married a Japanese woman, Mieko Namiki. His daughter Dacia (1936-) has returned intermittently to her childhood experience, as well, in numerous interviews, two poetry collections (*Crudeltà all'aria aperta*, 1966; *Mangiami pure*, 1978) and two books that gather and comment her parents' diaries and letters (*La nave per Kobe*, 2001; *Il gioco dell'universo*, 2007). She returned to Japan, too, in 1967, together with her husband Alberto Moravia (1907-1990). Moravia had already visited the country in 1957, invited by Tokyo PEN Club, and was later sent by *L'Espresso* to Hiroshima in 1982, when he decided to devote himself to the antiatomic campaign (Moravia and Elkann 2000: 282), as attested by a number of articles appeared in *L'Espresso* and the *Corriere della Sera*.

Alberto Arbasino (1930-2020) visited Japan in 1971 and then wrote a reportage entitled *Trans-Pacific Express* (1981). Dino Buzzati (1906-1972) reported on Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964 for the *Corriere della Sera*. After Calvino's journey, Goffredo Parise (1929-1986) visited Tokyo in the autumn of 1980 (see *L'eleganza è frigida*, 1982), whereas Antonio Tabucchi (1943-2012) went to Kyoto in 1998 (see 'Kyoto. Città della calligrafia', in *Viaggi e altri viaggi*, 2010). As these instances suggest, more often than not the encounter with Japan seems to inhibit structured narrative, rather inspiring reflections in snatches, fragmented articles and symbolic images – often imbued with forms of 'neo-exoticism', according to Monserrati (2020: 187-190). On the other hand, Italian poet Andrea Zanzotto (1921-2011) allows us to identify in poetry a sharper tool to delve into Japanese culture. Zanzotto never directly visited Japan, but he perceptively attuned to the 'matrice culturale giapponese' sustaining *haiku*, to its emblematic haze, and to the 'neutral', or 'a-subjective' essence of Japanese language, as proved by his introduction to the collection *Cento haiku* (2014: 9). The poet even turned his hand to the composition of pseudo-*haiku* in English and Italian from 1984 onwards, later collected in *Haiku for a Season* (2012). By investigating both Calvino's articles dealing with his Japanese experiences and his later production, it is my intention to bring to the fore the relevance of a Japanese influence, especially in a poetical and philosophical context. The intersection of Calvino and Japan thus turns out to be an exceptionally

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[7] The book has been translated in English by Eric Mosbacher, with the title *Meeting with Japan* (1960, London: Hutchinson). Internationally, Fosco Maraini is also known for his photographic books *The Island of the Fisherwomen* (1962, New York: Harcourt), *Japan: Patterns of Continuity* (1971, Tokyo: Kodansha), *Tokyo* (1976, Amsterdam: Time-Life Books), *Kyoto in the Fifties* (1995, Kyoto: Istituto Italiano di Cultura).

[8] Maraini's family was first in Hokkaido, where Fosco was specialising in a study of the Ainu people, then in Kyoto. In 1943 Fosco and his wife Topazia Alliata di Salaparuta, committed anti-Fascists, independently refused to sign a document swearing allegiance to Mussolini's Fascist Republic of Salò, despite the insistence of the Japanese, who were allied with Mussolini. The family was thus placed under house arrest and subsequently interned in a POW camp in Nagoya with other Italian anti-Fascists.

suitable test case for an examination of processes of cross-cultural fertilisation, which develop beneath and beyond the surface of travel experiences.

Italo Calvino in Japan: travels and encounters

The ability to capitalise intellectually on diverse experiences, or 'to read the book of the world', as in De André's line in the epigraph, is a quality that Italo Calvino has proved not to be devoid of throughout his entire life. This is why his trip around Japan deserves due consideration, despite its relatively short duration: according to the 1977 edition of the Japan Foundation Annual Report, Calvino visited the country between the 5th and the 18th of November 1976. The Foundation organised an itinerary which included Kyoto, Nara, Tokyo and Nikko. During my own research trip in Japan, in the spring of 2019, I had the opportunity to retrace some moments of Calvino's travels, thanks to the cooperation of Prof. Wada Tadahiko and Prof. Amano Kei, who met the author in Kyoto at a time when they were promising students of Italian literature,[9] and of Prof.ssa Marisa Di Russo, then lecturer of Italian at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

In Kyoto Calvino visited Katsura Imperial Villa, Sentō Imperial Palace, temples and gardens of Ryōan-ji, Daigo-ji, Manju-in, Ginkaku-ji (also known as the Silver Pavilion), as well as the district of Arashiyama and the commercial area around Shijō-dori and Kawaramachi-dori. He also attended a meeting at the Nihon-Itaria Kyoto-Kaikan with a number of scholars of Italian literature, language and culture (see Figures 1-8 in the appendix):[10] among them, Nogami Motoichi, then director of the Kaikan and professor of Italian literature at Kyoto university,[11] and Waki Isao, who was going to become one of the most established translators of Calvino's books in Japanese.[12] A postcard to Giorgio Manganelli speaks to Calvino's visit to Nikko (see Figures 9-10),[13] where he collected a number of yellow and red leaves which he later extracted from his pockets during a dinner in Tokyo, as recalled by Marisa Di Russo and Kawashima Hideaki, another of Calvino's Japanese translators.[14] Tokyo Italian Cultural Institute also organised a formal event for Calvino, attended among others by Yonekawa Ryōfu, the first Japanese translator of Calvino's works,[15] and novelist, poet and critic Nakamura Shinichiro.

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[9] Wada later became Professor at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and an eminent translator of modern and contemporary Italian literature and culture in Japan. Alongside his translations of works by Eco and Tabucchi, he turned into Japanese *La speculazione edilizia* (1985, Shorai-sha), *Palomar* (1988, Shorai-sha), *Il giardino incantato* (1991, Fukutake Shoten), *Gli amori difficili* (1995, Iwanami bunko), *La strada di San Giovanni* (1999, Asahi Shimbun-sha) and *Lezioni americane* (2011, Iwanami Shoten). Amano later became Professor of Italian literature at Kyoto University and in 2007 was appointed as chairman of Nihon-Itaria Kyoto-kaikan.

[10] I thank Prof. Amano for granting me access to the images attached and for driving me around Kyoto in the same orange beetle that he once used to accompany Calvino.

[11] Professor Nogami's name is linked to his translation of Dante's *Commedia*, the first to appear in Japan, in 1965. Between 1941 and 1943 Fosco Maraini collaborated with him, as a lector of Italian at Kyoto University.

[12] Waki translated for Shorai-sha publishing house *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* in 1981, *Collezione di sabbia* in 1988, and *Il cavaliere inesistente* in 1989, as well as *Ti con zero* in 1971 for Kawade Shobo Shin-sha.

[13] I thank Lietta Manganelli for kindly authorising the attachment of the postcard that Calvino sent to her father on the 18th of November 1976.

[14] Kawashima wrote about this episode in the afterword to his translation of *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1980: 217). He also translated *Il visconte dimezzato* in 1971 (Shobun-sha) and *Fiabe Italiane*, first partially (1978), then integrally (1984-1985) for Iwanami Shoten.

[15] Yonekawa taught at Tokyo Kokugakuin University and translated *Il barone rampante* (1964, Hakusui-sha), *Le città invisibili* (1977, Kawade Shobo Shin-sha), *Le cosmicomiche* (1978, Hayakawa Shobo), *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1989,

As Di Russo maintains, Calvino was in Japan also for the purpose of finding interesting Japanese authors to be translated and published by Einaudi, and according to this agenda he met in Tokyo Ōe Kenzaburō, who was later awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994.[16] In the afterword to his translation of *Collezione di sabbia,* Waki suggests that another Japanese author that Calvino should have had the opportunity to meet is Abe Kōbō:[17] this hypothesis is further shored up by the presence of a dedication by the author in Calvino's copy of Abe's *The Box Man* (1974, New York: Knopf), which may have originated in a friendly encounter of the two.[18]

Calvino has often advocated the distinction between biographical subject and writer (Rainey 2013: 580). In particular, remarking on his own travels, he once stated: 'Dei suoi viaggi si sa poco perché è uno dei rari scrittori italiani che non scrivono libri di viaggio né reportages' (EP, 170). However, it is hardly deniable that biography and narration conflate with particular intensity in the essays of *Collezione di sabbia* (1984) and in the reflective descriptions of *Palomar* (1983),[19] two of the texts at the core of the present analysis. The biographical details outlined above, far from stifling the creative aspects of the books that resulted from those experiences, aim to reveal an understudied line of enquiry to Calvino's mature works. They constitute the bedrock of a fertile cross-contamination, which illuminates – among more widely-known sources of influence – a Japanese matrix behind the later evolution of Calvino's ecological awareness, post-humanism, and structuralism.

Japan in Italo Calvino: the 'Japanese shelf'

In the last text of *Palomar*, entitled 'Come imparare a essere morto', Calvino writes:

> Uno per esempio legge in età matura un libro importante per lui [...]. Ebbene, [...] dal momento che lui ha letto quel libro, la sua vita diventa la vita di uno che ha letto quel libro, e poco importa che l'abbia letto presto o tardi, perché anche la vita precedente alla lettura ora assume una forma segnata da quella lettura (RR2, 978).

This take on the relevance of certain literary encounters illustrates pertinently a further *tessera* in the mosaic of Calvino's interaction with Japanese culture. Indeed, in his personal library in the penthouse at Campo Marzio, in Rome, where Calvino moved with his family in 1980, the number of books of Japanese literature and about Buddhism, especially Zen, is considerable: an element that corroborates Calvino's overt interest in global literatures and cultures.[20] As Laura Di Nicola (2013b: 285) explains, by collecting the books of his previous houses in Sanremo, Turin and Paris, as well as by merging them with the books of his wife Esther, Calvino finally arranged a proper library in Rome, and not a mere juxtaposition of bookcases. In the process of selection that constituted such a library, Japanese literature was granted a shelf of its own, with around sixty volumes of Italian, English, French and Spanish

Kokusho Kankohkai), *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1990, Fukutake Shoten), *Lezioni americane* (1999, Asahi Shimbun-sha).

[16] Despite this encounter, the first book by Ōe to be translated in Italian was *Il grido silenzioso*, edited by Garzanti.

[17] Waki (1988: 199) recalls that the author mentioned that he would have met Abe in Tokyo, and asked what languages the writer could speak besides Japanese.

[18] The dedication reads: 'Itaro Karubino sama ni 17.11.1976'.

[19] McLaughlin (1989: 283) maintains that 'Calvino's last work is highly autobiographical, very much about life'.

[20] Calvino (1983, in Weaver and Pettigrew 2003: 51) once stated as follows: 'per me è sempre stato più importante un ambiente internazionale [...] essere italiano nel contesto internazionale. Anche nei miei gusti di lettore, ancor prima di diventare uno scrittore, c'era l'interesse per la letteratura vista in una prospettiva globale'.

translations of novels and short stories by Abe Kōbō (1924-1993), Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927), Endō Shūsaku (1923-1996), Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972), Mishima Yukio (1925-1970), Ōe Kenzaburō (1935-), Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965), among the most represented.[21] All the references to Japanese literature that sustain this research draw on the bibliographical data to which I was granted access by Prof.ssa Di Nicola, who has long and passionately worked on a cataloguing of Calvino's library in Rome.[22]

Calvino's Japanese shelf also includes a poetical excursus, in the form of the collection *Cento haiku*, edited by Irene Iarocci and with a foreword by Andrea Zanzotto (1982, Milan: Longanesi),[23] and an artistic one, with three albums of polychrome prints, two of which were edited by Gian Carlo Calza, who personally donated them to Calvino.[24] A different shelf houses a number of Buddhist texts: modern editions of classics by Aśvaghoṣa (80-150), compilations of Zen *kōan* by Mumon (1183-1260), Senzaki Nyogen (1876-1958) and Paul Reps (1895-1990), as well as secondary sources by Eugen Herrigel (1884-1955), Maurice Percheron (1891-1963) and Alan Wilson Watts (1915-1973). While my analysis of Japanese prose and poetry focuses specifically on the texts that Calvino owned, I will contextualise the aspects of Japanese culture that the author must have been most exposed to by considering his collection of Buddhist texts as a starting point for a broader discussion.

The main aesthetic and philosophical source of influence over Calvino's reflections relating to Japan is certainly Zen.[25] Zen is part of that spiritual flowering that characterised Japan during the Kamakura period (1192-1333), alongside the Amidist schools and the Nichiren school. Unlike these branches, which developed independently in Japan, Zen comes from the Chán school, which flourished in China after the introduction of Indian thought, and that became dominant there during the Song period (960-1279). Towards the end of the twelfth century, after a long interval of cultural and economic separation, Japanese monks started again to visit China in order to learn Buddhism. What in China was Chán, was then imported to Japan with the name of Zen: this first encountered the hostility of Buddhist traditional schools, Tendai and Shingon in particular (between mid thirteenth century and mid fourteenth century), experiencing a period of gradual adjustment and stabilisation. Only with the end of the Kamakura period, and especially with the beginning of the Muromachi period (1333-1603),

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[21] The reason behind the multiple languages of this Japanese shelf is twofold. Partly, they reflect the interests of a polyglot couple with multicultural personal backgrounds: Esther Judith Singer (1925-2018), Calvino's wife, was an Argentinian translator of Russian Jewish descent, who worked for UNESCO (RR1, LXXVII) and mastered Spanish, French, English and Italian (Serra 2015). Secondly, the books give evidence of an Italian editorial landscape which did not keep up with Calvino's interests in world literature: many among the Japanese novels that Calvino read in English and French have only been translated into Italian at a later time.

[22] I thank Prof.ssa Di Nicola for granting me the unprecedented opportunity to access the list of books collected in Calvino's library, which she has thoroughly classified and described (Di Nicola 2013b; 2020). My attention toward the Japanese shelf, in particular, was prompted by a lecture delivered by Prof. Wada Tadahiko ('Nel progettare la poesia-natura. Calvino e la letteratura giapponese', 29.11.2016), within the series 'Calvino e i classici', part of the international project 'Calvino qui e altrove', designed and supervised by Prof.ssa Di Nicola at La Sapienza University of Rome.

[23] The volume *Poesie e scritti sulla poesia* by Lu Xun, edited by Anna Bujatti (1981, Rome: Bibliotheca Biographica) is misplaced, since the author is Chinese.

[24] In *Le stampe del mondo fluttuante. Mostra sulla silografia giapponese secoli XVII-XVIII* (1976, Milan: Scheiwiller), the inscription reads 'A Italo Calvino queste immagini dell'illusione obbiettiva'. In *Vedute celebri di Tokyo. Estetica e società moderne nel Giappone del '700 attraverso un album di stampe policrome* (1977, Milan: All'insegna del pesce d'oro), Calza writes: 'Per Italo Calvino con amicizia e stima'.

[25] For a necessary relativisation of the categories of 'philosophy' and 'religion' in modern and contemporary Japan, see Godart (2008).

Zen established as one of the main forms of Japanese Buddhism, thanks to the political and military support of Hōjō rulers first, and Ashikaga *shōgunate* afterwards (Tollini 2018: 659-660).

Zen possibly represents the highest point of the long and not always pacific encounter of Buddhism and Shintoism (that is, Japanese traditional faith). In the Zen approach to natural and human life as parts of the same non-dualistic whole, there stand elements of the two main Japanese forms of religiousness, the former imported from the continent, the latter indigenous (Balmas 2018: 606). Owing to its emphasis on discipline, Zen progressively enjoyed the appreciation of that idiosyncratic military group that is the caste of *samurai*. In its mature forms, it deeply influenced different forms of art that distinguish Japan still today, and that Calvino unavoidably came across – such as tea ceremony, gardening, Noh theatre, *haiku* poetry, ink brush painting.

However, it is essential to remember, following Nina Cornyetz (2007: 20-21), that the canonisation of Zen as '*the* aesthetic sentiment of Japan throughout the age is [...] a modern construct'. It has gone through a deliberate process of reconceptualisation aimed at creating a 'Japanese *being*', essentially connected to the environment and ethnically connoted, in response to Western imperialism. Cornyetz states that 'with Japan's modernity, the meaning of Zen shifted from an institutionalized religious practice by a dominant aristocratic-military minority to a subjectively individual, yet culturally communal, ontology available to the masses and linked to nationalism' (ivi: 21). Throughout this thesis, I am going to refer at length to the so-called 'symposium on modernity' that, in July 1942, beckoned a prominent group of Japanese intellectuals in Kyoto to discuss how Japan should have approached modernity and Westernisation: a cornerstone in Japanese public discourse, at the bottom of the creation or ratification of an exceptionalistic and essentialised culture. Religion played a fundamental role in the constitution of an allegedly true Japanese subjectivity (Harootunian 2000: 93), and Calvino himself occasionally adopted a similar (self)-Orientalist view.

Paradoxically enough, Zen was the form of Buddhism that the West most favourably received during the twentieth century, mainly through the mediation of Alan Watts, D. T. Suzuki, and Gary Snyder.[26] Since the 1960s, non-Western philosophies became appealing alternatives to conventional Euro-American values, and among them Zen underwent a diffusion of unprecedented scale. Umberto Eco, in an essay collected in *Opera aperta* (1962), analyses the potential reasons behind Zen's diffusion in the West (in Italy, according to Eco's analysis, Zen started generating interest in 1959). He locates in the anti-intellectualistic approach to life, and in a certain dose of ambiguity, a timely non-ideological and mystical alternative to the pervasiveness of industrial civilisation, against which many young women and men were at that time rebelling. Taking into account in particular the importation of Zen in the American context, Eco (1962: 213-214) distinguishes between Square Zen ('regular', orthodox, based on silent meditation and control over breath) and Beat Zen (embraced by San Francisco hipsters, who found in the 'illogic' of Zen the means to refuse the so-called 'American way of life'). All these reasons make Zen stand out as the main cultural reference for a Western traveller like Calvino, with Euro-American reculturalisation of Zen buttressing the author's gradual disengagement from direct political participation.

Not by chance, Calvino's copy of Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1968, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul) is among the few books of his collection with pencil annotations (Di Nicola 2013b: 287). If volumes from his early years are riddled with underlinings, footnotes, signatures, and

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[26] Calvino's library displays Alan Watts' *Lo Zen. Un modo di vita, lavoro e arte in Estremo Oriente* (1980, Milan: Bompiani).

even vignettes on the margins, Calvino gradually limited himself to take notes of the most relevant passages of a small number of books only, in their opening blank pages (Di Nicola 2013a: 174-176). Herrigel's introduction of Zen to a Western audience is among the books that deserved a similar thorough reading. As far as the shelf of Japanese literature is concerned, the Italian edition of Tanizaki's *Libro d'ombra* (1982, Milan: Bompiani) is considerably annotated, as well:[27] Calvino reviewed it for *La Repubblica* (24.4.1982), with an article entitled 'Un viso bianco nel buio' (S, 1445-1449), and he referred to it also in the essay 'La luce negli occhi' (S, 525), in *Collezione di sabbia*, discussing different theories of colour and vision.

If Calvino carefully summarises the contents of Tanizaki's book in his review ('come arredare una casa in Giappone', 'opposizione fondamentale [...] tra opaco e luccicante', 'infinite gradazioni del buio', 'percezione poetica di Tanizaki': S, 1446-1449), it is in the opening and in the conclusion of the essay that he proves to be aware of the dynamics of Orientalism and self-Orientalism sustaining Tanizaki's treatise:

> Tanizaki s'affermò in Giappone come romanziere occidentalizzante negli anni tra il 1910 e il 1930. Poi si riaccostò alla tradizione nipponica e il libro che segnò questo passaggio non è un romanzo, ma un saggio su oggetti e aspetti e abitudini della vita quotidiana (S, 1445).

Tanizaki's 'pilgrimage to the West' and his 'return' to a Japan 'distilled from nostalgic fantasies' (Tsuruta 2000: 239) epitomise the multifaceted aspects of that worldwide phenomenon that is exoticism, influencing both creation and reception of cultural representations. Leslie Pincus (1996) analyses carefully the ways in which a return to allegedly 'traditional' aesthetics in Japan derived from a previous encounter with European hermeneutics. Even if not engaging in a thorough philosophical discussion, Calvino takes into account the delicate dynamics characterising intercultural encounters at the end of his review of *Libro d'ombra*:

> Anche una pagina esemplare come quella sulla carnagione delle giapponesi [...] è tipica del suo [di Tanizaki] procedimento di valorizzare l'oggetto della descrizione ma nello stesso tempo d'accentuarne [...] un effetto per noi repulsivo. Per noi? O non è piuttosto lui, Tanizaki, a vedere con occhio viziato da una schifiltosità tutta occidentale, questi aspetti negativi per poi trasformarli in valori, mentre l'ottica tradizionale era tutta diversa e non aveva bisogno di trasfigurare in bellezza «chiazze, scurimenti, cerchiature intorno alle narici, in fondo alla nuca, lungo la spina dorsale» perché non le vedeva, e dunque *non c'erano*? (S, 1449)

While remarkable for the insight into the positional charge of cultural representations and self-representations, this awareness does not prevent Calvino from according his preference, in regards to Japanese literature, to those authors who most forcefully embraced a return to Japanese 'traditional' aesthetics: namely, Tanizaki himself and Kawabata Yasunari.

Calvino's Japanese literary and artistic canon

In an interview commenting on the inspiration for the Japanese incipit of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979), Calvino invokes Tanizaki and Kawabata as his reference points for his construction

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[27] Ciapparoni La Rocca (2005: 127) reports a number of notes underlining some descriptive variations on particular themes: '5 opaco/lucente', 'giada p. 25', '26 fa elogio dello sporco vs candore ospedaliero', '41 le infinite variazioni del buio', '68-71 la pelle dei giapponesi'.

of a stylised eroticism ('Cercare la complessità': SNiA, 574).[28] As a further proof of this influence, Teresa Ciapparoni La Rocca (2005: 126, n. 79) notes that Calvino's copy of *Mille gru* by Kawabata (1969, Milan: Mondadori), a book recounting meticulously and rather claustrophobically the relationships of protagonist Kikuji with a number of women, bears particularly tangible marks of use. Calvino even includes Kawabata in a very selective choice of favourite authors, prompted by a question by Ludovica Ripa di Meana in an interview on *Europeo* (24.11.1980):

> *Chi sono i tuoi autori preferiti?* [...] Vediamo: nel Novecento un posto chiave lo ha Paul Valéry, il Valéry saggista, che contrappone l'ordine della mente alla complessità del mondo. In questa linea, per ordine di corposità crescente, metterò Borges, Queneau, Nabokov, Kawabata... (SNiA, 394).

Kawabata is the first Japanese writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1968, thus his presence in Calvino's personal canon should not come as a surprise. But, as his Nobel Lecture *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself* proves,[29] Kawabata is also one of the most prominent standard-bearers of what Cornyetz (2007: 14) defines a 'nationalized, acculturating aestheticentism', against which I am going to read Calvino's not infrequent slips on forms of essentialisation of Japanese culture.

To proceed with this overview of the presence of Japanese figures in Calvino's essayistic production, Murasaki Shikibu (978-1014), author of the foundational novel *The Tale of Genji*, is recommended in 'Perché leggere i classici' as one of the writers that an imaginary blissful reader dedicating their time exclusively to the classics of global literature should address (S, 1822). Moreover, Calvino is not completely unfamiliar with Japanese politics, as proved by his cursory reference to the moral controversies caused in Japan by the Lockheed bribery scandal in the late 1970s (in 'Rispettoso promemoria per mille Grandi Elettori': S, 2346-2347), of which an echo can be detected in the reference to some protests that he witnesses in Tokyo ('La vecchia signora in chimono viola': S, 568).

However, Calvino's interest lay more consistently in Japanese artistic production, cinema included. During his very last week as a resident in Paris, in 1980, he watched Kurosawa Akira's *Kagemusha* in its original version ('Se una sera d'autunno uno scrittore...': SNiA, 386). In his review in *La Repubblica* (12.11.1980), Calvino develops a series of reflections, prompted by the film, on the ability of powerful men to stay immobile in the midst of turmoil. Again, he shifts in this article toward an interpretation of social and political dynamics that is far from his early Marxist positions: in his view, hierarchies are deemed unavoidable, and those who sit on top of them are allowed to detach themselves from what lies below, in order to better understand the world.[30] This discourse chimes with a similar thought on the allegedly inevitable cost of culture, which Calvino expresses in 'Il rovescio del sublime'

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[28] See also a similar statement in a letter that Calvino sends to Lucio Lombardo Radice on the 13th of November 1979 (L, 1406). Calvino refers to his personal Japanese canon in a letter to Mario Soldati, too, written on the 9th of November 1977 ('Come ossessività e precisione nella passione amorosa [*La sposa americana*, by Soldati] si legge come un romanzo giapponese, di Tanizaki o Kawabata': L, 1355).

[29] Calvino owns its English translation (1981, Tokyo and New York: Kodansha), to which I am going to refer often in the course of this work.

[30] 'Fondamentale il fatto che il valore in guerra si dimostri (è questo il vero tema del film) non agitandosi scompostamente nella mischia, ma al contrario stando seduti su un piccolo sgabello, [...] mentre intorno i morti cascano come zanzare al soffio d'un insetticida. [...] un luogo interiorizzato e astratto da cui si cerca d'osservare l'informe massacro e spreco che il mondo fa di se stesso, per cercare [...] d'imporgli un ordine, l'unico cui si possa pretendere, cioè un ordine interiore, presupposto d'ogni altro possibile ordine o forma o ragione che abbia presa sulle cose' (S, 1941-1943).

while conversing with his young guide (Wada Tadahiko) during their visit to gardens in Kyoto, products of utmost age-old exploitation.[31]

Kurosawa's work had already gained international esteem when *Rashōmon* (1950) won the Golden Lion at the 1951 Venice Film Festival, thus engendering a number of theatrical and television adaptations of the same story (Beviglia 1967: 158). The film was based on Akutagawa's short story 'In a Grove' (1922), while entitled after another story by the same author ('Rashōmon' was originally published in 1915). At the beginning of the 1950s, Calvino was working at Einaudi as a commissioning editor (Roscioni 1988; Perrella 1991): the minutes of Einaudi general meeting on the 8th of October 1952 attest to his interest in Akutagawa's production, raised by Kurosawa's filmic adaptation:

> Rashomon: Calvino dice di aver ricevuto da Parronchi una traduzione in inglese dei due racconti da cui è stato tratto il film *Rashomon* e di altri racconti dello stesso autore giapponese. Secondo Calvino, questi racconti sono di valore molto ineguale ed egli si propone di richiedere a Parronchi di esaminare altre cose dello stesso scrittore (Munari 2011: 110).

Despite this expression of interest, Einaudi did not manage to secure an Italian translation of Akutagawa's short stories.[32] In a similarly negative outcome resulted the idea of publishing the complete work of Murasaki, put forth by Elio Vittorini a few weeks later, as attested by a letter to Luciano Foà written on the 5th of November 1952 (Vittorini 2006: 49-50).[33]

Further proof of the discrepancy between Calvino's literary curiosity and the backwardness of the editorial environment of which he was part emerges from a letter to Marisa Di Russo, which he wrote after she had handed him a copy of the English translation of Natsume's *Kokoro* (1914):

> già durante il viaggio di ritorno da Tokyo in aereo ho letto *Kokoro* di Natsume e lo trovo un libro stupendo. Lei ha ragione: è ingiustificabile che un libro come questo non sia mai stato tradotto in italiano (in Ciapparoni La Rocca 2005: 126).

In light of this background, it appears more clearly why evidence of Calvino's interest in Japanese literature is more likely to be found in that farther-reaching space that is his multilingual collection of books.

His library speaks to an intellectual prehensility that, going beyond the rather unreceptive environment at Einaudi, led Calvino to be immersed in an international cultural landscape characterised by diverse Japanese suggestions. As I am going to discuss in the chapter on death (see § 5.2.3.), two main actors in this process of cultural mediation are Roland Barthes and Jorge Luis Borges. Barthes's *Empire of Signs*, a semiotic reading of Japanese culture, society, art, and language, interacts consistently with Calvino's reflections on Japan, of which it represents a fruitful source of inspiration.[34] After all, as stated previously, at the time of his visit to Japan Calvino is residing in Paris, and it is

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[31] 'Crearsi uno spazio ed un tempo per riflettere e immaginare e studiare presuppone un'accumulazione di ricchezza, e dietro a ogni accumulazione di ricchezza ci sono vite oscure sottoposte a fatiche e sacrifici e oppressioni senza speranza. [...] Sta a noi vedere questo giardino come lo "spazio d'un'altra storia", nato dal desiderio che la storia risponda ad altre regole' (S, 578).

[32] *Rashomon e altri racconti* are first translated in Italian by UTET in 1983.

[33] What is more, among the not numerous Einaudi editions of Japanese novels in catalogue still today, Kawabata's *Il paese delle nevi* and Futabatei's *Mediocrità* are translated from intermediate English versions by Luca Lamberti, a name that an in-depth analysis reveals not to be related to a real person, but to a pseudonym covering up scarcely accomplished translations, originated by the joint work of several editors and translators on particularly difficult works (Davico Bonino 2003: 121).

[34] In 'In memoria di Roland Barthes' Calvino defines *Empire of Signs* 'uno dei suoi [di Barthes] libri meno noti ma più ricchi di notazioni finissime' (S, 484).

certainly there that the most productive intellectual cross-fertilisation between European post-WWII culture and Japanese tradition has occurred, mainly thanks to figures such as Maurice Pinguet (Midal 2013: 15), who introduced Barthes, Foucault and Lacan, among many others, to *Le Texte Japon*.[35]

On the other hand, in the same year of Calvino's Japanese journey, Borges wrote *Qué es el budismo* together with Alicia Jurado, where he illustrates a tradition that strongly resonates with his idiosyncratic fascination with illusions, cosmologies and the interaction of diverse forms of physical and spiritual life. As far as his contact with Japanese literature is concerned, already in 1959 Borges had penned a foreword to the Spanish translation of the collection of short stories by Akutagawa owned by Calvino and his wife (Buenos Aires: Mondonuevo).[36] Therefore, if Barthes influences the semiotic approach to Japanese culture that Calvino himself adopts in his travelogues, Borges epitomises the possibility of a creative interaction with that aesthetic and philosophic kaleidoscope of forms that is Japan: under a similar light I shall offer a novel interpretation of Calvino's *Palomar*.

Japan in Italo Calvino's works: an overview

To finally approach the literary outcome of Calvino's encounter with Japan, the first *tessera* that can be retraced, which is also the least significant, is the short story 'La glaciazione' (1975), commissioned for advertising purposes by Suntory (one of the most renowned Japanese whisky distilleries): it first appeared in the *Corriere della Sera* and was then collected in *Prima che tu dica pronto* (1993). The text, revolving around a man trying to prepare some ice cubes for the whisky he is offering to his date, does not bear any significant mark of Calvino's acquaintance with Japanese culture, which is directly explored one year after its composition. Even earlier than this contact, Calvino refers to 'il buddismo dei Samurai' (RR1, 1217) in his 1960 afterword to *I nostri antenati*, when he comments on his search for the most suitable cultural reference for Torrismondo's mystical experience in *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1959) – which in the final version of the book rather summons 'l'infinita forza del Gral' (RR1, 1047). Buddhism resurfaces in passing also in one of Amerigo Ormea's reflections, in *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* (1963),[37] whereas minor references to Japan recur in a number of articles collected in *Collezione di sabbia* (S, 421; 427; 470).

More specifically, the journey around Japan that Calvino embarked on in the fall of 1976 is the object of a number of articles that he first published in the *Corriere della Sera* a few months later, within the column dedicated to Mr Palomar:[38] 'Due donne, due volti del Giappone' (5.12.1976), 'L'amara

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[35] *Le Texte Japon* is a posthumous collection edited by Ferrier in 2009, where Pinguet's literary and anthropological analyses of Japan are juxtaposed to the reconstruction of his relationships with the most notable exponents of French *intelligentsia*.

[36] This book is marked as Esther Judith Singer's.

[37] 'È segno che una beatitudine esiste? si domandava Amerigo, (questi problemi, a lui poco consueti, era portato a connetterli con il buddismo, il Tibet), e, se esiste, allora va perseguita?' (RR2, 34).

[38] As analysed in detail by Serra (1996: 13-49), this column runs under the title of 'Osservatorio del signor Palomar' throughout the whole 1975, and again toward the end of 1977. In 1976, it changes into 'Taccuino del signor Palomar'. If already one of the texts related to his travels to Mexico causes the title of the column to turn into the more specific 'Appunti del taccuino messicano del signor Palomar' (16.7.1976), it is precisely when Calvino publishes the excerpts of his Japanese travelogue that the title of the column gets to be the most instable, as if the geo-localisation of these texts was felt to be particularly relevant, and needed a further specification from the outset: 'Italo Calvino racconta un viaggio del signor Palomar da Tokyo a Kyoto' (5.12.1976), 'Italo Calvino racconta le impressioni del signor Palomar in Giappone' (19.12.1976), 'Impressioni di viaggio del signor Palomar' (4.1.1977), 'L'universo Zen nelle impressioni di viaggio del signor Palomar' (16.1.1977).

ricchezza delle ville di Kyoto' (19.12.1976), 'I gentili miracoli del Giappone': 'La spada e le foglie', 'I bigliardini della solitudine', 'Il novantanovesimo albero' (4.1.1977), 'L'ansia annullata nei giardini giapponesi' (16.1.1977). After a re-elaboration on *L'Approdo Letterario* (XXIII, nn. 79-80, December 1977, pp. 60-76) under the general title of 'Il signor Palomar in Giappone',[39] which Calvino proposed to Leone Piccioni in a letter sent on the 20th of September 1977 (L, 1344), these texts were finally collected in the section 'La forma del tempo' of *Collezione di sabbia* (1984), preceding the accounts of Calvino's journeys to Mexico and Iran.[40] The conventional attribution to Mr Palomar of the experiences there described was eliminated, and Calvino opted for an exposition of facts and thoughts in the first person.

Ciapparoni La Rocca (2005: 125, n. 74) advances the hypothesis that behind the choice of the title *Collezione di sabbia*, for that heterogeneous cluster of texts of which Calvino suggested the publication to Pietro Gelli on the 11th of June 1984 (L, 1516-1517), there can be the echo of the French translation of a collection of anecdotes by Japanese Buddhist monk Mujū, originally entitled *Shahekishū* and turned into *Collection de sable et de pierres* in its 1979 Gallimard edition. While purely conjectural – but potentially validated by the presence in Calvino's library of *101 Storie Zen* (1973, Milan: Adelphi), which includes an excerpt of *Shasekishū* – this suggestion might be considered as one of the more or less visible ripples originating from Calvino's contact with Japan. The Japanese texts that were finally gathered in *Collezione di sabbia*, to which this analysis is going to refer, are entitled and ordered as follows: 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola' (S, 565-572),[41] 'Il rovescio del sublime' (S, 573-579),[42] 'Il tempio di legno' (S, 580-582),[43] 'I mille giardini' (S, 583-586),[44] 'La luna corre dietro alla luna' (S, 587-588),[45] 'La spada e le foglie' (S, 589-590),[46] 'I bigliardini della solitudine' (S, 591-593),[47] 'Eros e discontinuità' (S, 594),[48] 'Il novantanovesimo albero' (S, 595-596).[49]

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[39] Colucci (2016: 41-42, n. 2) reconstructs carefully the editorial changes that lead to the seven texts as they appear on *L'Approdo*: 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola', 'Lo spazio d'un'altra storia', 'L'aiola di sabbia', 'La luna corre dietro alla luna', 'La spada e le foglie', 'I bigliardini della solitudine', 'Il novantanovesimo albero'.

[40] This detail constitutes a further small editorial evidence of the relevance of Calvino's Japanese experience: the account of the latter comes before Mexican and Iranian texts, despite the author's travels to Japan occurs chronologically after the other two.

[41] Calvino takes the opportunity of a train journey from Tokyo to Kyoto to reflect on the perception of cultural differences, mainly by describing his close encounter with the enigmatic relationship between an old Japanese woman and her young assistant.

[42] A detailed description of the garden in Sentō Imperial Palace, which gives rise to a number of thoughts on the mutual influence of human and vegetal nature, on perspective illusions, and on potential parallels between gardens and poems; while conversing with the young student that is accompanying him, Calvino also ruminates on the distance necessary for contemplation, and consequently on the cost of culture.

[43] A reflection on the 'artless art' that informs many expressions of Japanese 'universe of wood', which subverts Western canonical understanding of temporality.

[44] A rumination on the perspective metamorphoses that a garden such as the one in Katsura Imperial Villa engenders, evoking an ever-changing and yet permanent temporal and spatial dimension that is only graspable in silence, as maintained by tea ceremony master Sen-no Rikyu and poet Sogi.

[45] Calvino discusses the trope of the reflection of the moonlight, as it is elaborated in some Japanese gardens and in an avant-garde poem by Tarufo Inagachi.

[46] An account of Calvino's visit to an exhibition of antique weapons and armours at Tokyo National Museum.

[47] The author gathers his impressions on the widespread diffusion of *pachinko* in Tokyo, while reflecting on Japanese capital's polycentrism, night life and low delinquency rate.

[48] A brief reflection on Japanese erotic prints. This is the only text that does not derive from a previous publication in the *Corriere della Sera*, but rather from the column 'Diario d'estate' in *La Repubblica* (5.8.1982).

[49] Here the geography of contemporary Kyoto prompts the taxi driver who is accompanying Calvino to indulge in the account of a traditional story.

The text 'L'aiola di sabbia', included in the selection on *L'Approdo Letterario* but absent in *Collezione di sabbia*, filtered through *Palomar* (RR2, 951-953), and it is from there that a Japanese influence propagates within the last 'narrative' book by Calvino, as this analysis is going to argue. Alongside these direct elaborations of Calvino's travelogue, Japanese literature and aesthetics are at the core of the eighth incipit of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979), entitled 'Sul tappeto di foglie illuminato dalla luna' (RR2, 808-819). The book – the first work that Calvino published after his Japanese travels – develops as a postmodern catalogue of ten genres, in the shape of ten incipits that the protagonists of the frame navigate, attempting to no avail to have a traditional reading experience. Japanese erotic novel is stylised alongside 'spy-thrillers, Russian or East European revolutionary novels, Borgesian fables, [...] and Latin-American magic realism' (McLaughlin 1998: 117). The present research is going to delineate the influence of Japanese literature and culture particularly on these three works following Calvino's journey to Japan – *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, *Palomar*, *Collezione di sabbia*.

Indeed, the enumeration of biographical and bibliographical details connected to Calvino's contact with Japan, while reassuring on the foundation of the endeavour here proposed, represents just an introduction to the semiotic discourse sustaining this analysis. This research is meant to illuminate the evolution of five main structural and thematic threads in Calvino's oeuvre (perspective, language, void, time, death), with a specific focus on the three mature works just mentioned, where a Japanese turn emerges with particular force, bearing philosophical and narrative outcomes that have been underestimated so far. After all, in an essay on 'Philosophy and Literature' written in 1967 for *The Times Literary Supplement*, Calvino stated that 'l'opposizione letteratura-filosofia non esige d'esser risolta; al contrario, solo se considerata permanente e sempre nuova ci dà la garanzia che la sclerosi delle parole non si chiude sopra di noi come una calotta di ghiaccio' (S, 189). I would propose considering Calvino's contact with Japanese culture precisely as a refreshing input in the author's own treatment of literature in dialogue with philosophy, in particular with different forms of dialectical materialism.

A five-fold ripple: thesis outline

The first chapter (**'Ecocritical and feminist perspectives on perspective changes'**) connects the viewpoint shift that is intrinsically activated by a travel experience, especially in a faraway country, to the relativisation of human perspective *tout court*. An ecocritical and posthuman approach sustains the examination of the trajectory of Calvino's works around three structural paradigms: a *separative* Cartesianism, a *confusive* holism where human and non-human are equated, and a *distinctive* negotiation of the distance between self and environment. The influence of Zen and of the Japanese literature that Calvino read is retraced, in his Japanese travelogue, in the attention devoted to *confusive* human-nature interdependencies and mutual identifications. The texts of *Collezione di sabbia* appear to overcome *separative*, hierarchical relationships between human and other-than-human, detected in certain early works by Calvino, contextually opening to the *distinctive* potential of texts – especially those collected in *Palomar* – where the difference between self and other is fruitfully navigated in its porosity. Alongside a focused analysis of the role of Japanese gardens in this evolution, the chapter also takes into account eroticism, as a prism to investigate the extent to which even deconstructed eurocentrism and anthropocentrism fail to engender a parallel deconstruction of androcentrism.

The second chapter (**'Semiotic dialectics between language(s) and silence'**) builds on the previous one, by addressing the linguistic outcomes of the dialectical intersection of paradigms there employed. A tendency toward a *separation* of silence from human activities is retraced in several of Calvino's early books. Against this backdrop, the encounter with Buddhism and with a number of relevant narrative and poetic works from Japanese tradition leads Calvino to question his Illuminist confidence in human *logos*. Not only does he thus explore a *confusive* openness toward non-Western and non-human forms of communication, but the *distinctive* outcome of this subversion of linguistic hierarchies brings him to appreciate the depths of a non-conceptual dimension. The synthesis of different forms of language – animal language included – and of non-linguistic meaning is particularly probed throughout the texts of *Palomar*, where semiotic theory and practice unite as in Buddhist forms of *praxis*.

In **'Everywhere and nowhere: thinking and representing the void'**, the investigation just outlined regarding the evolution of the role of silence in Calvino's oeuvre is adjusted to the spatial equivalent of silence, namely the void. If the latter is first represented by Calvino within the paradigm of a certain Western Cartesianism, its presence in Calvino's mature production is unquestionably richer, with the void progressively constituting a crucial 'absent structure', validating contradictions and semiotic oscillations in what I shall propose defining the 'weak structuralism' at play mainly in *Se una notte* and *Palomar*. As I argue, Japanese religious and philosophical traditions, as well as literature and architecture, can be considered as influential agents in this evolution. While contextualising the relevance of spatiality and distance in this array of Japanese cultural manifestations, chosen among the ones that Calvino came closer to, the expressive potentiality of the void in Buddhism and Buddhism-related forms of art will be investigated, in order to pave the way to a comparative reading of mature essays and narrative works by Calvino, which deal particularly with the semiotic relevance of the emptiness of self and things.

The fourth chapter, entitled **'Time is a time is a-time is non-time'**, deals with temporality both as a narratological structure and as a theme in Calvino's works. If nowhere in his production an ordinary treatment of time can ever be retraced, due to the multifarious experimentalism behind genre contaminations and combinatorial constructions that Calvino relentlessly plays with, it is especially in the Japanese article 'Il tempio di legno' that he questions the ontological substance of time. A structural subversion of chronology sustains Buddhist meditation and *haiku*, and an intrinsic sense of perishability dominates traditional and contemporary architecture in Japan, as well as many of the Japanese novels that Calvino read. Thus, following his contact with Japanese tradition, the author conceives a possible coexistence of discrete and continuous, finite and infinite notions of temporality, attaining the awareness of the relativity of time as a human construction. Albeit in different manners, both *Se una notte* and *Palomar* problematise these temporal dialectics philosophically, at the same time representing their narrative embodiment.

The final chapter discusses **'Representations of the unrepresentable'**. After providing an overview of Calvino's varied rendering of death in his works up until the 1970s, it will address the paradoxical (non)centrality of death in Zen Buddhism, in the aesthetics of Japanese gardens and architecture and in a number of Japanese poems and prose. A blurred distinction between life and death characterises many of the Japanese expressions that Calvino approached. What is more, the conflation of these two quintessentially opposite forces allows for a validation of many of the dialectical connections that, in the previous chapters, I suggest identifying in Calvino's works following his Japanese travels: that is, the negotiation of the threshold between human and other-than-human, self and other,

language and silence, matter and void, temporality and atemporality. I will especially focus on the conclusion of *Palomar*, where the subversion of the life-death dichotomy is ultimately performed, the unrepresentable is represented, and Western analytic rationality and Eastern meditative experience are meaningfully brought together.

Far from advocating a 'semiotic transparency' of the themes taken into account, I aim to place emphasis on their evolution in Calvino's cross-cultural elaboration.[50] Contextually, I propose fertilising a semiotic analysis of the author's literary and experiential contact with Japan, by means of ecocritical, posthuman, as well as feminist heuristic methods. By opening Calvino's trajectory to a potentiality largely overlooked to date, this research aims to uncover a 'common presence' – to borrow the title of a poem by René Char – beyond any fixed, static and close identities. It is the 'common presence', in Calvino's later works, of Eastern meditation and Western rationalism, alongside human and non-human traits. It is the possibility of hybridisation and contradiction, too. It is, finally, the attunement to multifarious signifying possibilities that from the pebble of Calvino's contact with Japan propagate throughout the length of the author's intellectual production, suggesting the prospect of a novel reconfiguration of the relation of Italian cultural configuration with other cultures, as well as with other natures.

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[50] I am adapting Douglas Howland's argument regarding the fallacy of 'semantic transparency' when *Translating the West* (2001).

1. Ecocritical and feminist perspectives on perspective changes

> I love not Man the less, but Nature more
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> – George Gordon Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Italo Calvino's ecological concerns have long been identified as peculiar features of his narrative production. Largely ahead of their time when they first drew attention to deforestation, urban speculation and air pollution, Calvino's works have not ceased to elicit the interest of ecocritical analyses, which are currently undergoing a remarkable acceleration.[1] A further recognised characteristic of the author is his variable experimentation of different narrative forms and structures. It thus seems reasonable to ask what sort of formal and theoretical evolution Calvino's ecological themes have undergone over time, and what impact the encounter with a different cultural configuration and environment, such as the Japanese, might have had over the author's trajectory.

In order to address these questions, the present chapter draws on Niccolò Scaffai's definition of three paradigmatic dynamics involving human and natural realms:[2]

1) a classic *separative* paradigm, which legitimises a 'Cartesian' control of Spirit over matter;

2) a *confusive* holistic paradigm, which tends to equate human and non-human without taking into account historical contexts and contingencies;

3) a *distinctive* paradigm, which transforms the distance existing between self and surrounding environment into a cognitive and artistic resource (Scaffai 2017: 16-17).[3]

Although Calvino's creativity is hardly regimented within clear-cut paradigms, this analysis aims to individuate predominant forces in the author's works from different periods. In this way, an ecocritical reading of Calvino acquires a multifaceted, chronological diversification, within which the cross-cultural encounter at the core of this research emerges as a crucial turning point.

Taking into account the 'animal side' of environmental concerns, it can be said that Calvino's interest in the 'question of the animal' dates back to the author's early production and envisages from the beginning both hierarchical (*separative*) and mutual (*distinctive*) interactions between human and animal perspectives. Not by chance, the ethical and aesthetic centrality of the animal in Calvino's narrative has been recognised immediately after the author's first publications and has raised significant critical interest over time.[4] What this research aims to underline more specifically is the importance of

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[1] See Pilz (2005), Iovino (2007, 2011, 2014, 2018), Sanna (2016), Aloisio (2017), Scaffai (2017: 151-154; 193-199).

[2] Scaffai adapts to his ecological analysis of literature paradigms that Bottiroli (1993) has first proposed in his theories on figural rhetoric and style.

[3] It is promising to find, in Fromm's comparative reading of Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis (1960), definitions of the relationship between self and nature that chime with the three paradigms just outlined. According to Fromm, the self constantly faces the contradiction of being part of the natural realm and of transcending nature by being aware of this condition (ivi: 92). One answer to this concern is 'to do away with reason, [...], and thus to become one with nature again' (ivi: 93): a state of intrinsically a-ideological and a-moral *confusiveness*. The alternative pole is represented by the development of specifically human potentialities, mainly constituted by rational and emotional means, requested to find a renewed harmony between nature and human beings (ivi: 94). This potential unity, only reachable after experiencing a non-human alienation, is what can be otherwise defined as *distinctive* paradigm.

[4] Falqui notices Calvino's 'compiacimento [...] per quanto di stregato trapela negli animali e di animalesco negli uomini' already in *Ultimo viene il corvo* (1961: 197). The representation of the animal in *Il visconte dimezzato* is appreciated

the 'botanic other' for Calvino's accomplishment of a thorough harmonisation with the environment. I shall suggest individuating in Zen gardens the model for this integration, which Calvino really comes to term with when visiting and writing on Japan, and which he further develops in *Palomar*. While Zen is only one expression of Japanese cultural configuration, it is undoubtedly the most influential for Calvino's Japanese turn towards an all-encompassing *distinctive* approach to the surrounding world.

In this chapter, I will follow the author's trajectory aiming to identify the functioning of the three categories delineated above, in relation to the author's 'walks' in diverse fictional and cultural 'woods', and to his choices in terms of perspectives and points of view. His early works address environmental themes mostly within a *separative* paradigm, with a *confusive* mutuality occasionally arising from the confrontation with the animal, rather than with the vegetal. The a-ideological *confusive* paradigm starts operating more forcefully from *Le cosmicomiche*, prior to finding a peculiar form as an Oriental influence occurs. Indeed, already the fictional East of *Le città invisibili* reveals certain forms of interpenetration between human and non-human, revolving around a symbolic wooden *tessera* – thus around a vegetal, albeit dead, form of life. Then, Calvino properly delves into the *confusive* holistic paradigm when visiting Japanese gardens in Kyoto and describing them in *Collezione di sabbia*.

Before examining Calvino's works subsequent to his Japanese journey, and analysing their specifity in comparison to the fantastic holism of *Le cosmicomiche*, I will delineate the philosophical and literary coordinates which influence and guide Calvino throughout his encounter with Japan. Ultimately, I will propose to identify a dialectical fusion of Calvino's former *separative* attitude towards the botanic other and of his East-oriented *confusive* approach, in that *distinctive* literary elaboration that is *Palomar*. Similar to what happens in Zen meditation, Palomar progressively makes himself 'empty' and 'open' to receive the entire world around him, finally overcoming the apparent distance of surrounding beings and fruitfully attuning to both animal and vegetal forms of otherness. In this chapter, Calvino's Japanese travels thus act as a structural and semiotic prism through which to access a full comprehension of one among the author's most relevant turning points in his relationship with nature.

Contextually, this analysis aims to discuss the extent to which Calvino, whilst gradually interested in non-human modes of existence and non-verbal languages, maintains throughout his production a rather androcentric standpoint. In this regard, his encounter with Japanese erotic novels reinforces an intellectual position that seems more inclined to acknowledge animal and vegetal agency than female perspectives. In *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* Calvino allows a female reader to carry a strong personality and a sharp intellectual agency, which stands out efficaciously in comparison to the sexist perspective of the Japanese incipit in that book. However, if the Japanese authors that Calvino read and appreciated, such as Kawabata and Tanizaki, often fetishise feminine bodies in aesthetic imaginaries aimed to particularise and culturalise Japanese nature (Cornyetz 2007: 57), it comes as a consequence that in *Palomar* – Calvino's last book, and arguably the most influenced by Japanese aesthetics – female perspectives are again alienated and made ancillary to the male protagonist's reflections. While appreciating Calvino's forward-thinking post-humanism, this analysis puts it in a feminist perspective, recognising the less progressive traits on which it happens to be based.

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by Cecchi as far as its gothic traits are concerned (1959: 310-313), and by Banti in its closeness to Walt Disney's cartoons (1952: 75-76). For more recent investigations on this subject, see Schneider (1981; 1989), Ferretti (1989), Dini (2002), Ross (2003), Bolongaro (2009), Iovino (2011), Piana (2013).

1.1. Changing perspectives in Calvino's works before 1976

Italo Calvino was the eldest son of an agronomist and a botanist, and developed an ecological awareness that drew effectively on his familiar background from the beginning of his career, despite his recurring understatements regarding a strictly scientific knowledge (EP, 249; AC, 5). Living between Villa Meridiana in Sanremo, with the experimental agriculture station there installed by his parents (SNiA, 17; 604), and the countryside around San Giovanni Battista, Calvino grew inevitably sensitive to the inherent proximity between human beings and nature, which he represented in many characters of his early production.

However diverse the first representations of this proximity are, they still fall within generally stable narrative forms: points of view are structurally fixed and based on human centrality, especially when the botanic realm is approached. Over time, the human is relativised by the awareness of concomitant animal gazes, at first investigated by Calvino in journal articles, and gradually included in his narrative production by means of creative experiments with *confusive* forms. In this section, I will investigate Calvino's earlier production, in order to pave the way for the subsequent illustration of his later hybridisation of *separative* and *confusive* paradigms, as well as of animal and vegetal perspectives: this dialectical synthesis will then be connected, among other influences, to the author's Japanese reflections.

1.1.1. *Separative* attitude beneath interspecies experiments

Pierpaolo Antonello (1998: 112) singles out a number of characters who bear witness to Calvino's early questioning of the human-nature dichotomisation. While partly following his analysis, I shall also highlight the extent to which, in my view, these first instances are still pervaded by an intrinsic *separative* attitude. The latter marks not only various characters' perspectives within the narrations, but also the narrative standpoints which give them voice, behind which can be detected Calvino's own early disposition. The most interesting material can be found in the trilogy *I nostri antenati*: *Il visconte dimezzato* (1952), about viscount Medardo of Terralba, severed by a cannonball into a Good Half and a Bad Half, which live two symmetric lives until they are sewn up in a renewed wholeness; *Il barone rampante* (1957), the story of baron Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, who climbs up a tree one day in his youth and decides to spend the rest of his life inhabiting an arboreal kingdom; *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1959), mainly focused on Agilulfo, a knight in the age of Charlemagne, who only exists within an armour, which is actually empty.

Antonello is undoubtedly right in bringing to our attention the proximity to nature of figures such as Gurdulù in *Il Cavaliere inesistente* and Cosimo in *Il barone rampante*. Yet, I would underline that these characters are associated specifically with the 'botanic other', and the point of view through which they are described does not stop short of highlighting the oddity of their closeness to plants. Calvino here adopts ironic tones that, while fully organic to the *separative* mode, are still devoid of that philosophical depth which pertains to a *distinctive* modality. As far as the former character is concerned, Gurdulù's personality is constantly in progress, as he believes himself to be whatever he is in front of. Carlo Magno and Orlando make fun of him when he thinks to be a pear tree (RR1, 974), and the aristocrats in whose eyes he is nothing but the village idiot reproach him when he feeds a tree confusing

his own mouth with the plant's (RR1, 976). Even if Gurdulù then becomes Agilulfo's squire, his porous identity, floating between human and vegetal, does not seem to represent any viable or desirable interconnection of those poles.

Il barone rampante, too, solicits a distinction. When the protagonist is young, he breaks with his aristocratic family by creating his own domestic space in the trees, thus bending branches and leaves to his human needs (RR1, 621-622). Even if Cosimo's behaviour is all but predatory or aggressive towards nature, which he rather 'helps' to accommodate his needs and elsewhere protects via engineering projects (RR1, 658), the baron is still far from welcoming a counter-influence of plants over himself. If anything, when sitting beneath the pavilion of leaves of a fig tree, feeling saturated by their smell and their sticky liquid, thus almost becoming a fig himself, he grows uneasy and then moves away towards other trees (RR1, 619). After all, Cosimo takes active part in the Enlightenment, which sees human reason as indisputably superior to any other forms of life and allows the former to transform the latter for its own purposes (Chakrabarty 2009). Thus, his experience of estrangement brought about by the proximity to a plant is still far from engendering a productive mutuality of perspectives.

It is only when the baron gets old and his mind loses clarity of thought that his body is said to take on some marks of the nature he has long been living within ('gambe arcuate e braccia lunghe come una scimmia', 'faccia [...] rugosa come una castagna': RR1, 768). Therefore, the same oddity that characterises Gurdulù emerges with respect to old Cosimo, as well as to another character of *Il barone rampante*: Gian dei Brughi, a fearsome bandit who lives in hiding and gets to blend with the brush around him. Gian's permeability to natural features, again, is not recounted by the narrating voice as a positive model of interrelation between human and non-human realms (RR1, 641).

Following Calvino along his narrative production, something similar can be said with regard to *Marcovaldo* (1963), a collection of short stories rotating around the titular character's urban adventures throughout the four seasons. As highlighted by Adele Sanna (2016: 33), in many stories Marcovaldo takes the shape of natural elements, such as a rabbit (in 'Il coniglio velenoso': RR1, 1116) or a plant (in 'La pioggia e le foglie': RR1, 1143).[5] The protagonist's adventures point to a positive example of ecological resilience, which of course should not be overlooked. At the same time, it is also impossible to deny that, whenever Marcovaldo deludes himself into probing forms of integration of nature and city, relentlessly doomed to failure, his subjectivity does not really evolve, stuck as it is in a cartoon-like cyclical repetition, which does not entail any philosophical depth. In other words, Marcovaldo confuses himself with nature, but only because his *naïveté* allows him to do so, a *naïveté* which the narrator does not seem to present yet as a viable alternative to Cartesianism. It is precisely in the heterodiegetic perspective through which Marcovaldo's misadventures are told, affectionate but at times vaguely derisive, that the impracticality of this model emerges.

1.1.2. Gardens as objective correlatives of human feelings, within a *separative* paradigm

It can be said that in this predominantly *separative* attitude lies the starting point of Calvino's trajectory as a narrator: after all, as much as Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, Calvino has long declared himself to be

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[5] As for the role of animals in *Marcovaldo*, see also Ross (2003).

an Illuminist,[6] and an illuminist schema is what inevitably shapes his first narratives. To retrace the first instances of this *separative* attitude, it is worth leafing through *Ultimo viene il corvo*, the author's first collection of short stories, published in 1949. 'Un pomeriggio, Adamo', the opening text, is based on a mechanism similar to *Marcovaldo*'s, where the perspective adopted to tell the story embraces a *separative* paradigm. Its main male character is inspired by the actual figure of Libereso Guglielmi, gardener in the above-mentioned Villa Meridiana of Calvino's youth, from whom the fictitious persona borrows the physical appearance, the Esperanto name and some personal features such as vegetarianism, anarchism and atheism (Guglielmi and Pizzetti 1993). Libereso is described in full harmony with nature, but the narrative means through which this harmony is conveyed encompasses an anthropocentric centring. Indeed, the sense of order and calm that the garden communicates to the reader seems to be itself the projection of human feelings.

Similarly, the garden in the short story 'Il giardino incantato', within the same collection, acts as an objective correlative of the two young protagonists' discomfort, anxiety, fear, and bitterness, which they feel while sneaking into that space (RR1, 169). If this story seems to suggest that more enjoyment might be taken by experiencing wild – rather than regimented – nature, the narrative tools employed for this purpose still fall within a *separative* modality in which characters' subjectivity advocates stronger power than the surrounding environment, which is shaped by the former. Calvino's early production is riddled with similar vegetal objective correlatives validating the *separative* paradigm. To give but a few more examples, in 'Paura sul sentiero' (1946) the surrounding landscape reflects memories of the character walking through it (RR1, 247), in 'Il bosco degli animali' (1948) natural spaces change according to human fears (RR1, 280-287), the abandoned garden described in 'I figli poltroni' (1948) epitomises the lack of vitality of the lazy sons of the title (Pietro and Andrea in the fiction, Italo and Floriano in truth: RR1, 198)[7], whereas in 'Gli avanguardisti a Mentone' (1953) an agave, whose leaves are cut through by the passage of several invaders, symbolises the violence of the Italian military advance (RR1, 514).

A *separative* paradigm is still active when Calvino describes natural environments in the ideal ecological trilogy of the 1950s: *La formica argentina* (1952), describing a family's alienated relationship with the natural world, epitomised by a colony of ants infesting their new house; *La speculazione edilizia* (1957), about an intellectual's haphazard plunge into real estate; *La nuvola di smog* (1958), on the troublesome intrusion of pollution in the material and psychological life of a journalist. *Separative* are the characters' perspectives within the stories, such as that of the protagonist of *La formica argentina*, driven by the desire to *own* a piece of land (RR1, 454), or that of Quinto in *La speculazione edilizia*, who pursues property speculation at the expense of his mother's beloved garden (RR1, 812).[8] *Separative* is the recurring 'pathos of distance' that these characters are attracted by:[9] the protagonist of *La nuvola di smog* has a revelation regarding environmental justice by means of a panoptic view (RR1, 925-926), whereas the couple in *La formica argentina* appreciate the beauty of their village and of the sea only

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[6] 'Continuo a sentire vivo lo spirito con cui undici anni fa ho scritto *Il barone rampante* come una specie di Don Chisciotte della «filosofia dei lumi»' (S, 235).

[7] A comparison between 'I figli poltroni' and 'La strada di San Giovanni', an openly autobiographical short story, proves the validity of such a parallel.

[8] It seems to me that Quinto's slightly outrageous choice can be considered as a political and moral symbol of Italian outrage towards Mother Earth, which strongly characterised the second post-war economic boom.

[9] I am referring here to the concept that Cases (1958: 160), writing about *Il barone rampante*, borrowed from Nietzsche, in order to describe Calvino's recurring tension between illuminating distance and the human need for community.

from afar (RR1, 482). In both cases, it seems like the human being needs to enclose nature within its own (superior) perspective, in order to truly understand or appreciate nature. *Separative*, once again, is Calvino's very choice, as a narrator, to describe gardens and vegetal beings as mirroring human feelings. In *La formica argentina* gardens turn into fields of battle against ants, with devices there arranged symbolising defeated efforts and sense of discomfort (RR1, 458; 459; 462; 470-471). Similarly, in *La speculazione edilizia*, the garden embodies the sensibility for a nature that is jeopardised by overbuilding, with the former being related to the figure of the main character's mother (RR1, 784; 786; 788; 841; 864; 889-890).

1.1.3. *Distinctive* approach in Calvino's non-fictional reflections

All the previous examples regarding descriptions of nature bear witness to the tendency of Calvino's early narrative production to separate, in a more or less pronounced Cartesian fashion, the human perspective from the surrounding environment, especially from the botanic realm – despite the intended (and largely successful) purpose of praising nature. Nevertheless, as Gian Carlo Ferretti (1989) has extensively analysed, Calvino's essayistic and journalistic production reveals a simultaneous, different tendency; that is, the author's long-term awareness of the role of the animal gaze in relativising human centrality. Reflections concerning animal consciousness recur in a number of 1946 articles for *L'Unità*, such as 'Le capre ci guardano', 'Soggezione di un cane', 'Il marxismo spiegato ai gatti', and 'Da Esopo a Disney' (S, 2131-2136). In these articles, Calvino acknowledges the ethical need to consider other (animal) points of view,[10] in order to better understand human responsibilities:

> Io [...] propendo per una concezione dell'uomo come non staccato dal resto della natura, di animale più evoluto in mezzo agli altri animali, e mi sembra che una tale concezione non abbassi l'uomo, ma gli dia una responsabilità maggiore, lo impegni a una moralità meno arbitraria, impedisca tante storture ('Il Marxismo spiegato ai gatti': S, 2133-2134).

It is possible to glimpse already in this early statement the conclusive act of the paradigmatic evolution that I am here delineating: that *distinctive* modality according to which a proper ethical understanding of human possibilities can only be achieved by making human limits emerge. Calvino's trajectory as a writer of fiction can hence be read as the unrelenting attempt to find the best narrative form to express what he promptly perceived and expressed in journalistic form and under a specific ideological influence (the excerpt just quoted is from the article 'Il marxismo spiegato ai gatti'). As I am going to argue, *Palomar* represents the ultimate hybridisation of narrative and journalistic traits, where ideological tenets are watered down, in favour of a poetical and philosophical transfiguration of many reflections over which Calvino has been ruminating over time.

The quest at stake is certainly not devoid of constant deviations and multifarious attempts. Before opting for a less ideological expression of the *distinctive* paradigm, for instance, Calvino still explores a political dimension in a book like *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* (1963), following the thoughts of Communist Party activist Amerigo Ormea, throughout a day that he spends as a scrutineer in Turin hospital for the physically and mentally disabled. In a passage that underlines the interdependency of human and nature, Marxism surfaces again:

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[10] 'Vi siete mai chiesti che cos'avranno pensato le capre, a Bikini? e i gatti nelle case bombardate? e i cani in zona di guerra? e i pesci allo scoppio dei siluri?' (S, 2131). 'Ogni tanto mi capita di chiedermi come ci giudicheranno gli animali' (S, 2132).

il comunista Amerigo Ormea cercò in Marx. E vide, nei *Manoscritti* giovanili, un passo che fa: '[...] La natura è il *corpo inorganico* dell'uomo, precisamente in quanto non è essa stessa corpo umano. Che l'uomo *viva* della natura vuol dire che la natura è il suo *corpo*, con cui deve stare in costante progresso per non morire...' (RR2, 49-50 – emphases in the original text).

Later on, especially after Calvino's decision to resign from the Italian Communist Party in 1957, and with his relocation in Paris in 1967, ideology gradually attenuates in his texts (*La giornata d'uno scrutatore* itself, although published in 1963, is the result of a long gestation started on the 7th of June 1953, during the election day described in the book).[11] Nevertheless, even if progressively divested of patent ideological charges, Calvino's narrative works during the 1950s and early 1960s still appear to be far from the *distinctive* paradigm which the articles of *L'unità* pointed to. Rather, as argued so far, books such as *Ultimo viene il corvo*, *Il barone rampante*, *Il cavaliere inesistente*, *Marcovaldo*, *La formica argentina*, *La nuvola di smog* and *La speculazione edilizia*, beyond formal and thematic specificities, all tend to fall within the *separative* model.

1.1.4. Experimental *confusive* holism

It is thus time to ask whether, after his ideological *distinctive* propositions and narrative *separative* experiments, and before finding the most suitable narrative form to go back to the *distinctive* paradigm, Calvino explored the *confusive* holistic option, as well. And, if so, by means of what sort of perspective. In my opinion, it is in the experimental space of the cosmicomic tale that a peculiar form of holism emerges: a holism of fantasy.[12] In the thirty-three cosmicomic stories that Calvino publishes since 1965, for almost two decades,[13] historical contexts and contingencies are hardly traceable, precisely as per Scaffai's definition of the holistic paradigm. It is in this period that Calvino employs all the potentialities implied in the fantastic genre (Gioanola 1988: 25), letting mythical and scientific thoughts interact (De Lauretis 1976: 69). When Kathryn Hume (1992) analyses Calvino's multifarious imagination 'as a Cartesian cogito pitted against some form of cosmos in flux' (ivi: 2), she also acknowledges the 'slight but persistent possibility of Vision-with-a-capital-V: *holistic*, mystic, or significant vision as opposed to mere seeing' (ivi: 39 – emphasis mine).

The '*coincidentia oppositorum*' at the bottom of the cosmicomical tales (ivi: 22), that is the ideal override of every form of otherness, is characterised by three main features that make this *confusive* experiment crucial for Calvino's subsequent development. First of all, as Hume's statement suggests, there is a *mystic* vein in this supposed continuity between human, other beings and matter. Appropriately, as Claudia Nocentini (2009: 162-163) recalls, the cosmicomic text 'Tutto in un punto' has been quoted by Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy, in her 1991 *World as Lover, World as Self*, as an instance of a fruitful meditation on the interdependency between human and nature.

The story 'Tutto in un punto', as many others in the cosmicomic project, refers to a somehow *primordial* state, which is the second characteristic of this holistic model. The main character, Qfwfq, if read by means of a psychoanalytic lens (Rushing 2006), is like the child who 'does not differentiate

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[11] As Ferretti (1989: 96) recalls, between 1964 and 1973 Calvino's intellectual participation in social, cultural and political events diminishes, as though he progressively feels the need to be less involved in that time's upheavals.

[12] Not by chance, Bottiroli (1993: 165-167) refers to the cosmicomic tale 'La distanza dalla luna' to introduce his view of a '*confusive* figural regime'.

[13] See McLaughlin (1998: 80) for a summary of the different editions of the cosmicomic tales.

between itself and the mother [...] or the blanket [...] or the pillow [...]. Its libidinal flow is directed toward the complete assimilation of everything which is experienced as pleasurable, and there are no recognized boundaries' (Silverman 1983: 155). Qfwfq could thus be considered as a Freudian 'oceanic self' which has yet to become a proper subject – and that the 'oceanic' experience has often been connected to mystic, especially Buddhist experiences (Epstein 1995: 391), adds to what stated previously. Resulting from the 'prematurity' of what is imagined, there comes the playful mechanism through which this imagination is expressed: the reader is confronted with the paradox of a world which speaks of itself in human terms, even prior to contemplating the human as a possibility (Iovino 2007: 116).

At the base of the *mystic* and *primordial* character of *Le cosmicomiche*, there lies its *mental* dimension. It is of utmost importance to stress that the interconnection between human and nature, which Calvino traces as the origin of cosmos (Ferretti 1989: 101), is completely imaginary, although inspired by scientific laws. Antonello (1998: 120-121) observes that the mind is the main actor of these logical performances, even if never directly represented: the cosmicomical space is completely mental, but negatively so. As highlighted by Serenella Iovino (2007: 118), this is the mechanism that informs the harmonisation of non-anthropocentric values with anthropomorphic representation in the cosmicomic tales. Calvino himself refers to his inescapable anthropomorphic perspective in an interview released in 1968:

> Ricordiamo che anni fa Robbe-Grillet aveva pronunciato una requisitoria serrata contro l'antropomorfismo, contro lo scrittore che continua a umanizzare il paesaggio, a dire che 'il cielo sorride', che 'il mare s'infuria'. Invece io questo *antropomorfismo* l'ho accettato e rivendicato in pieno come procedimento letterario fondamentale, e – prima che letterario – mitico, collegato a una delle prime spiegazioni del mondo dell'uomo primitivo, l'*animismo* (S, 233-234 – emphases in the text).

Therefore, the sort of *confusive* paradigm that the cosmicomic fantasy entails is still entirely human, precisely because of its fantastic dimension. Conversely, as I am going to argue below, the philosophical dimension of *Palomar*'s reflections, while being the result of a sheer rational mechanism, allows the possibility of overcoming the human dimension altogether, arguably influenced in this paradox by Eastern forms of meditation.

In the chessboard of *Le città invisibili* (1972), a collection of descriptions of cities that Marco Polo purports to have visited and recounts to emperor Kublai Khan, a similar activation of a *confusive* logic can be identified, and the Oriental setting of the book does not fall short of interest. Polo and Kublai happen to use a chessboard as a replacement for words in their evocative dialogues, thus the object seems to support fully human, *separative*, semiotic dynamics.[14] But at the bottom of the multiplicity of meanings that the two interlocutors decide to attribute to the pieces in the chessboard, there lies the vegetal substance of every wooden *tessera*, whose features need to be considered in order for the cultural, semiotic discourse to develop all its potentialities:

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

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[14] See, among others, Bernardini Napoletano (1977), Milanini (1990), Bonsaver (1994), Brera (2011).

In other words, the fictional Eastern setting of the book inspires reflections regarding the interpenetration between human and non-human realms, anticipating the *confusive* paradigm that Calvino will probe while visiting and describing Japanese spaces.

At this point, one could ask whether, beyond fantasy, an alternative holism is ever possible. The following sections of this chapter aim to investigate Calvino's response to the peculiar holism of Japanese gardens, and to highlight the influence which these spaces had on the author's treatment of human-nature relations. Indeed, if the cosmicomic tales develop a *mental, primordial* and partially *mystic* holistic paradigm, it is in Japanese gardens that Calvino identifies a similar *mystic* element, but projected on a *real*, tangible, *present* dimension, where the agency of nature is considered in its totality, flora included. In order to contextualise this encounter, I will first analyse the holism of Japanese gardens in light of the religio-philosophical contexts which have originated them. Then, I will interrogate the Japanese books that Calvino read, looking for literary treatments of this holism, which could have partially guided the author in composing his travelogue and subsequent reflections.

1.1.5. Calvino's configuration of eroticism between *separative* and *confusive* paradigms

Before moving on, I will bring the erotic theme in this framework, to understand whether its treatment diverges from, or rather reinforces the structural evolution that I am illustrating in this chapter. In *Il barone rampante*, the first encounter between Cosimo and Viola – respectively the main character and his lifetime lover – can be considered as the perfect epitome of a *distinctive* paradigm, where love triggers a reciprocal mechanism of self-understanding described masterfully by Calvino: 'Si conobbero. Lui conobbe lei e se stesso, perché in verità non s'era mai saputo. E lei conobbe lui e se stessa, perché pur essendosi saputa sempre, mai s'era potuta riconoscere così' (RR1, 713). However, this mutuality represents an exception confirming a rule of *separation* of male and female perspectives in Calvino's works, which more often keep apart the standpoints of different genders, even when bold *confusive* interspecies experiments are attempted.

In Calvino, as Giulio Ferroni (1996) analyses, erotic experiences and acts of reading often overlap. This element itself shows how most of the times feminine body and body of literary work inhabit the same peripheral position revolving around the author's eye: equally read, they both are passive objects of a process of *separative* observation. Just to give a few instances, in a scene of *La nuvola di smog* the main character caresses Claudia, his partner, out of the need to remove dust dropped from a book off her: the following intercourse develops in the will to protect her from the titular smog, which likewise affects her objectified body and the books in the main character's room. 'L'avventura di un lettore', in *Gli amori difficili* (1970), stages the intersection between the pleasure and determination to read and the invitation to participate in a love affair in the real world: the reader of this short story alternatively reads his book and a woman's gaze, and the inherently sexist nature of this viewpoint is confirmed by more than one passage in the narrative.[15]

Tommasina Gabriele (1994) has thoroughly demonstrated that eros is reluctantly represented directly by Calvino, mainly due to the author's linguistic concern regarding a generally abused and deteriorated lexicon. In the essay 'Il sesso e il riso' Calvino advocates a mimetic exorcism that, through

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[15] 'La villeggiante lo ascoltava mostrando un grande interesse e ogni tanto interloquiva, sempre a sproposito, come usano le donne [...] (la signora era cortese, discreta, docile)' (RR2, 1134).

the minor confusion caused by laughter, is able to control the absolute confusion incited by sex (S, 262). Adhering to this view, *Le cosmicomiche* can be considered as an attempt to reinvent sexuality and its language: in a comic vein, they represent pansexual drives animating the universe with multifarious gravitational pulls, which engender surreal stories of continuous mating of celestial bodies (Baldi 2012: 65). In the underlying *confusive* paradigm of these stories, human and non-human perspectives mingle more efficaciously than female and male points of view, which do not engender any particular dialectic. For instance, in 'Tutto in un punto', when Calvino describes the concentration of matter prior to the Big Bang, and represents the force which causes the explosion under a feminine guise, he projects on this female entity a desire that, albeit presented as universal, is hard not to recognise as masculine:

> [...] lei signora Ph(i)Nk$_0$, quella che in mezzo al chiuso nostro mondo meschino era stata capace d'uno slancio generoso, il primo, «Ragazzi, che tagliatelle vi farei mangiare!», un vero slancio d'amore generale, dando inizio nello stesso momento al concetto di spazio, e allo spazio propriamente detto, e al tempo, e alla gravitazione universale, e all'universo gravitante, rendendo possibili miliardi di miliardi di soli, e di pianeti, e di campi di grano, e di signore Ph(i)Nk$_0$ sparse per i continenti dei pianeti che impastano con le braccia unte e generose infarinate, e lei da quel momento perduta, e noi a rimpiangerla (RR2, 122-123).

As Teresa De Lauretis (1987: 71) points out, in many of Calvino's texts 'desire is founded in absence, in the tension-towards rather than the attainment of the object of love'. If the union with the female object of love is constantly deferred, it comes as a consequence that female agency is oftentimes absent, with the masculine standpoint not being reciprocated or enriched by his gender counterpart. Elio Baldi (2012: 63) maintains that *Le città invisibili* constitute emblematic examples of an all-encompassing sensuality, within what I would identify as an unapologetic androcentrism. Indeed, each city has a feminine name, most of them portray women, but never is a feminine perspective foregrounded. Kawabata's or Tanizaki's erotic narratives do not contradict this trend, and it is thus possible to envisage in this very affinity one of the reasons behind Calvino's interest in the production of these Japanese authors, as I am going to argue below.

1.2. Matters of perspective in Japanese tradition

As Brian Moeran and Lise Skov (1997: 181-205) notice, nature is among the elements that feed most Orientalism and self-Orientalism (*nihonjinron*) with regards to Japan. Especially by focusing on Japanese gardens, which significantly attracted Calvino's interest during his travels, it is possible to detect some features of what is often described as Japanese 'nature-culture'.[16] The mutual embedding of nature and culture is supposed to weave in a peculiar seamless fabric contemporary,[17] Buddhist, and Confucian

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[16] For seminal definitions of the concept of 'nature-culture', see Latour (1993: 105-109) and Haraway (2003: 1-5).
[17] To refer to but the most influent Japanese philosophers of the twentieth century, Nishida Kitarō formulates the Japanese spirit in terms of 'pure experience', of merging of the mind in nature, of the self in the universe (see Kyburz 1997: 258), whereas Watsuji Tetsuro analyses the interconnection of climate and culture in his seminal *Fūdo*.

philosophies,[18] as well as Shinto,[19] characterised by a common harmonic fusion of ecocentrism and cultivation (Shaner 1989: 163). Therefore, the notion of Japanese 'nature-culture', albeit vague to a certain extent and ideologically constructed over time, often in association with sexist tropes, seems flexible enough to contextualise some literary and aesthetic idealisations underpinning Calvino's cross-cultural encounter.

On the bedrock of this 'nature-culture', it is possible to test the functioning of the three perspective paradigms outlined at the beginning of this chapter, with gardens offering a very useful specimen for this purpose. Even if, at first sight, a *separative* modality seems to inform gardens, they actually embody a *confusive* holism, upon which both Shinto and different branches of Buddhism rest (Maraini 2000: 23; 286). Furthermore, gardens bridge the gap between the second stage, where human beings are in practical coexistence with other beings, plants included, and the third *distinctive* one, where human beings draw from that coexistence a specific knowledge of themselves and of their position in the cosmos. The comprehension of the dialectics at stake inevitably entails a sequence of phases – operational as it may be – of which a more focused analysis will be developed in the chapter regarding time (see § 4.2.).

1.2.1. Japanese gardens part 1: from a *separative* paradigm to a *confusive* holism...

To begin with, as Arne Kalland (1995: 243) argues, it is important to move away from the stereotype of the 'nature-loving Japanese', and to understand accordingly a key premiss: in their artistic approach to nature, the Japanese seldom delve into the wild naively, but 'try to control nature [...] by processes of taming' and of homogenisation, at the root of which Cornyetz (2007: 26) identifies a reactionary ideology. Describing the garden of Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto – which Calvino visits, too –, Young Lee (1984: 80) notes that 'seen from the teahouse [...] the garden presents a great seascape. But viewed from the Shōkatei, the scene is of a hidden valley deep in the mountains, while from a bay window on the south side [...] one sees a plain of rice fields. This garden expresses in the reduced space of perhaps three or four hectares the vastly different aspects of sea, mountain, and plain'. By means of reductionism and by framing nature's plenitude, gardens seem to exemplify the *separative* paradigm par excellence. Joy Hendry (1997: 83) maintains that this can be said for any kind of garden, since they always represent 'the efforts of human beings to create cultural versions of their natural surroundings'. And, one can add, writing itself can be considered as a taming process: a comparison which Calvino does not fail to reflect upon.[20]

Nevertheless, the *separative* attitude is only partially satisfactory when it comes to illuminating Japanese cultured gardens. When analysed in comparison with Western gardens, this specificity emerges clearly, and points to the second, *confusive* level. Kalland (1995: 250) recalls that, 'unlike the Versaille park, which with its strict symmetry is not intended to be anything but culture, the Japanese

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[18] For a detailed analysis of the number of religio-philosophical traditions of Asia, see Rossi (2018). In particular, see Balmas (2018) as for Shinto, and Tollini (2018) as far as Japanese Buddhism is concerned.

[19] Balmas (2018: 606) proposes to identify in Zen the ultimate synthesis of Indian Buddhism and Japanese Shinto, on the basis of a shared profound relation with nature. See Kalland (1995: 246-247) for an analysis of the continuity between Shinto's view of supernatural power (*kami*) residing 'in anything which gives a person a feeling of awe', and Buddhism, according to which everything has Buddha nature and all creatures are on the same level. For some memorable pages about the reverence towards nature in Shinto, see Maraini (2000: 23-27).

[20] See 'Il rovescio del sublime' (S, 573-579) and 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto' (S, 1865-1875).

garden [is] meant to give an impression to be natural'. In other words, the processes of taming, while undoubtedly at stake, is generally marked by the peculiarity of not resorting to the nature-culture dichotomy. Steve Odin's recourse to Alfred North Whitehead's process metaphysics offers a theoretical lens to understand this passage: if it is true that Japanese gardens come out of a process of taming, that is, 'an organization of perspectives', what underpins such a process is 'the aesthetic continuum of nature' (Odin 2017: 123), of which the human being is an integral – yet by no means hierarchically superior – part.

The traditional *Sakutei-ki* (lit. 'Notes on garden techniques')[21] expresses this apparent paradox clearly: while providing norms for a cultural construction of the garden, it consistently demands to follow nature, to do what the stone demands. That is to say, it harmonises the *separative* paradigm, according to which the human being acts on the environment from a prominent position, with the *confusive* paradigm, which envisages no disruption of the continuum of nature and human culture. Tanaka (1967) emphasises, in particular, the just-quoted expression regarding the demands of the stone, as it recurs often in the *Sakutei-ki* and indicates a fundamental principle implied in the text: things and humans are connected by an organic link, which makes people perceive natural stones directly, and potentially identify with them.

Such a continuum is what can be otherwise defined as a *holism*. Not only gardens, but also a number of artistic and religious models, social and psychological structures, and even language in Japan tend to bear a holistic mark. As Odin (2017: 126) puts it, the all-comprehensive, integrated whole which constitutes the Japanese world view[22] can justly be considered as a 'web-like system of interconnected perspectives, whereupon each perspectival event both causally influences and receives influence from all other relational events, from its own standpoint of unification within the aesthetic continuum of nature'. Buddhism visualises this system in the form of mandalas, or by resorting to the so-called net of Indra.[23] What such fractal models have in common is the graphic reproduction of processes of mutual identification and interpenetration between humanity and nature (Oh 2000: 283-284), upon which the *holistic* model is based.

1.2.2. Holistic views of Japanese society and Zen psychology

Drawing on Louis-Adolphe Bertillon's seminal definition of *mésologie*,[24] Augustine Berque has extensively reflected upon a holistic view of society, as well, in terms of *milieu*, or 'a society's relationship to space and nature' (Berque 1997: 9). The *milieu* is both natural and cultural,[25] subjective and

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[21] The *Sakuteiki*, as Berque (1997: 155) explains, is a short collection of precepts attributed to a noble at the Heian court. Circulated secretly for centuries, it is now considered a classic with regard to certain key principles of the art of gardens and the feeling of nature, still prevalent in Japan today.

[22] Kyburz (1997: 258) reminds us that the Chinese world view rests on the same assumption, as further proof of the fact that many of the characteristics here at stake are far from characterising Japan exclusively.

[23] Kasulis (1977: 5) analyses the '*Hua-yen* (Jp. *Kegon*) image of the net of Indra. According to that model of reality, each *dharma* [phenomenon] is like a multifaceted jewel located at the nexus of a web. Each jewel stands alone, but each of its facets reflects one of the other jewels'. The most complete description of this poetical metaphor is in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, one of the fundamental sutras of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

[24] Bertillon is considered to be the founder of *mésologie* as the study of reciprocal reactions between the organism and its environment (1872).

[25] Berque (1997: 116) remarks that 'nature only exists for society as "cultured" (perceived, conceived, acted on); and similarly, culture only exists for society as "natured" (it is experienced "naturally", without detachment)'.

objective,[26] collective and individual[27] (Berque 1997: 116), and reflects in sociological terms the kernel of the seminal essay *Fūdo* (1935), by Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960). This work – a veritable cornerstone in Japanese philosophy, translated into English as *Climate and Culture. A Philosophical Study* (1988) – emphasises how the interpenetration of self and environment is at the core of the issue of self found in many areas of Japanese cultural configuration, including *haiku*, landscape painting, and treatises on Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjinron*). Moving from culture to society, Berque builds upon this idea by suggesting that 'there is a link between the way the Japanese [...] perceive nature and space, and the way they interact with each other. [...] The logic of the Japanese medial process, or mediance, tends both to blur the identity of the self and to enhance the identification of the self with what is not the self: environment, both social and natural' (Berque 1992: 93-94).

Nina Cornyetz (2007: 20) contends that the 'prewar naturalization of an environmentally and ethnically particular "sensibility"' is a 'constitutive component of Japanese *being*' as a 'modern construct', often deliberately rooted in the psychology of Zen (Mathers et al. 2009: 49). Indeed, the concept of 'decentered self-awareness', key in George Atwood and Robert D. Stolorow's (1984) intersubjective psychoanalysis,[28] has been paralleled to the Zen notion of achieving compassion via self detachment (Herrigel 1960), which can in turn be considered as another way of expressing the *confusive* paradigm. 'With no resistance, self is supposed to merge with the rest of the world. Merging means a twofold process: on the one hand, self becomes part of the objective world or nature; and on the other, self absorbs the outer world into itself', Takie S. Lebra (1992: 115) explains. As I am going to analyse below, Calvino does not fail to notice and reflect upon these structural mechanisms, especially when in contact with a number of Japanese gardens.

1.2.3. Japanese gardens part 2: ... toward a *distinctive* awareness

The *distinctive* logic entails the enhancement of the pragmatic aspects of *confusive* holism, by means of those rational tools that were hypertrophic in the *separative* paradigm, and which need to find a more harmonic calibration. If the distance between self and surrounding environment has to be transformed into a cognitive and artistic resource, as per Scaffai's (2017: 17) definition of the *distinctive* paradigm, this permutation cannot but involve language, in the attempt to find the best way to keep its usefulness, while renouncing any logocentric presumption. The outcome of such a dialectical fusion is a sort of 'degree zero' of rationality, which is also the objective of the meditation happening in Japanese (especially Zen) gardens – as Calvino notices in 'L'aiola di sabbia', in *Palomar* – and which I am going to explore in more detail in the next chapter.

To summarise, if human rationality and language outgrow their natural grounds in the Illuministic, hierarchical, *separative* logic, and if the *confusive* decentres the human subject into the mesh of natural forces, the *distinctive* attains the awareness of the non-hegemonic centrality of

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[26] '[T]he representation that people create of their milieu never attains pure objectivity: the representation itself is part of that milieu. In that, it is not purely subjective either: the experience specific to this milieu verifies it to a certain extent' (Berque 1997: 116).

[27] '[T]he matrices for apprehending reality (representation, behaviour) are transmitted by the group, but exist only through and for each individual' (Berque 1997: 116).

[28] As Suler (1995: 410) explains, 'the ability to "decenter" from the organizing principles of one's own subjective world, to attain a "decentered self awareness" of the cognitive-affective schemata that constitute self structure', opens the scope of 'empathic immersion into another person's self experience'.

rationality and language, via a more prudent use of rationality itself, eventually prone to disposing of its potential superiority and to embracing silence. Japanese gardens epitomise efficaciously this theoretical evolution, considering that flora does not have higher-order rational faculties and language, and yet it is there supposed to guide gardeners' actions. Clearly, gardens are far from representing the sole specimen of such an evolution, against which Calvino could confront his own ever-changing ecological awareness. To name but two other significant points of reference as for the need of reaching a *distinctive* paradigm, this is after all the mechanism at the root of Viktor Shklovsky's theorisation of *ostranenie* (which Calvino acknowledges in passing in an interview released in 1983: SNiA, 542), and Karl Marx (1992: 328) himself remarks (in the passage from his *Early Writings* that Calvino refers to in *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* (RR2, 49-50)) that human beings can be thought of as an inseparable part of Nature, but equally correctly can they be considered as 'linked', thus pointing up their difference.

If Calvino's early journalistic production has proceeded more under the aegis of a Marxist *distinctive* approach to the world, his contact with Japanese gardens marks a turning point as for his creative production, where a decentralisation of the *Western* point of view triggers a decentralisation of the *human* point of view *tout court*. When the author notices the specificities of Japanese gardens in terms of *distinctive* harmonisation of humanity and nature as a whole (and not only in its animal configuration), he is deploying an observation capacity rendered even sharper by the eccentricity of his travel experience in a far remote country, which makes eccentric – thus decentred – his own very standpoint. In the last section of this chapter, I aim to locate in Calvino's travelogue, then in *Palomar*, his own literary non-ideological transposition of that development from the *separative* to the *distinctive* paradigm, which he had the opportunity to observe in Japan.

1.2.4. Perspective in Calvino's Japanese books

Before proceeding with Calvino's mature works, the analysis of some of the Japanese books that the author read aims to underline the relevance which nature acquires in Japan not only in a practical field (such as in gardens), but also in literary constructions, and to connect the means by which nature is there described to the structural paradigms adopted in the present chapter. Two main features characterise references to nature, especially flora, in works that are otherwise utterly heterogeneous: namely, the attention to detail and the reciprocal interaction between natural and human beings. As for the former, the Japanese authors that Calvino read rarely fail to focus on precise taxonomies or sensorial characteristics of the botanic world, as if only by drawing near nature's specificities would it be possible for them to glimpse the value that lies within it. Or, as mentioned above, as if only by probing *separative* taming descriptions could narratives and poems progress towards a *distinctive* understanding of nature – human nature included. The passage through the middle *confusive* step (although, as already specified, the temporal sequence is mainly functional) can be represented by the second feature at stake here, that is, the mutual influence active between vegetal and human forms.

The attention to botanic detail characterises many Japanese authors, across different currents, styles, literary and ideological views. I would contend that, at the core of a literary tradition that is structurally rich and diverse, there stands a steady reference to nature as a mirror which is often called upon to trigger, embody and reflect human thoughts and actions, rooted in that Japanese construction known as *mono no aware* ('sensitivity to things'). Writing about nature and describing it in a peculiarly detailed way can be paralleled to a wilful taming process (Kalland 1995: 250) – thus it could be

subsumed under the *separative* logic. At the same time, as the very concept of *mono no aware* suggests, the attention to detail opens up to reflections about the decentralisation of human perspective and its consequences in artistic and philosophical terms, that is precisely how the *distinctive* paradigm works. However, similarly to what has been said above in respect to Calvino's narrative, in works such as Kawabata's or Taizaki's the decentralisation of a human perspective paradoxically engenders the universalisation of a male perspective: only the latter gets to question itself in a broad subversion of coordinates, whereas women are prevalently referred to with respect to their fetishised, 'natural' bodies.

1.2.5. Detailed botanical descriptions

The two Japanese Nobel Prize winners, Kawabata Yasunari and Ōe Kenzaburō, offer diverse instances of the same penchant for detailed descriptions. Indeed, all the books by Kawabata that Calvino read abide by this trend, with precise references to botanical diversity running through their plots. *The Old Capital* (1962) – the story of two twin sisters (Chieko and Naeko) who, separated after their birth, progressively reconstruct an affective and existential connection – is riddled with violets, maples, moss, cherry trees, irises, water lilies, pine trees, cypresses, bamboo, weeping willows, cinnamon trees, plane trees, larches, firs, tulips, azaleas, peonies, camphor trees, cedar trees, chrysanthemums, honeysuckles. In *Thousand Cranes* (1952) – an exploration of the protagonist Kikuji's relationships with a number of women, partly linked to his father's past – there are also pomegranates, roses, carnations, bluebells, oleanders. In *The Lake* (1954) – where the sentimental past and present of Ginpei Momoi are fragmentarily reconstructed – appear pine trees, ginkgoes and wild cherry blossoms, as well. Tsukimura Reiko reminds that what seems merely lyrical is in fact a revelation of life in Kawabata. 'Nature works as a consolation which allows us to see beauty in sorrow. Our perception of "the fate of plants" is a barometer of our capacity for sympathy, which testifies to our being genuinely alive. This inseparable relationship between nature and man's intense, and often instantaneous, awareness of life explains the predominance of descriptions of nature in the works of Kawabata' (Tsukimura 1968: 25).

According to Cornyetz's (2007) detailed analysis of different forms of 'aestheticentism', Kawabata's 'cultured' reinvention of the real, in light of the construction of a Japanese spiritual superiority, encompasses nature in the form of not only plants, flowers and trees, but also feminine bodies. The construction of so-called natural aesthetics in his texts involves a deliberate transformation of objects and women into images mirroring the author's own ideal of pleasure. Indeed, in Kawabata's novels, women are often contemplated through glass and mirrors, fetishised, distanced and described as unattainable for the sake of sheer masculine sensual fulfilment. In her political and psychoanalitical study of Kawabata, Cornyetz (2007: 49) attributes to his works a 'complex eroticism that is at once distanced or disinterested, yet also incorporates an experiential-sensual dimension inscribed on female bodies as well as other objects to facilitate a "lived experience" of truth that is particularly, exceptionally, Japanese'.

Especially in books such as *Snow Country* and *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*, descriptions do not differentiate virginal beauties, natural elements, and art objects. *Snow Country* (1947) recounts the winter sojourns of *connoisseur* Shimamura in a hotel in the mountains, and his erotic dalliance with a *maiko*, Komako, whose beauty is constantly praised throughout the novel.[29] *The*

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[29] 'Particularly when a light out in the mountain shone in the center of the girl's face, Shimamura felt his chest rise at the inexpressible beauty of it' (Kawabata 1960: 15). 'The white in the depths of the mirror was the snow, and floating

House of the Sleeping Beauties (1961) revolves around an old man, Eguchi, who spends his nights in a peculiar pleasure house where he is only allowed to sleep close to narcotised virgins, and to desire their bodies at a distance. As Matsuura Hisaki (1992: 270) maintains, 'when Kawabata Yasunari gazes intently at human beings it is the same gaze with which he gazes intently at antique curios [...]; all that is needed is the object-as-fetish for his gaze to uninhibitedly and uni-directionally fondle'. As I am going to analyse below, not only is Calvino keen to operate a stylisation of Kawabata's positional sexism in his Japanese incipit, but this 'uni-directional', *separative* approach to gender ends up filtering through his own production, up until some of *Palomar*'s texts, where it collides with an evolution that is otherwise directed towards a *distinctive* post-human paradigm.

On the other side of Nipponese canon,[30] Ōe Kenzaburō, more politically progressive and stylistically innovative than his predecessor (Yoshida 1995: 10), is himself an avid amateur botanist (Riggan 2002: 5), whose writing is equally dense with natural images (Sakurai 1984: 371). If among his main interest there is the examination of human beings caught in existential situations, as well as the fear of possible deracination by nuclear holocaust (Yoshida 1995: 11), he constantly counts on detailed natural references to represent such forms of disorientation and madness. A passage from *A personal matter* (1964) exemplifies this mechanism effectively: the protagonist rides a bike in a state of utter confusion derived by knowing that his son has just been born with a defective cranial bone structure, and the ginkgo trees that he encounters are thoroughly described with the aim of reflecting the character's inner state:

> As Bird watched the water ripple away from the tires with his body tilted sharply into the wind, he began to feel dizzy. He looked up: no one on the dawn street as far as he could see. The ginkgo trees that hemmed the street were thick and dark with leaves and each of those countless leaves was swollen with the water it had drunk. Black trunks supporting deep oceans of green (Ōe 1969: 21-22).

As the scene procedes, the reader is also confronted with the second distinguishing feature that interests this analysis, that is, the narrativisation of the web of interdependencies that has been above referred to in light of Shinto and Buddhism.

1.2.6. From human-nature interdependencies to mutual identifications

The main character of Ōe's *A Personal Matter*, Bird, feels 'threatened by the trees' (1969: 22), as if they were properly living and agentive beings as much as himself.[31] This device recurs often in many of the Japanese books that Calvino read. In Kawabata's *The Old Capital* Chieko 'sometimes [...] was moved by the "life" of the violets on the tree. Other times their "loneliness" touched her heart' (Kawabata 1987: 3). In addition to these instances, Natsume Sōseki achieves a peculiar form of 'dehumanisation of art'[32] in *I Am a Cat* (1906), by describing the life of a domestic environment 'with the aloofness,

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in the middle of it were the woman's bright red cheeks. There was an indescribably fresh beauty in the contrast' (ivi: 45).

[30] In an interview by Yoshida Sanroku (1988: 397), on 7 June 1986, Ōe clearly declares his antipathy for such people as Kawabata Yasunari or Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, toward which he used to feel antagonistic, especially in his early years as a writer.

[31] As Yoshida (1985: 83-84) points out, this form of defamiliarisation, which Ōe borrows mainly from Rabelaisian grotesque realism, characterises many of the author's works.

[32] I am here referring to the concept as analysed by Ortega y Gasset in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays* (1925).

indifference, and irony of a pet cat' (Odin 2001: 244). Hane (2013: 93) recalls that Natsume became a writer best known to the average Japanese because *I Am a Cat* was included in the public school reader: many generations of Japanese people thus became acquainted not only with a vivid description of the mundane universe of human interactions, but also with the hypothetical intersection of the human with plausible non-human perspectives. One of the *haiku* collected by Iarocci revolves around a similar cross-species interaction:

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

Another poem, by Natsume himself, plainly envisages a future life in the guise of a violet:

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

The step that inevitably follows the dynamic interaction between nature and human beings is that of their mutual identification, quintessential *confusive* stage. To focus on Kawabata's texts, in *The Old Capital* the fate of twins Chieko and Naoko is mirrored precisely by two violets:

> She could faintly see the violets growing in the two hollows of the great maple. There were no flowers on them now, but the two small violets in the upper and lower hollows – were they Chieko and Naeko? It looked as though the violets could never meet, but had they met tonight? (Kawabata 1987: 88)

Beauty and Sadness (1964) tells the story of the long-lasting but unattainable love between writer Oki and artist Otoko, interlaced with the sexual and sentimental desires of a number of peripheral female characters. The text describes a woman who empathises with the rain and compares it with tears, an old lady who even identifies herself with the rain, whereas a metalinguistic passage of the book deals with the habit of Kansai language of referring to natural elements with honorary titles. In *The Lake*, the titular natural environment is what the main character, Ginpei, dreams of swimming into, but it is a lake that pertains to the realm of memories and of an interplay of human features ('The sudden discovery numbed his brain, and her eyes became a black lake. He wanted to swim in her pure eyes, to bathe naked in the black lake, but he also felt a deep despair' – Kawabata 1974: 87). As Tsuruta (1971: 261-262) remarks, *Snow Country* is riddled with flow dynamics which result, in the final pages, in a suggestive scene where the Milky Way takes on a human quality ('The Milky Way came down just over there, to wrap the night earth in its naked embrace. There was a terrible voluptuousness about it' – Kawabata 1960: 134). Not only, through this parallel, does Kawabata describe 'the actual circumstances of human beings as figuratively and psychologically corresponding to the beautiful scenes' of nature (Akiyama 1989: 197), but this intertwining of human and natural destinies can even point to a sort of mystical communion (Phillips 2006: 427). The *distinctive* elaboration of the *holistic* experience, in Kawabata's case, thus aims to overturn human-nature dualities in light of a superior form of cultured aestheticism.

A superior aesthetic *holism* characterises Japanese poetry, too. In his 'Lectures on Zen Buddhism', Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1960: 2-4) refers to different poetic reactions to a flower seen in

the wild by English poet Alfred Tennyson, on the one hand,[33] and by Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō, on the other.[34] Tennyson needs to pick the flower in order to understand 'God and man', and by his *having* it, he destroys the flower. Instead Bashō wants to *see*, not merely look at the flower, but also 'to be at one, to "one" himself with it – and to let it live' (Fromm 1978: 17). Japanese poetic expression, which merges attention to detail and subject-nature union,[35] thus often reflects the Shinto and Buddhist interconnection of things that has much in common with Heideggerian *aletheia*. As in the German philosopher's *Being and Time*, the world discloses its meaning via a *holistic* structure, which can be accordingly expressed via poetic language, in a passage from *confusiveness* to *distinctiveness*.

As I am going to discuss in greater detail in the chapters on language and death, Japanese poetry appeals to Calvino especially in view of the reflections developed in *Palomar*, which are closely related to perspective changes. Yves Bonnefoy (2015: 19) maintains that the *haiku* represents an impulse towards things, and an act of fusion with them. Given the use of ideograms, which can evoke things even by means of their layout, words and things undergo a continuous semantic exchange in that particular form of poetry that is Japanese *haiku*. Even if Calvino only got acquainted with a number of Italian translations, it is possible to speculate that one of the reasons behind his appreciation of Japanese poetry's relationship with nature (SNiA, 612) lies precisely in his awareness of the interconnectedness of things and events which *haiku* represents. This awareness is also highlighted in Zanzotto's introduction to the collection *Cento haiku* (2014: 9-10). Moreover, *haiku* gives poetical form to the Buddhist principle of 'Non-obstruction' which Calvino himself explores both in *Palomar* and in 'Per Arakawa' (see § 3.3.3.).

Kawabata's and Bashō's works represent only two facets of a multifarious literary tradition, where a similar integrated approach to nature can lead to completely different outcomes, as it is worth underlining. To refer to a very distant example, Abe Kōbō represents, via human-vegetal metamorphoses, the 'evaporation of the self-subject, an arguably historical Western construct' (Guest 2004: 172). Abe's early, surrealistic stories, often tell of physical transformation of man into some other, mainly vegetal, forms (Yamamoto 1980).[36] Then, the peculiar 'surreality in which subject and object continually infuse each other' (Guest 2004: 168) progressively passes onto images and perspectival games that, while not implicating necessarily metamorphic changes, do not cease to interrogate the porous relation between humanity and what surrounds it.

In Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962) there is a recurring reference to the Möbius strip, a symbol of the protagonist's very story, since Jumpei is an entomologist who is suddenly trapped in a village stuck in the sand, as if he was an insect himself. In *The Face of Another* (1964), it is a mask which is demanded to reconstruct, in vain, a broken balance between subject as self-affirming rationality,

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[33] Tennyson's poem reads as follows: 'Flower in a crannied wall, | I pluck you out of the crannies, | I hold you here, root and all, in my hand, | Little flower – but *if* I could understand | What you are, root and all, and all in all, | I should know what God and man is'.

[34] Bashō's *haiku*, in its English translation, runs like this: 'When I look carefully | I see the *nazuna* blooming | By the hedge!'.

[35] Suzuki (1980: 76) explains the structural mechanism behind a poet's connection with a flower, that passes from the *confusive* to the *distinctive* step: 'It is not that the poet comes to beauty through or by means of what our senses and intellect distinguish as individual objects. The poet knows no other beauty than the morning glory as she stands beside it. The flower is beauty itself: the poet is beauty itself. Beauty recognizes beauty, beauty finds itself in beauty'.

[36] Yamamoto (1980: 174) distinguishes Abe's early works into two groups: one in which transformation is an 'active force allowing man to start a new life style' ('The Flood, 1950; 'The Magical Chalk', 1950; 'The Life of a Poet', 1951), a second one where transformation is a 'negative force which is destructive of the human psyche' ('Dendrocalia', 1949; 'A Red Cocoon', 1950; *The Wall – Mr. S. Karuma's Crime*, 1951; 'A Stick', 1955).

and public gaze (Persiani 2001). In *The Ruined Map* (1967), a similar overturning of conditions actualises once the detective becomes the man he himself is looking for (Seaman 2012: 53). Finally, in *The Box Man* (1973), the box that the main character decides to inhabit appears as a metaphor for a uni-directional view of the Other, thus for photography and writing (Guest 2004: 170), but the very fragmentation of the self that the absurd plot points to is enhanced by the representation of the permeability between self and environment (Hock Soon Ng 2009: 317), by means of surreal perspectival games:

> He had the impression that the whole view had turned into eyes that reproached him. Instinctively he ducked his head. [...] The second time he continued watching in defiance of the vista that bore down on him from the eyepiece. [...] He was vividly aware of the change in the relationship between himself and the scene, between himself and the world. [...] He looked playfully at the street beyond the mirror. And the street returned the smile of the amorous boy. Just by looking at it, the world was happy for him. In his imagination he put his signature to a peace treaty between himself and the world (Abe 2001: 150-151).

Abe's ability to depict the dissolution of the self by means of multiple narrative perspectives and plotless novels can be put in fruitful dialogue with what, at the beginning of the century, Akutagawa created in his short stories. As Aaron Gerow (1995: 201-202) highlights, Akutagawa engaged in the challenge of a new identity to construct also by approaching cinema, and Kurosawa's cinematic transposition of *Rashomon* – a story on the diverse realities entailed in diverse perspectives on the same life event, which Calvino appreciated (Munari 2011: 110) – can be considered as a *mise en abyme* of a 'commentary on reflexivity, intersubjectivity and multiple perspectives' (Bachnik 1987: 32).

Fredric Jameson (1993: xiii) recalls that Japanese literary critic, Karatani Kōjin has observed that the Japanese never needed deconstruction because they never had a centred subject to begin with. This provocative statement illuminates the idiosyncratic relationship to nature of many of the Japanese writers that Calvino read, despite their peculiarities and distinctions. In this relationship, the human subject does not impose its centrality (*separative* paradigm), but is rather committed to describing in detail the surrounding environment as 'other' and 'self' at the same time, and to illuminating its own human condition (*distinctive* logic) by making the interwoven human-nature relation emerge (*confusive* step). After all, if Japanese culture can be considered as characterised, as naturalist Imanishi Kinji used to say, by a 'subjectivation of the environment' and a parallel 'environmentalisation of the subject' (Berque 2017: 21), then the interconnection of nature and human beings cannot but represent a key structural feature of Japanese literature, as this section has aimed to prove.

1.3. Perspectives on Calvino's mature production

From a structural analysis of Japanese gardens and of the treatment of nature in Japanese literary expressions emerges a viable roadmap: one that takes into account both the *separation* of natural and human realms and their *confusion*, in order to reach an awareness of the vital, *distinctive* intersection of the two. Most of all, the natural 'other' that many Japanese forms of art summon has to do, more often than not, with botany rather than animality. It is thus fruitful to interrogate Calvino's accounts of his Japanese journey in light of a progressive inclusion of the *entire* environment in the author's trajectory, beyond the initial struggle to represent human-vegetal relationships, and towards a sharper

distinctive decentralisation of the human. Indeed, I interrupted the investigation of Calvino's narrative evolution after pointing out his early penchant for *separative* representations, followed by his experimentation with the *confusive* fantastic holism of *Le cosmicomiche*. But if, in a fantastic creation, human and natural coordinates are after all suspended, in a truly existing environment such as the Japanese garden Calvino has the opportunity to relate to the three structural paradigms in their tangibility, *holism* included. The article 'Il rovescio del sublime' offers, in this respect, the most interesting material, which productively illuminates the following trajectory of *Palomar* and its potential deployment of a non-anthropocentric humanism.

1.3.1. 'Il rovescio del sublime': experiencing holism

Describing the garden of Sentō Imperial Palace, Calvino unavoidably deploys his hereditary sensibility for natural details, which chimes with the above-analysed similar feature of many Japanese novels and poems. He describes little lakes, waterfalls, lawns, hillocks, rocks, slopes, bridges, and paths, and illustrates maples, conifers, ginkgo trees, pine-trees, cedar-moss, camellias, and dwarf-bamboo plants, indulging in the depiction of their vegetal specificities and always enriching this exactitude with colorist annotations:

> Le foglie degli aceri a novembre diventano d'un rosso scarlatto che è la nota dominante del paesaggio autunnale giapponese, spiccando sullo sfondo verde cupo delle conifere e sulle varie tonalità di fulvo, di ruggine e di giallo degli altri fogliami (S, 573).

> Gialle del giallo più acuto e luminoso sono invece le foglie del ginkgo, che cadono in pioggia dagli altissimi rami come petali di fiori: infinite foglioline a forma di ventaglio, una pioggia continua e leggera che pigmenta di giallo la superficie del laghetto (S, 573).

> Ecco, sopra gli alberi rossi e ruggine e gialli di là dal laghetto, sporgono i rami nudi d'un unico albero che ha perduto le foglie. Tra quel fiammeggiare di colori, quei rami neri e stecchiti fanno un contrasto funereo. Passa uno stormo d'uccelli e tra tutti gli alberi intorno puntano dritti sull'albero spoglio, calano sui rami, si posano lì a uno a uno, neri contro il cielo, a godersi il sole di novembre (S, 576).

These detailed, 'exact' descriptions of the surrounding environment stem from a *separative* mode, which implies a supposed human centrality and human ability to contain nature in its own linguistic terms. At the same time, in 'Il rovescio del sublime' Calvino brings to the fore the interconnection and mutual identification between human and vegetal beings, thus adopting a *confusive* paradigm, as well. Japanese gardens' natural elements are described in human terms so often that it is difficult not to read these personifications in light of a precise structural (*holistic*) choice:

> di cascate d'acqua il giardino Sento ne ha due: *una maschio* e *una femmina* (Odaki e Medaki), la prima a picco tra le rocce, la seconda che *mormora saltellando* tra gradini di sassi in una crepa del prato (S, 575).

> [...] vero spirito del giardino giapponese, dove mai un elemento *prende il sopravvento* su un altro (S, 575).

> [...] un greto di ciottoli levigati e tondeggianti, grigio-chiari e grigio-scuri, che continuano sotto l'acqua verde del laghetto *come godendo della sua trasparenza* (S, 579 – all emphases are mine).

What is even more relevant, to corroborate the *confusive* hypothesis, is that the text also presents an opposite form of influence or identification – from natural forms to human beings:

> Ma non è con un atto di sfacciata prepotenza cromatica che *gli aceri s'impongono alla vista*: se *l'occhio viene calamitato* da loro come inseguendo il motivo di una musica è per la leggerezza delle foglie stellate (S, 573).

> Molte *vecchie* in Giappone sono *ingobbite e contorte come per una parentela con gli alberi nani* coltivati in vaso secondo l'antica arte del *bonsai*. [...] Basse di statura sotto grandi fagotti di foglie secche e cesti di rami, armate di rastrelli e di roncole, non si capisce se vecchie o giovani ma già *nodose e contorte come per un adattamento ambientale* (S, 574 – emphases mine).

Nature thus acquires its own agency, which is even able to influence the outward appearance, actions, and attitudes of human beings, in a reciprocal interrelation which goes beyond canonical forms of personification.

At this point, Calvino's line of reasoning takes an interesting turn, where I would identify his becoming conscious of the *distinctive* hypothesis, originating from the harmonisation of *separative* and *confusive*. It is worth reading the relevant passage in full:

> Seguendo il filo delle mie riflessioni, mi viene da pensare che qui poesie e giardini si generano gli uni dagli altri a vicenda: i giardini venivano composti come illustrazioni a poesie e le poesie venivano composte come commento ai giardini. Ma mi viene da pensarlo più per amore della simmetria nei ragionamenti che perché ne sia veramente convinto: ossia, trovo ben plausibile che si possa fare con la disposizione degli alberi l'equivalente d'una poesia, ma sospetto che per scrivere una poesia sugli alberi gli alberi veri servano poco o nulla (S, 576).

Even if poems and gardens are both cultural products, the closeness to nature of gardens is indisputable. In order to create these spaces, the human being has to take into account the specificities of natural materiality, differently from when composing a poem. Thus, Calvino is here recognising the autonomy of poetry – and language *tout court* – from the surrounding world, but is only able to attain such an awareness after hypothesising a nature-culture reciprocity. To stick to the structural categories employed so far, Calvino can only appreciate the *distinctive* peculiarities of being human – among which, in the first place, its linguistic ability – on the bedrock of previous reflections regarding *separative* anthropocentrism and *confusive* holism.

As Calvino declared in a television interview in 1979: 'Quello che mi interessa è il mosaico in cui l'uomo si trova incastrato: il gioco di rapporti, la figura da scoprire tra gli arabeschi del tappeto. Tanto so già che dall'umano non scappo di sicuro' (SNiA, 245, n. 6). The author thus advances a new mode of being human, widely discussed today under the definition of 'post-human'. That is, a vision according to which the most specific human feature lies in the ability to dismiss human centrality and to recognise a non-hierarchical coexistence of beings, precisely as it is envisaged both in Shinto and in Buddhism. If the roots of 'post-humanism' in Western debates go back to Michel Foucault's reflections in *The Order of Things* (originally published in 1966), if not to the Macy conferences on cybernetics held between the 1940s and 1950s (Wolfe 2010: xii), and is mainly connected to the works of Rosi Braidotti, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, this relatively new ontology demonstrating 'the need to reconsider the place of the human vis-à-vis the nonhuman other' (Ferrara 2020: 3) acquires an age-old allure when compared to non-Western traditions, which have long been based on the conjoined determination of beings.

In light of this vision of 'the human and the nonhuman [as] confluent, coemergent, and defining each other in mutual relations', Iovino (2014: 218) has 'posthumanised' Calvino by focusing on the 'hybriditales' of *Le cosmicomiche* and *Palomar*: I argue that, in the passage from the fantastic posthumanism of the cosmicomic tales to the philosophical and poetical posthumanism of *Palomar*, an influential role has to be ascribed to Calvino's interest in Japanese Buddhism and literature, where the non-human is an all-encompassing category including both vegetal and animal beings on the same level.

The key element which distinguishes the achieved *distinctive* awareness from the initial *separative* stance in *Palomar* is the acknowledgment, alongside human specificities, of parallel and not less important natural peculiarities. Human and natural realms are recognised as equally essential, each with its own specific characteristics which do not give rise to any form of hierarchy. In 'Il rovescio del sublime' Calvino writes that '[...] non ha senso aspettarsi che un paesaggio ti detti delle poesie, perché una poesia è fatta di idee e di parole e di sillabe, mentre un paesaggio è fatto di foglie e di colori e di luce' (S, 576-577). As I shall analyse in depth in the chapter about language (see § 2.3.2.), Calvino will confirm this *distinctive* position in a later paper delivered at the Institute for the Humanities of New York University on the 30th of March 1983, under the title of 'The Written and the Unwritten World'. In this essay, he ascribes to the human the impossibility of doing without language, at the same time acknowledging that in the world also exists a 'silenzio pieno di significato' (S, 1869), parallel and equally essential in the macropicture of human-nature relations.

1.3.2. 'Sul tappeto di foglie illuminato dalla luna': stylisation of androcentric perspectives

The first work that Calvino publishes after his Japanese travels is *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, a metanarrative book on the pleasure of reading and the potentialities behind the exploration of different literary traditions. Martin McLaughlin (1998: 116) has defined the book as a 'Borgesian summa' of forms and styles, since the frame story of two readers, a man and a woman, contains within itself ten incipits of different novels that the characters start reading, every time finding themselves unable to proceed beyond a certain point. In an interview by Francine Du Plessix Gray, published on *The New York Times* ('Visiting Italo Calvino', 21.6.1981), Calvino admits that, in the endeavour to compose a pastiche of novelistic styles, he most enjoyed writing those 'subnovels' that were the most divergent from his own style and experience, and specifically points at the Japanese erotic tale.

Indeed, in addition to neo-gothic, Latin-American, modernist and Central European styles, the eighth incipit that Calvino writes is a stylisation of a Japanese novel. 'Sul tappeto di foglie illuminato dalla luna' is set in an undefined and yet easily recognisable Japan, which tells about shady sexual affairs and psychological connections. The main character is involved in an academic research in the library of Mr Okeda, whose taciturn and pensive traits seem to evoke a Zen master's temper.[37] Besides spending his days discussing perceptions with Mr Okeda, he eventually seduces the man's daughter and has a sexual encounter with his wife. In the idiosyncratic context of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, Calvino stages Japanese literature by highlighting one of its most characteristic themes (eroticism) and narrative paces (a rather slow and analytical one) which are abundantly present in several of the novels on Calvino's 'Japanese shelf'.[38]

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[37] The attention devoted to the autonomous experience of the disciple (RR2, 811) rather than to verbal instruction (RR2, 809, 812) is typically Zen. Suzuki (1980: 90) states that '[e]xperience [...] counts much more in Buddhism than its teaching': even if referred to religious experience – thus to something different from what described in Calvino's chapter –, this element throws an interesting light over the figure of Mr Okeda.

[38] To name but a few examples, a similar sexual and sentimental competition between a mother and her daughter can be found in Kawabata's *Thousand Cranes* (1952) and Tanizaki's *The Key* (1956), whereas the situation of a child witnessing one of their parents' extramarital affair is crucial in the development of the main character's deviant psyche in Mishima's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956).

From the outset, the character who says 'I' in Calvino's incipit is prone to describe in detail every single image and perception that he encounters (RR2, 808). As discussed above, the ability to narrow the focus when seeing and describing lies at the root of Japanese storytelling and poetry (Kerr 1999: 42), and it goes hand in hand with a *separative* modality. Conversing with Mr Okeda, the protagonist compares his own experience to a novel, focusing precisely on the process of taming human perceptions that both involve:

> [...] provai a fare il paragone con la lettura d'un romanzo, in cui un'andatura della narrazione molto calma, tutta sullo stesso tono smorzato, serve a far risaltare delle sensazioni sottili e precise su cui si vuole richiamare l'attenzione del lettore (RR2, 812).

As it is typical in the 1979 meta-narrative text, this hypothetical novel mirrors precisely the incipit that the reader is navigating. Soon, Mr Okeda's wife (Miyagi) and daughter (Makiko) make an appearance alongside the two men and, to express the sexual charge that their presence entails, Calvino is compelled to confront his own discomfort at writing about sex, in what can be read as an elaborate play of parody and self-parody. The heavy descriptivism of the incipit is turned from natural elements to the two women's bodies and beauties, and the story acquires the distinctive erotic mark of several of Kawabata's or Tanizaki's books, as well as of other Japanese forms of art, such as the erotic prints that Calvino describes in 'Eros e discontinuità'.[39]

Whereas the main character's reflections revolve around sight and sound (RR2, 808, 811, 819), it is through the filter of his touch that Miyagi's and Makiko's bodies are introduced in the narrative: the shape and the texture of their breasts (RR2, 810, 816), and even of Mrs Miyagi's vagina (RR2, 817), are sketched by means of analytical and detached anatomical descriptions. The involvement of senses other than sight and the lack of a moral lens are certainly two distinguishable features of many Japanese erotic novels that Calvino read, but there is also a European author whose descriptions chime with the ones at stake: Marquis de Sade. Sadian personality and writing infiltrate this discourse via the mediation of Mishima Yukio, who was utterly fascinated by the French nobleman and writer: in the play *Madame de Sade* (1965), which Calvino had in its French translation, Mishima exalted the exceptionality of Sade's aestheticism and eroticism.

Even if Mishima does not fall into the most canonical Japanese erotic tradition, his interest in Sade prompts an interpretive parallel that is not devoid of interest. As Roland Barthes has acutely analysed (1976: 15-37, 123-170), Sadian eroticism is neither suggestive nor metaphorical. It is precisely this central feature of Sade's erotic world that resonates with the tradition of Japanese erotic novels, to which the following Barthesian statement might appropriately be adapted:

> [...] our society never utters any erotic practice, only desires, preliminaries, contexts, suggestions, ambiguous sublimations, so that, for us, eroticism cannot be defined save by a perpetually elusive word. On this basis, Sade is not erotic: in his case there is never any kind of striptease, that apologue essential to modern eroticism (Barthes 1971: 26).

According to this view, the Japanese erotic novel is not erotic, either, neither is 'Sul tappeto di foglie', with its descriptions cut to the chase. It can thus be said that, through this incipit, Calvino's early doubtful

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[39] 'Qualche riflessione sulle stampe erotiche giapponesi. La figura umana vi figura formata da tre elementi ben distinti: 1. i visi concentrati [...]; 2. i corpi dai contorni tracciati con linee distese e nette e dalle superfici senza colore [...]; 3. gli organi sessuali rappresentati con una tecnica molto più minuziosa, una resa tridimensionale (disegnati con molte linee e colori oscuri) che riesce a mostrare tutto: peli, grandi labbra, talora anche l'interno del sesso femminile, e il membro maschile come un viscere turgido' (S, 594).

approach towards eros in literature reaches maturity:[40] by stylising the 'non-eroticism' of Japanese erotic novel, he indirectly proves how eroticism does not lie in obvious descriptions of sexual encounters, but rather in the vicarious sensuality of daily acts such as reading, as embodied by the smart and attractive character of Ludmilla, the female reader in the frame novel of *Se una notte* (see Ferroni 1996: 41-44). In particular, as Marco Belpoliti (1996: 88-90) recalls, in the seventh chapter of the frame the act of reading becomes a metaphor of sensual knowledge, and there is scope for a rare *distinctive* approach to sexuality in the description of a libidinous mutual reading of male and female readers' bodies.[41]

The Japanese incipit, on the other hand, reproduces the problematic character of many Japanese books as far as gender perspective are concerned. In these texts, the anthropocentric gaze that the *confusive* paradigm can potentially decentralise is almost always an androcentric one, and this incipit does not contradict the trend. Indeed, while focusing on observing the body of Mrs Miyagi, the enunciating self realises more than once to be scrutinised in turn by Mr Okeda and Ms Makiko.[42] The observer thus turns out to be observed, with the female body triggering the same twist of perspectives that in Japanese gardens rises from natural elements. As in Kawabata's novels, a female gaze (Ms Makiko's) is only taken into account as a mirror in which the male perspective reflects, and the agency thus attributed to the former is not far from the subordinate agency that nature is granted by a deliberate human concession (as illustrated by the paradigmatic successional process at the core of this analysis). The significance of the experience of beauty, and of interlacing looks thereof, has been analysed by Jacques Lacan (1962-1963: 208-209), too, in that part of his tenth seminar where he settles on an episode occurred while visiting a Buddhist temple in Japan, and describes the look of a Buddha statue, the look of a person who looks at the statue, and the voyeurism of those looking at people looking at statues (Morton 2015: 187). What a feminist reading of the Japanese incipit concurs to highlight, with the awareness of contemporary gender discussions, is the male-centredness of all these experiences.

1.3.3. Relevance of Buddhism and Japanese poetry in *Palomar*'s trajectory

In *Palomar*, the collection of texts that Calvino publishes in 1983, the author develops some of the structural threads concerning perspectives and human-nature relations that the present analysis has so far delineated. It also stages the contradiction just outlined, since it depicts the sequence *separative-confusive-distinctive*, without subverting the androcentric perspective underlying them. For instance, in 'Il seno nudo', the second of the twenty-seven short stories which the book consists of, a naked bosom is treated as a natural object and illustrated in a detailed way that resembles Mishima's or Tanizaki's

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[40] Falaschi (1988: 116-117) recalls that, when working at Einaudi, Calvino was used to discourage writers from writing about sex.

[41] 'Lettrice, ora sei letta. Il tuo corpo viene sottoposto a una lettura sistematica, attraverso canali d'informazione tattili, visivi, dell'olfatto, e non senza interventi delle papille gustative. Anche l'udito ha la sua parte, attento ai tuoi ansiti e ai tuoi trilli. Non solo il corpo è in te oggetto di lettura: il corpo conta in quanto parte d'un insieme d'elementi complicati [...]. E anche tu intanto sei oggetto di lettura, o Lettore: la Lettrice ora passa in rassegna il tuo corpo come scorrendo l'indice dei capitoli [...]' (RR2, 762-763).

[42] 'Ero concentrato a guardarla quando sentii su di me la pupilla immobile del signor Okeda che mi scrutava' (RR2, 809); 'La sera a cena [...] il signor Okeda scrutava i nostri volti come se vi fossero scritti i segreti della giornata' (RR2, 813); 'la ragazza [...] ora veniva a vedere quale ostacolo m'avesse trattenuto' (RR2, 816); 'spalancava gli occhi seguendo i sussulti di sua madre e miei con attrazione e disgusto. Ma non era sola: al di là del corridoio, nel vano d'un'altra porta una figura d'uomo stava immobile in piedi. Non so da quanto tempo il signor Okeda era là. Guardava fissamente, non sua moglie e me, ma sua figlia che ci guardava' (RR2, 817).

descriptions.[43] The bosom triggers a series of reflections on bourgeois *pruderie*,[44] with Palomar's clumsy attempt to take into account a feminine perspective on corporeality only pointing out his ridiculous inability of disposing of his centripetal masculinity.[45] Not by chance, in a text appearing later in the same collection and entitled 'Il museo dei formaggi', sensual desire is more easily projected on a reciprocal relationship between Palomar and food (Wood 1991).[46]

In more than one text of the book, Calvino proves still prone to describing the surrounding world with an attentiveness that testifies to a *separative* disposition. 'Lettura di un'onda' and 'Il prato infinito', to give but the most relevant examples, develop around recurring cognitive demarcations which imply the centrality of the human mind and its attempt to tame natural phenomena:

> [...] volendo evitare le sensazioni vaghe, egli si prefigge per ogni suo atto un oggetto limitato e preciso (RR2, 875).

> Bisognerebbe procedere così, – egli pensa, – prendere un quadrato di prato, un metro per un metro, e ripulirlo fin della più minuta presenza che non sia trifoglio, loglietto o dicondra. Poi passare a un altro quadrato. Oppure, no, fermarsi su un quadrato campione. Contare quanti fili d'erba ci sono, di quali specie, quanto fitti e come distribuiti (RR2, 899).

Leafing through *Palomar*, the reader cannot avoid perceiving that Palomar/Calvino wavers between the attraction for descriptive methods and the awareness of the partiality of their traditional form, which will ultimately be overcome.

The key for a viable enhancement of a Cartesian, anthropocentric, *separative* approach to description is located by Calvino in his recurring appreciations of Francis Ponge's method, indicated as a direct model for *Palomar*:

> Nel mio libro ho tenuto presenti certe esperienze della letteratura francese, soprattutto Francis Ponge, che ammiro molto, come una esperienza unica nella letteratura del nostro secolo, di solidarietà e attenzione e rispetto per i più umili oggetti quotidiani. *Ponge va molto al di là della descrizione: arriva a una identificazione con gli oggetti* (SNiA, 611 – emphasis mine).

Ponge's model recurs often in Calvino's essayistic reflections.[47] What is particularly relevant, in light of this analysis, is that Ponge's identification with objects is more than once referred to in contexts that evoke the analogous approach to things entailed in Buddhism and in Japanese poetry. Common thread

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[43] Mishima, in *The Sound of Waves*, describes the distinctive appearance of the breasts of a virgin (1994: 73); in *Thousand Cranes*, Kawabata recurringly refers to the purple-black birthmark on the left breast of Chikako, one of the main female characters of the book (1981: 4-9; 13; 24; 29; passim).

[44] 'Palomar ripassa davanti a quella bagnante, e questa volta tiene lo sguardo fisso davanti a sé, in modo che esso sfiori con equanime uniformità la schiena delle onde che si ritraggono, gli scafi delle barche tirate in secco, il lenzuolo di spugna steso sull'arena, la ricolma luna di pelle più chiara con l'alone bruno del capezzolo, il profilo della costa nella foschia [...] Ma sarà proprio giusto fare così – riflette ancora, – o non è un appiattire la persona umana al livello delle cose, considerarla un oggetto' (RR2, 881).

[45] 'Ma appena lui torna ad avvicinarsi, ecco che lei s'alza di scatto, si ricopre, sbuffa, s'allontana con scrollate infastidite delle spalle come sfuggisse alle insistenze moleste d'un satiro' (RR2, 882).

[46] '[N]on è questione di scegliere il proprio formaggio ma d'essere scelti. C'è un rapporto reciproco tra formaggio e cliente: ogni formaggio aspetta il suo cliente, si atteggia in modo d'attrarlo, con una sostenutezza o granulosità un po' altezzosa, o al contrario sciogliendosi in un arrendevole abbraccio' (RR2, 934).

[47] See 'Rapidità' (S, 672), 'Esattezza' (S, 692-694), 'Notizia su Giorgio Manganelli' (S, 1156), 'Marianne Moore' (S, 1348), 'Francis Ponge' (S, 1401-1407), 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto' (S, 1873), 'Lo sguardo di Palomar' (SNiA 561), 'La ricchezza degli oggetti' (SNiA, 581-582), 'Il mondo non è un libro, ma leggiamolo lo stesso' (SNiA, 611), 'Il silenzio ha ragioni che la parola non conosce' (SNiA, 623), 'I quaderni degli esercizi' (SNiA, 640).

between these two benchmarks is the preference for a *confusive* description where the subject identifies with the object, as opposed to a *separative* hierarchy whose assumed pinnacle is the human subject:

> *Il signor Palomar è quanto di più vicino si possa immaginare a un monaco, se vogliamo buddista*, anche se è costruito tutto con procedimenti della nostra cultura e non con materiali orecchiati o presi in prestito. Lei [Fabrizia Ramondino, interviewing Calvino for *Il Mattino*] ha fatto il nome di Leiris, che mi pare molto pertinente; è in quelle zone che si possono trovare dei precedenti a Palomar, per esempio le descrizioni di oggetti di Francis Ponge, un autore che io amo molto, o anche in certi *propos* di Alain (SNiA, 560-561 – emphasis mine).

> Con la mia ricerca ho cercato di avvicinarmi di più all'esperienza di Francis Ponge, oppure all'esperienza della poesia americana degli Imagisti, soprattutto a William Carlos William e Marianne Moore. [...] *Forse il mio progetto si collega, anche se da lontano, a certe cose della poesia orientale: penso al rapporto con la natura della poesia giapponese* (SNiA, 611-612 – emphasis mine).

It is important to pay specific attention to what is stated in the former quote: Palomar is embedded in Western culture, his thoughts mainly refer to an Occidental frame of reference. And yet, the need that Calvino feels to connect his character's intellectual experiences to Buddhism and Japan – among many other cultural explorations that he could choose from – bears witness to the impact that Japan has on his conceptualisation and consequent description of the world.

In Buddhist thought and in Japanese poetry – which Calvino gets acquainted with both directly and indirectly, that is, by visiting the country and by reading Percheron, Herrigel, Watts and Rāhula among others – the author finds an instance of the centrality of the *confusive* stage, which eventually leads to a *distinctive* awareness, as I will discuss further in the chapter about death. If the need to take into account animal points of view dates back to as early as 1946, as seen above, from the late 1970s onwards Calvino proves increasingly interested in a proper reconfiguration of society as including human and non-human individuals on the same level, with the non-human encompassing animals, plants, and even stones, precisely as it is intrinsic in the Buddhist view of the world which he came in contact with in those years. To quote but a few instances of this line of thought:

> A me per esempio piace riflettere sul passaggio tra l'animale e l'uomo, sull'analogia tra le forme naturali e quelle culturali (SNiA, 392).

> Credo in una società di tutti gli esseri viventi, e delle piante, e degli oggetti, e delle pietre. Penso che se ho un'anima io, ce l'hanno anche i cosiddetti oggetti inanimati (SNiA, 630).

In the Norton Lecture dedicated to 'Leggerezza', Calvino quotes a number of authors that, before him, were similarly fascinated by the parity of every being, thus by the *confusive* hypothesis, and the reference to Buddha strikingly recurs:

> Anche per Ovidio [come per Lucrezio] tutto può trasformarsi in nuove forme; anche per Ovidio la conoscenza del mondo è dissoluzione della compattezza del mondo; anche per Ovidio c'è una parità essenziale tra tutto ciò che esiste, contro ogni gerarchia di poteri e di valori. [...] Tanto in Lucrezio quanto in Ovidio la leggerezza è un modo di vedere il mondo che si fonda sulla filosofia e sulla scienza: le dottrine di Epicuro per Lucrezio, le dottrine di Pitagora per Ovidio (*un Pitagora che, come Ovidio ce lo presenta, somiglia molto a Budda*) (S, 637-638 – emphasis mine).

Buddha proves an unavoidable reference point when it comes to fraternity between beings. Buddhism overall offers a valid philosophical backdrop to Calvino's interest in the *holistic* hypothesis.

The realm where *holism* fully blooms is poetical: 'la lentezza della coscienza umana a uscire dal suo *parochialism* antropocentrico può essere annullata in un istante dall'invenzione poetica' ('Leggerezza': S, 649 – emphasis in the original text). Here comes the relevance of the quoted passage

where Calvino links the experiment of writing *Palomar* to Japanese poetry. It is there, in poetry, and particularly in Japanese *haiku*, that Calvino identifies the best way to give literary form to that *confusive* paradigm that he has shown interest in for years. The fact that, in his imaginary, Japanese gardens can be equated to poems further strengthens the relevance of Japanese poetical culture in this quest for the best alternative to anthropocentrism.

Moreover, even if *Palomar* is a collection of prose texts, this does not contradict the relevance of poetry in the process that brings to its creation. As much as Calvino considers Ponge as an actual poet, despite his writing prose poems,[48] and as Kawabata composed poetic prose throughout his career, otherwise devoted to novels,[49] what matters when it comes to *Palomar* is the poetical posture which allows the renovation of a sense of wonder and the expression of a *holism* encompassing any living and non-living being:

> la poesia non avrà mai fine, e così quel caso particolare della poesia che chiamiamo romanzo: la poesia come primo atto naturale di chi prenda coscienza di se stesso, di chi si guarda attorno con lo stupore d'essere al mondo (S, 89).

> il suo sogno [di Palomar] sarebbe annullare se stesso in quanto soggetto per essere uno strumento mediante il quale il mondo guarda il mondo (SNiA, 638).

> siccome [Palomar] crede che non solo l'uomo tenda a creare e produrre forme e figure, ma pure vi tendano ogni animale e pianta e cosa inanimata, e così il mondo intero e l'universo, egli considera l'uomo come uno strumento di cui il mondo si serve per rinnovare la propria immagine di continuo (S, 1991-1992).

In this approach, one could undoubtedly recognise an echo of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), according to which it is more appropriate to say that the world perceives itself through the perception of a person, rather than that a person perceives the world. Not by chance, comparative philosophical approaches have highlighted Merleau-Ponty's outstanding proximity to Buddhism's nondiscriminating mode of consciousness (Midal 2013: 112-113), where the 'mind can engage an intersubjective experience with nature' (Shaner 1989: 171). The same mode of consciousness is active in the Japanese poetical view of a subject-nature union, as seen above.

In order to attain the awareness of the interconnection of beings, and of beings and world, Mahāyāna and Ch'an masters locate themselves at the summit of things, in what is usually called a 'bird's-eye vision' (Faure 1987: 347). Palomar himself attains his closest acquaintance with the *confusive* paradigm precisely by taking on the point of view of birds in two texts, both in 'Dal terrazzo' and in 'L'invasione degli storni':

> La terrazza è a due livelli: un'altana o belvedere sovrasta la baraonda dei tetti su cui il signor Palomar fa scorrere uno sguardo da uccello. Cerca di pensare il mondo com'è visto dai volatili. [...] Così ragionano gli uccelli, o almeno così ragiona, immaginandosi uccello, il signor Palomar (RR2, 919-920).

> Se si sofferma per qualche minuto a osservare la disposizione degli uccelli uno in rapporto all'altro, il signor Palomar si sente preso in una trama la cui continuità si estende uniforme e senza brecce, come se anche lui

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[48] 'E poiché questo mio invito vuole rivolgersi ai moltissimi potenziali lettori di Ponge che ancora non lo conoscono per nulla, m'affretto a dire la cosa che avrei dovuo dire per prima: che questo poeta ha scritto esclusivamente in prosa' ('Francis Ponge': S, 1403).

[49] Gessel (1993: 159) connects Kawabata's so-called 'palm-of-the-hand stories' to his early formation as a Neo-Perceptionist. The New Perception School (*Shinkankaku-ha*) was devoted to view every incident of the human condition through new eyes and to break away from Japanese realism and autobiographism, dominating in the first decades of the twentieth century.

facesse parte di questo corpo in movimento composto di centinaia e centinaia di corpi staccati ma il cui insieme costituisce un oggetto unitario (RR2, 926-927).

Brian Fitzgerald (1994: 52) observes that *Palomar* adheres here to a 'unifying vision' offered by the projection of imagination onto an animal standpoint. The latter is recognised as different from the human viewpoint, whilst a potential homology of experience is imagined, linking the two perceptions in the construction of a *confusive* heuristic vision that is already on the verge of turning *distinctive*.

Indeed, even more relevant than a non-anthropomorphic identification is, in 'L'invasione degli storni', the definition of form as 'a recognition of the subject in the object' (Fitzgerald 1994: 53): 'Finalmente una forma emerge dal confuso battere d'ali, avanza, s'addensa: è una forma circolare, come una sfera, una bolla, *il fumetto di qualcuno che sta pensando a un cielo pieno d'uccelli*' (RR2, 927 – emphasis mine). As Fitzgerald (1994: 53) puts it, 'the subject must go beyond itself into the object for either the object to reveal itself or the subject to reveal itself in the object. It may be that these two aspects of revealing are one and the same thing'. In other words, what emerges in the intertwined confusion of subject and object is a deeper comprehension of both, according to those specificities that only a mutual confrontation can reveal, that is, a *distinctive* understanding of human and non-human realms.

In a *confusive* dimension everything, from human to animal and vegetal forms, from materiality to immateriality, can be equated. But, as the text 'L'invasione degli storni' helps understand, this does not happen for the sake of merely overcoming borders and attaining confusion out of *confusiveness*, but rather with the aim of extrapolating a better comprehension of the world and of the self in their diverse, yet interconnected specificities. It can be said that, in the suggestive image of a flock of starlings in the shape of the thought of someone thinking about a flock of starlings, Calvino attains precisely that 'poetic invention' that can lead out of anthropocentric parochialism more effectively than any philosophical reflection (see 'Leggerezza': S, 649). In this case, the identification between human and other-than-human is imagined as influencing not only the content, but even the form of a person's thoughts. If, in Calvino's early works, human perceptions were projected on objective correlatives that ratified a structural anthropocentrism, here a poetical image unsettles the very roots of that hiearchy, arguably mindful of the interaction of human and other-than-human informing Japanese gardens – not by chance interpreted by Calvino as embodied poems.

In *Palomar*, Calvino indulges also in conceptual analyses of similar matters. For instance, in 'Il mondo guarda il mondo' he states:

> Dunque: c'è una finestra che s'affaccia sul mondo. Di là c'è il mondo; e di qua? Sempre il mondo: cos'altro volete che ci sia? Con un piccolo sforzo di concentrazione Palomar riesce a spostare il mondo da lì davanti e a sistemarlo affacciato al davanzale. Allora, fuori dalla finestra, cosa rimane? Il mondo anche lì, che per l'occasione s'è sdoppiato in mondo che guarda e mondo che è guardato. [...] forse l'io non è altro che la finestra attraverso la quale il mondo guarda il mondo. Per guardare se stesso il mondo ha bisogno degli occhi (e degli occhiali) del signor Palomar. Dunque [...] d'ora in avanti le guarderà [le cose] con uno sguardo che viene dal di fuori, non da dentro di lui (RR2, 969).

Subject and object are but the same, as the *confusive* hypothesis implies. And this is not only true for fantastic, anthropomorphic, and continuously transforming creatures, as in *Le cosmicomiche*. Rather, this equivalence applies to the world and to its real, existing dwellers, which thanks to this perspective are understood in their inseparability and difference, at the same time. A perspective that, it is worth restating, also lies at the foundation of Buddhist conceptions.

A comparison between this passage from 'Il mondo guarda il mondo' and the same concept as it was already expressed in 'Dall'opaco' (1971)[50] can help illuminate the potential influence of Eastern thought on the development of Calvino's view. In 'Dall'opaco' the author wrote:

> «D'int'ubagu», dal fondo dell'opaco io scrivo, ricostruendo la mappa d'un aprico che è solo un inverificabile assioma per i calcoli della memoria, il luogo geometrico dell'io, di un me stesso di cui il me stesso ha bisogno per sapersi me stesso, l'io che serve solo perché il mondo riceva continuamente notizie dell'esistenza del mondo, un congegno di cui il mondo dispone per sapere se c'è (RR3, 101).

Curiously, the word 'congegno' used in 'Dall'opaco', which is still ascribable to a *separative* conception of the world, disappears in *Palomar*. A synonym ('meccanismo') will resurface in the text that follows 'Il mondo guarda il mondo', that is, 'L'universo come specchio', only to be qualified as obstructed and to be compared to Palomar's convoluted inwardness ('il cielo stellato sprizza bagliori intermittenti *come un meccanismo inceppato*, che sussulta e cigola in tutte le sue giunture non oliate, avamposti d'un universo pericolante, contorto, senza requie come lui': RR2, 974 – emphasis mine). After all, the Buddhist model of the universe that in the intervening years Calvino has the chance to explore is biological-organic, as opposed to presumed well-oiled mechanical models characterising many Western conceptualisations (King 1982: x-xi). The (albeit slight) difference separating 'Il mondo guarda il mondo' and 'Dall'opaco' might be ascribed to the acquaintance made with this alternative model.

1.3.4. Palomar's attainment of a *distinctive* awareness

What I argue to be truly innovative in *Palomar* is the dethronement of the subject operated by the subject itself, which no longer dwells at the pinnacle of a supposed universal hierarchy, but rather recognises to be integrated part of an interconnected universe equally belonging to human, animal, vegetal and even mineral beings. This innovation emerges distinctly once post-human coordinates are enriched with cross-cultural nuances, as proposed by the present research: the acknowledgement of the traditional centrality of the interrelation of every being in many expressions of Japanese culture puts Calvino's mature evolution in dialogue with an extremely rich source of influence, which has been neglected so far.

Indeed, the understanding of the whole is only guaranteed by the understanding of each part reflecting the whole itself, as in the net of Indra or in the structuralist approach to the world, according to which a system is immanent in each of its constitutive elements (Starobinski 1965: XIX).[51] This heuristic stage finally coincides with the *distinctive* mode, where the difference between self and other becomes a fertile cognitive and artistic threshold to navigate. Palomar, without losing his human characteristics, realises that he can better understand himself by confusing himself with nature, and by acquiring a novel self-confidence precisely in this act of self-decentring. Calvino, contextually, attains the most suitable means to represent this awareness via his own experience of decentralisation of Western coordinates, as this research argues.

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[50] The topic interests Calvino as early as 1967 at least, as proved by an interview with Madeleine Santschi: 'Io credo che il mondo esiste indipendentemente dall'uomo; il mondo esisteva prima dell'uomo ed esisterà dopo, e l'uomo è solo un'occasione che il mondo ha per organizzare alcune informazioni su se stesso. Quindi la letteratura è per me una serie di tentativi di conoscenza e di classificazione delle informazioni sul mondo, il tutto molto instabile e relativo ma in qualche modo non inutile' (RR2, XXIII).

[51] I am going to draw a more systematic parallel between Calvino's Japanese experience and his idiosyncratic structuralist approach to the world in the chapter on the conceptualisation of the void.

An article that Calvino writes in 1977, titled 'L'uovo enciclopedico', is enlightening in respect of the *distinctive* paradigm that the author develops over time. He describes Palomar leafing through Enciclopedia Einaudi, and states:

> la voce *Anthropos* è letta con passione da Palomar non solo perché tutti i problemi vi convergono, ma perché, come ricognizione dei confini dell'uomo, mentre avvita la sua spirale verso un centro d'ogni discorso, allo stesso tempo si proietta ai margini esterni (centro e margini che continuamente sfuggono all'indagine, che non si lasciano definire, che fondamentalmente non esistono). La voce *Anthropos* è preceduta immediatamente dalla voce *Animale* (di Jacques Barrau) che è come sua complementare. (Il posto che nella coscienza dell'uomo, nelle varie civiltà, ha avuto l'animale, come differenza ma spesso anche identificandosi con lui). Palomar s'affretta a leggere anche *Animale*, poi compie una rilettura comparata delle due voci: ecco che stavolta la prossimità alfabetica funziona davvero come l'ordine della conoscenza (S, 1799).

As Carrie Rohman (2009: 66) highlights, Calvino 'posits the simultaneous difference and sameness of the nonhuman animal and suggests that we need to find ways to acknowledge this complexity'. In *Palomar*, the author approaches animality with even sharper poetic and philosophic tools than in his early years, thanks to his progressive comprehension of the entire natural alterity in his reflections, arguably owing to his acquaintance with Buddhist inclusiveness.

Several texts in *Palomar* bear witness to this *distinctive* mode of knowledge, where observed nature allows the understanding of certain aspects of the observing human that would otherwise be of difficult observation. 'Il fischio del merlo' advances a challenging blackbird/human parallel as far as communication is concerned, which I am going to analyse in the following chapter. By watching the sexual intercourse between two turtles in 'Gli amori delle tartarughe', Palomar struggles to imagine the sensations of the pair of mating animals, but at the same time formulates, out of that incomprehension, a set of challenging questions regarding human eros:

> Cos'è l'eros se al posto della pelle ci sono piastre d'osso e scaglie di corno? Ma anche quello che noi chiamiamo eros non è forse un programma delle nostre macchine corporee, più complicato perché la memoria raccoglie i messaggi d'ogni cellula cutanea, d'ogni molecola dei nostri tessuti e li moltiplica combinandoli con gli impulsi trasmessi dalla vista e con quelli suscitati dall'immaginazione? (RR2, 889)

At times, it is even possible to identify the interconnectedness of *confusive* and *distinctive* paradigms within the same text. For instance, in 'Dal terrazzo', when describing his terrace (to be considered as an urban variant of that space which has often been recurring in this analysis, that is, a garden), Palomar emphasises that its luxuriance derives from his wife's 'attenzione alle cose singole, scelte e fatte proprie per *identificazione interiore* e così entrate a comporre un insieme dalle multiple variazioni' (RR2, 918 – emphasis mine). Not only does Calvino project on Mrs Palomar the *confusive* logic that he appreciated in Zen gardens, but he extrapolates, contrastingly, a *distinctive* understanding of his own failed accord with the cyclic nature of plants, with significant consequences that sound like a motto for the entire book:

> Le preoccupazioni del coltivatore per cui ciò che conta è quella data pianta, quel dato pezzo di terreno esposto al sole dalla tale ora alla tale ora, [...] sono estranee alla mente modellata sui procedimenti dell'industria, cioè portata a decidere sulle impostazioni generali e sui prototipi. Quando Palomar s'era accorto di quanto approssimativi e votati all'errore sono i criteri di quel mondo dove credeva di trovare precisione e norma universale, era tornato lentamente a costruirsi un rapporto col mondo limitandolo all'osservazione delle forme visibili (RR2, 918).

In 'La pancia del geco' Palomar recurringly compares some features of the gecko to human organs (its claws are compared to actual hands, its legs to human elbows), without dispensing with parallels with other animals (the gecko's tip of the chin, 'hard and all scales', is compared to that of an

alligator). Alongside this *confusive* description, a *distinctive* attempt to understand a troublesome aspect of human morality is advanced:

> [il geco:] una macchina elaboratissima, studiata in ogni microscopico dettaglio, tanto che viene da chiedersi se una tale perfezione non sia sprecata, viste le operazioni limitate che compie. O forse è quello il suo segreto: soddisfatto d'essere, riduce il fare al minimo? Sarà questa la sua lezione, l'opposto della morale che in gioventù il signor Palomar aveva voluto far sua: cercare sempre di fare qualcosa un po' al di là dei propri mezzi? (RR2, 923).

The entire book is riddled with similar questions arising from the observation of the forms and behaviours of animals, and connecting them to specific aspects of human interior and exterior life. Just to quote a few other instances, there is the sense of apprehension triggered by the passage of migratory birds in 'L'invasione degli storni': 'Sarà perché questo affollarsi del cielo ci ricorda che l'equilibrio della natura è perduto? O perché il nostro senso d'insicurezza proietta dovunque minacce di catastrofe?' (RR2, 926). In 'La corsa delle giraffe', the unharmonious movements of giraffes and their heterogeneous yet perfectly functioning bodies offer food for thought as far as the world's and Palomar's very movements are concerned:

> Il signor Palomar [...] si domanda il perché del suo interesse per le giraffe. Forse perché il mondo intorno a lui si muove in modo disarmonico ed egli spera sempre di scoprirvi un disegno, una costante. Forse perché lui stesso sente di procedere spinto da moti della mente non coordinati, che sembrano non aver niente a che fare con l'uno e con l'altro e che è sempre difficile far quadrare in un qualsiasi modello d'armonia interiore (RR2, 941).

An albino gorilla never abandoning a rubber tyre recalls human investment in things, in the search for an escape from the dismay of living, which triggers Palomar's 'simultaneous alienation and camaraderie' with the animal (Rohman 2009: 71):

> Nell'enorme vuoto delle sue ore, «Copito de Nieve» non abbandona mai il copertone. Cosa sarà questo oggetto per lui? Un giocattolo? Un feticcio? Un talismano? A Palomar sembra di capire perfettamente il gorilla, il suo bisogno d'una cosa da tener stretta mentre tutto gli sfugge [...]. Di lì gli si può aprire uno spiraglio verso quella che per l'uomo è la ricerca d'una via d'uscita dallo sgomento di vivere: l'investire se stesso nelle cose, il riconoscersi nei segni, il trasformare il mondo in un insieme di simboli (RR2, 943).

Finally, the iguanas in a reptile house of the Parisian Jardin des Plantes – again described by means of parallels with human and other animal bodies,[52] and even with flora and stones[53] – renovate the interrelation between interspecial, *confusive* proximity, and a *distinctive* understanding of human relativity, in 'L'ordine degli squamati': 'sono queste le sensazioni di chi s'affaccia fuori dall'umano? Al di là del vetro d'ogni gabbia c'è il mondo di prima dell'uomo, o di dopo, a dimostrare che il mondo dell'uomo non è eterno e non è l'unico' (RR2, 947). It can be said that Calvino is here anticipating what Braidotti (2016: 23) has defined as 'a relational ethics that values cross-species, transversal alliances with the productive and immanent force of *zoe*, or nonhuman life'. I argue that, in *Palomar*, the author explores philosophically and poetically the porosity of the human in direct – albeit not exclusive – consequence of his cross-species experience in Japanese Zen gardens.

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[52] 'Le zampe anteriori a cinque dita farebbero pensare più ad artigli che a mani se non fossero impiantate su vere e proprie braccia, muscolose e ben modellate'; 'iguane [...] che si scambiano continuamente di posizione con agili mosse di gomiti e ginocchi'; 'la pelle d'un verde brillante, con un puntino color rame al posto dove i pesci hanno le branchie, una barba bianca crestata' (RR2, 946).
[53] '[I]l Cordilo gigante africano dalle scaglie puntute e folte come pelo o foglie'; 'bestie e piante e rocce si scambiano squame, aculei, concrezioni' (RR2, 946).

As many ecological readings of Calvino's works have emphasised, the kind of humanism that the author pursues over time is a non-anthropocentric one. What this research aims to underline is that the heuristic position according to which the human is recognised as 'materially and historically permeable to other natures' (Iovino 2014: 218) chimes with, and probably emerges from, a fundamental feature of Buddhism and of certain forms of Japanese literature that Calvino encountered in the late 1970s, which considers any form of life to be on the same level. Moreover, as Zen gardens and many Japanese poetical and narrative works reveal, it is not possible – or rather it is not enough – for the human to express a *confusive* logic, since this has to activate a *distinctive* evolution of thought. The awareness of being part of an interconnected universe results in a renewed understanding of the non-hegemonic role of the human being, who needs to approach, describe, and potentially blend with all the other forms of life in order to truly understand himself in this novel, unpretentious form. This opening towards the world, to realise that the world is already open within every living and non-living being, while being a tenet of Buddhist thought, operates effectively in the poetical/philosophical atmosphere of *Palomar*.

In 'Molteplicità', the fifth of his so-called *Lezioni americane*, Calvino wishes that it were possible to conceive a work outside of the self:

> magari fosse possibile un'opera concepita al di fuori del *self*, un'opera che ci permettesse di uscire dalla prospettiva limitata d'un io individuale, non solo per entrare in altri io simili al nostro, ma per far parlare ciò che non ha parola, l'uccello che si posa sulla grondaia, l'albero in primavera e l'albero in autunno, la pietra, il cemento, la plastica...' (S, 733).

The *holistic* drive in these words emerges clearly, as much as the awareness of the impossible viability of such a 'self-less' art. But *Palomar* finds a partial solution to this conundrum: to give voice to and to understand nature, the self does not really need to obliterate itself (unless symbolically, as Palomar does at the end of the book), but rather relativises its presence in light of a broader, non-anthropocentric picture, thus embracing a *distinctive* paradigm. This is precisely the key aspect behind Japanese tradition, where 'the juxtaposition of specific images grounded in a close observation of nature serves to suggest a larger [...] concern' (Rimer 1978: 246). This is, to conclude, the reason why Calvino's Japanese experience has to be reconsidered in order to shed fresh light on our understanding of the author's evolution, never truly concluded but always open to influences of different kind.

2. Semiotic dialectics between language(s) and silence

As the previous chapter aims to show, Calvino's narrative experiments can be read through the lens of structural and semiotic categories which help illuminate the author's ever-changing perspectival choices. I shall now adapt the same threefold, dialectical paradigm (1. *separative* hierarchy of beings with the human at its peak; 2. *confusive* holism equating human and non-human; 3. *distinctive* awareness of the differences among beings within an overarching affinity) to linguistic matters, in particular to the treatment of silence in Calvino's oeuvre. I shall identify, in his first narratives, an initial confidence in human language, wedded to a *separative* opposition of *logos* to surrounding forms of silence. The following step will be retraced in the *confusive* openness towards non-Western, non-human, even subconscious languages, often recognisable beneath a progressive acceptance of the value of silence in those works that more distinctly bear the mark of Eastern influences. Finally, I shall locate in *Palomar* a renewed, *distinctive* mastery of language, which subsumes the acquaintance with non-human forms of communication under the awareness of the centrality of silence in any linguistic act, with an interesting final openness towards a radical embracing of silence, no longer just reflected upon, but practiced to its ultimate consequences.

The former stage mainly characterises Calvino's early works, which I shall analyse in the first section of this chapter. The last stage, on the other hand, distinguishes his most accomplished poetical/philosophical experiment, that is *Palomar*, subject of the last section. In between, a number of intermediate shades can be identified throughout Calvino's production, especially in his Japanese texts. In order to cast light on the potential influence of Japanese tradition and literary forms over Calvino's trajectory, this analysis will also be devoted to a recognition of the treatment of silence in them, always focusing on the texts that the author collected in his personal library and read most probably in the late 1970s, around the time of his Japanese travels.

The progressive attunement of the human realm to a world that can do without the most significant human attribute, namely language, implies a parallel gradual awareness of the presence of such an alternative world within the common world, which is one of the main tenets of Buddhism. The relevance of Calvino's experience in Japan lies in its pointing at the co-presence of diverse forms of life and communication, of which one is usually unaware. The author's acquaintance with Japanese cultural configuration triggers such a realisation both via the estranging exoticism that reactivates the 'visual reading of the world' – as explained in 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola' – and via the importance that both Buddhist meditation and Japanese literary tradition devote to alternative forms of communication, especially to silence as the bearer of meanings that common language cannot express. Throughout this evolution, I shall highlight how silence itself changes its configuration in Calvino's works, by moving from a merely narrative function to a poetical and philosophical depth, and by turning its relative status (silence as opposed to language) into an all-encompassing relevance (silence as language), which results in a final override of conceptuality *tout court*.

2.1. Silence in Calvino's works before 1976

If James Joyce's character, Stephen Dedalus, is right in assuming that narrative emerges from the lyrical form, as 'the simplest verbal vesture of an instant of emotion' (Joyce 1969: 215), then the whole history of literature can be framed as a movement from and toward silence – and critics such as Ihab Hassan (1967) have advocated for this framework particularly in relation to modern literature. This is all the more true when it comes to the production of Italo Calvino, which has been constantly flanked by margins of silence. As McLaughlin (1996: 79) recalls, the author's creative experience has always swung 'between fluency and writer's block' and, even more considerably, silence has gradually swallowed his journalistic voice, inhibited over time by the complexity of post-WWII social and political emergencies (Ferretti 1989: 26). The presence of silence within Calvino's works has been investigated in focused analyses, such as Franco Ricci's essay on *Gli amori difficili* (1984) and Francesca Bernardini Napoletano's chapter on *Le città invisibili* in her *I segni nuovi di Italo Calvino* (1977). This section, on the other hand, aims to sketch the evolution of Calvino's treatment of silence in a number of his early works: it will lay the foundations for the understanding of its further development later in Calvino's literary production, when an Eastern influence possibly brings about a poetical and philosophical turn in how silence is envisioned and reproduced on the page.

2.1.1. Silence within the *separative* paradigm of early resistential and ecological texts

In Calvino's first short stories, with their resistential or ludic settings, silence displays an essentially practical relevance, at the service of the characters' rebellious, military, or playful actions. It is thus presented as a narrative tool at the author's or at the characters' disposal, as a *separate* realm that at times contributes to the realisation of human affairs, which occupy the higher step of an ideal scale of forms of life. To give but a few examples, in *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947) – Calvino's first novel, which recounts the Resistance in Liguria from the point of view of a child – the main character Pin often walks silently during his adventures in the mountains (RR1, 56), his partisan friend Lupo Rosso moves quietly not to be heard by sentinels (RR1, 44), and several of the partisans' clandestine activities inevitably occur in silence (RR1, 64; 76; 78; passim). In some short stories of *Ultimo viene il corvo*, silence is rather associated with children's activities and explorations, in a playful context that is, after all, not so distant from the peculiar approach which Calvino chooses for his accounts of the Resistance (RR1, 163-165; 169). In the short story 'Gli avanguardisti a Mentone', collected in the themed volume *L'entrata in guerra* (1954), the titular city is immersed in an unnatural silence caused by the Fascist occupation and consequent evacuation (RR1, 509; 516). In all these instances, silence is not accompanied by philosophical insights elevating its sheer practical necessity.

Silence finds a place, although *in negativo*, also in the context of Calvino's critical description of Italy during the economic boom. Of all the realities which urbanisation contributes to modify or suffocate, silence is among the biggest casualties. In 'La villeggiatura in panchina', Marcovaldo desperately looks for silence in the midst of the industrial city's auditory hypertrophy, and his attempts are frustrated as happens to him in many instances in the 1963 book (RR1, 1071; 1075). In this same short story, silence is cherished in a dream as much as, in earlier texts, it is associated to a mythical childhood (RR1, 193). Silence is broken at nights also in *La nuvola di smog*, similarly depicting the

alteration which human activities impose over natural rhythms (RR1, 898). On the other hand, *La formica argentina* defines the natural labour of ants as 'silent and almost invisible', to confirm the *separation* between natural and human dynamics (RR1, 455). It is worth recalling that Calvino does not embrace this binary separation as a positive condition: in fact, to boycott the nature/culture divide is an essential principle of any ecological discourse (Aloisio 2017: 174). But at this stage he does not seem to rely on any alternative paradigm to denounce its negativity, beyond the critical representation of the *separative* divide in the surrounding reality.

2.1.2. Towards the 'unspeakable'

What constantly characterises silence in Calvino's production from the 1950s is its 'relativity', i.e. silence is referred to in opposition to some sound or noise that counter-defines it. In *Il barone rampante*, it almost acquires a concrete substance by means of the range of swishes, choughs, chirps, and cracks that cross it (RR1, 620). Not by chance, D'Ondariva's garden – the garden of Viola, the female character the Baron falls in love with – is characterised by a 'different silence', which inevitably is tantamount to a different set of noises (RR1, 594-595). Similarly, in 'L'avventura di un poeta', in the collection *Gli amori difficili*, different kinds of silences are distinguished according to the natural sounds that circumscribe them:

> Di fatto, ogni silenzio consiste della rete di rumori minuti che l'avvolge: il silenzio dell'isola si staccava da quello del calmo mare circostante perché era percorso da fruscii vegetali, da versi d'uccelli o da un improvviso frullo d'ali (RR2, 1166).

If the human/nature divide seems to be fully operating in all the previous texts, 'L'avventura di un poeta' proves particularly relevant by virtue of the aesthetic experience that it illustrates. Silence is first referred to as that 'unspeakable' beyond concept which, as Timothy Morton (2015: 200) explains, characterises both Kantianism and Buddhism:

> Per lui, essere innamorato di Delia era stato sempre così, come nello specchio di questa grotta: essere entrato in un mondo al di là della parola (RR2, 1168).

> Capiva che quel che ora la vita dava a lui era qualcosa che non a tutti è dato di fissare a occhi aperti, come il cuore più abbagliante del sole. E nel cuore di questo sole era silenzio (RR2, 1169).

It can thus be said that, by describing as best as he can the experience of beauty, Calvino first sketches the role of the 'unspeakable' which he will later reflect upon while visiting Japanese temples, and which will assume a considerably richer and higher philosophical profile, when compared to the *separative* modality often substantiating silence in his early works. After all, as he states in 'Cibernetica e fantasmi' (1967), '[l]a battaglia della letteratura è appunto uno sforzo per uscire fuori dai confini del linguaggio' (S, 217).

As intermediate stages in Calvino's itinerary towards an Eastern turn, I shall identify the role that silence acquires in the fictional Eastern conversations of Marco Polo and Kublai Kan in *Le città invisibili*, and the potential influence of Taoist conceptions over *La taverna dei destini incrociati*'s silence. In *Le città invisibili*, Polo and Kublai pit several forms of expression against silence as a 'vuoto non riempito di parole' (RR2, 386).[1] Marco occasionally takes leave of words and resorts to gestures, jumps, shouts, but also faces, glances, and objects. Silence thus assumes a communicative potential, in

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[1] See RR2, 377-378; 387; 431; 442; 447; 458.

a *confusive* stage where linguistic and non-linguistic means are equated, as happens in some invisible cities, too: Cloe refers its entire existence to acts and gestures, 'senza che ci si scambi una parola' (RR2, 398), and in Laudomia 'le domande si formulano in silenzio' (RR2, 478). Coletti (1989: 80) reads this turn towards silence as the outcome of contemporary Enlightenment thinkers' awareness of the limits of science, with its method and language. Indeed, I would highlight that, whenever the East appears in Calvino's narratives, not only silence acquires a particular relevance, but alternative modes of expression tend to undermine Western logocentrism, probably the quintessential symbol of the Enlightenment. The Cartesian *separative* paradigm is therefore generally overcome, breached as it is first by the *confusive* stage, then by the *distinctive* one, as this analysis aims to prove.

Similarly, *Il castello* (1969) and *La taverna dei destini incrociati* (1973), which are not devoid of Eastern, specifically Taoist references – as I discuss in the chapter on emptiness (see § 3.1.2.) –, can be considered as examples of the ability of silence to stimulate non-verbal forms of communication. The characters of these two experimental texts are affected by an unforeseen form of mutism, which force them to recount their own stories through an interplay of Tarot cards, to be interpreted by the narrator and the reader accordingly. Not only do these stories trigger a typically Calvinian combinatorial paradox (the more Tarot cards are dealt, the less combinatorial choices are left), but they represent silence as an alternative to canonical verbal forms of communication.

As Elisebha Platzer (2007: 10) underlines, Calvino astutely recognises, long ahead of his time, the shifting of his contemporary intellectual context towards fluidity, thus giving shape in his texts to manifold forms of alterity. Among these, he considers forms of language that exceed traditional, Cartesian, Western communication, and plays with a range of creative opportunities offered by the very obverse of language, namely silence. In the following section, I am going to analyse the role of silence in Japanese thought and literature, in order to shed light on the most relevant traits of this (non)category, which Calvino encounters both visiting Japan and by reading religio-philosophical and fictional Japanese books. I aim to draw attention to the elements of continuity between this cross-cultural encounter and Calvino's late production, where silence is first associated to an alternative form of communication that deconstructs logocentrism, to progressively point at an ultimate override of conceptuality.

2.2. Silence in Japanese tradition

Adapting the structural coordinates outlined in the previous chapter to matters of language(s) and silence, I shall delineate two main strands when it comes to their presence in Buddhist thought. Indeed, Buddhism implies a *confusive* intimacy and openness to non-human forms of communication, a passage that is necessary in order for a *distinctive*, balanced approach to human language to be eventually pondered. At the same time, Buddhism, especially in its Zen configuration – which Calvino experienced more closely –, contributes to undermine the very fundamentals of language, aiding practitioners to rid their minds of the primacy of the verbal in order to enter silence, that is, the auditory counterpart of that void that I am going to analyse in the following chapter. This invalidation of language is embraced by Palomar in the very last passage of the titular book, where the access to this ultimate form of (non)communication happens via paradox – as in many meditative practices – and in

opposition to an excess of logocentrism, deconstructed while represented. In order to cast light on *Palomar* and on other silence-related questions which Calvino deals with after visiting Japan, I shall sketch the Buddhist framework upon which such questions have found a sound basis for their development.

Moreover, a survey of the narrative and poetic works constituting Calvino's Japanese collection reveals a multifarious treatment of language, as well as of silence in its stratified depth. Given the inherent polysemous feature of literature, and the wide range of authors and periods that this analysis interrogates, any presumption of exhausting the themes of language and silence in such authors and periods would take me far beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, a targeted engagement with these themes can provide the room to recognise some *traits d'union* between the religio-philosophical realm and the literary one.

Prior to some close readings of the texts, I shall also discuss the characteristic weakness of verbal communication that allegedly characterises Japanese culture, according to a number of anthropologists and linguists. I will then retrace in literary texts the same two-fold path just outlined. First, I shall address the equivalence between human and non-human languages that emerges quite consistently in both narrative and poetic forms. Then, I will investigate how the openness towards a non-conceptual dimension is thematised by some of the authors that Calvino read. At stake there will be, again, the gap between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric forms of expression, recognised and contextually questioned by considering as equal the two extremes within which it opens (the human and the non-human), and by probing its silent depths.

2.2.1. The alleged weakness of *logos* in Japanese cultural configuration

Before embarking on this analysis, it is paramount to remember that, according to Harry Harootunian (2020), the attention towards silence, in itself and as a medium for a healthy language, is fully organic to that political and cultural revisionism that has been at the core of Japanese 'symposium on modernity', and of intellectual debates throughout and beyond the 1940s. During the colloquium, Kamei Katsuichirō expressed his 'regret for the decline of sensitivity towards words', which he paired with the decline of Japanese 'spirit', overwhelmed by noises, slogans and clichés produced by the speed of modernity (Harootunian 2020: 71-73). Tanizaki's 1933 praise of shadows and nuances – which Calvino owned in French (*Eloge de l'ombre*, 1977) and Italian (*Libro d'ombra*, 1982), and reviewed in 1982 – went hand in hand with his configuration of the Orient as an auratic place of 'uncanny silence', in deliberate opposition to the West (Najita and Harootunian 1989: 753-754). This specific ideological framework has to be kept in mind when approaching analyses regarding Japanese ontological conceptions, since they are often constructed to validate reactionary stances, while presenting themselves as neutral statements on an alleged Japanese 'essence'.

Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, in his essay on 'The Japanese Attitude to Nature' (1995), goes as far as to identify the weakness of logocentric orientation at the root of major Japanese cultural constructions. On the one hand, Eisenstadt (1995: 204) highlights a prevalent mythocentric ontological discourse, as opposed to a logocentric one, to explain Japanese religious syncretism and the 'very successful dilution of whatever principled differences had existed between some of these religions, especially between Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism'. On the other, he refers to the 'relative devaluation of the subject as against the environment' to explain a semiotic construction based on a

'topological-metaphorical relationship between subject and environment', rather than on the 'active ordering, structuring or "mastering" of the environment' (ivi: 205) that language entails. It is difficult to establish whether the devaluation of the subject in the environment causes, or rather is caused, by the devaluation of linguistic means: a Wittgensteinian question which seems doomed to remain unsolved. Nevertheless, the non-centrality of language, which allegedly characterises Japanese culture, is apt to connect the peculiar ecological awareness from which it seems to arise, and the spiritual outcomes that it gives rise to, as a proof of the fruitful outcomes that the *distinctive* paradigm can beget.

2.2.2. Buddhist deconstruction of anthropocentric linguistic hierarchies

Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253), the Sōtō Zen master who experienced awakening while practicing in China, is believed to have stated: 'The ocean speaks and mountains have tongues – that is the everyday speech of Buddha... If you can speak and hear such words you will be one who truly comprehends the entire universe' (quoted in Shaner 1989: 173). Zen Buddhism, in this way, not only devaluates human language, but also, and more precisely, puts it in communication and communion with other forms of language, deconstructing once again any anthropocentric hierarchy. Not by chance, Buddhism has been widely taken into account by new strands of environmental discourses in the last decades,[2] and Zen in particular has strongly influenced the so-called 'Deep Ecology' movement (Devall and Sessions 1985: 100-101). Dōgen's words chime with a number of contemporary ethnographic, biopolitical and semiotic analyses, among which Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* (2013), Jeffrey Nealon's *Plant Theory* (2015), Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016), or Wendy Wheeler's 'How the Earth Speaks Now' (2016), to name but a few relevant examples.

Dōgen, as well as Kūkai (774-835), who founded the Esoteric Shingon sect of Buddhism, argues that, although we are all originally enlightened, it is our duty to authenticate the interdependent relationship with others and nature which such an enlightenment entails. In order to do so, we should commit to perceiving the world from a non-discriminating mode of awareness, and to engaging a sensitive interaction between us as persons and our environment which, necessarily, does not involve the structure of human language (Shaner 1989: 174-178). The discipline and concentration that the path towards this awareness entails have traditionally kept the populace away from Zen, which has conversely won a strong following among *samurai* and modern warriors. Despite this elitist feature, Zen has had a considerable influence on cultural developments throughout the history of Japan (Hane 2013: 31-32). Calvino briefly discusses the 'cost of culture' at the end of the text eloquently titled 'Il rovescio del sublime', where he proposes a justification to the inequalities needed to attain aesthetic peaks, as in Zen-oriented arts or Imperial gardens. The author here proves to approach Japanese culture with a mindset that has distanced itself from earlier Marxist positions, more attentive now to the connection to non-human surroundings than to human issues (S, 578).

Buddhism advocates the interaction between human being and environment by invoking the so-called 'child-like mind'. This is described in a famous Buddhist saying as boasting an original intimacy with the world, not yet structured into social and linguistic coordinates. Whereas this emotional attachment is generally lost as the child develops, it is one of the objectives of meditation to

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[2] See in particular Callicott and Ames (1989), Bruun and Kalland (1995), Asquith and Kalland (1997), Callicott and McRae (2017).

re-cultivate a child-like mind. The linguistic outcome of this view is, as already seen, a debasement of those linguistic means that have opened the gap between human and non-human. In this respect, Calvino's ignorance of the language spoken in Japan assumes a semiotic relevance which, as I am going to analyse below, sharpens his attention towards the surrounding environment, thus offering a practical instance of the useful relativisation of *logos*.

2.2.3. Forms of 'constructive annihilation' of common language

The entanglement of self and nature makes the implication between words and things (a general term including animals, plants, and the most diverse forms of nature) emerge, but this awareness can only be regained by disposing of language and by means of meditation. To adapt the structural coordinates of the previous chapter to this context, the plunge into the *confusive* paradigm envisaged both by Buddhism and Shintoism (Maraini 2000: 23-34) – a *confusive* paradigm which considers human and non-human forms of life and communication as equal – opens up interesting questions regarding human language itself, which can thus be interrogated in a *distinctive* framework. The latter, while focusing again on that very language that the *confusive* stage aimed to decentralise, is no longer based on a hierarchical *separative* standpoint, but rather tries to gain a different and broader understanding of language itself, even in its consonance with what language is not. As partly already analysed in the chapter on perspective, this is precisely what Calvino does when hypothesising a correlation between the construction of gardens and the composition of poems. Palomar too follows this path when analysing the aspects of human language that only emerge once confronted with non-human expressions. In light of this structural similarity, the impact of Calvino's contact with Buddhism acquires also a linguistic evidence.

Alongside the *distinctive* outcome of silence, possibly definable as 'constructive', there lies an apparent (and only apparent, it is important to reiterate) 'nihilistic' treatment of silence in Buddhism. Not only does Buddhism indirectly point to the ways in which the social institution of language may be splitting organisms from their environment, but it also offers a form of 'liberation from the *maya* of social institution' (Watts 1971: 50) by dismantling the categorial conception of language, to use a Heideggerian terminology.[3] In other words, Buddhism does not settle for the individuation of a gap within the equivalence between human and non-human, underlined by means of its attention to non-human languages, but it properly probes what emerges from this gap, that is, nothingness and silence. In his *Empire of Signs*, Barthes deftly recognises the peculiar semiotics of Zen Buddhism as interested in the 'emptiness of language', in the 'exemption from all meaning' (Barthes 1982: 4). In his benign Orientalism, influenced by Suzuki, Watts and the Beatniks, Barthes perceives a key aspect of Japanese Buddhism, especially in its esoteric form, which Calvino does not fail to notice, either.

In order to understand the extent to which Buddhism debases common language, it is illuminating to read at length a passage of Fabio Rambelli's *Buddhist Theory of Semiotics* (2013):

> If the world produced by the discriminating activity of consciousness – that is, the world of our everyday experiences – is illusory, any discourse about such a world (that is, ordinary language) is deluded and ultimately empty; language has no ultimate truth-value, it is like words uttered in a dream. Words only refer

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[3] The categorial conception of language lies at the root of those forms of logic and grammar which constitute the fundamental structure of a Western conception of the word. This is also the reason behind the particularly difficult, if not misleading translation of Buddhist texts in the West, as Midal (2013: 48-49) argues.

to the superficial features of things, not to their essence (which, by definition, is Emptiness – the lack of any positive, linguistically definable quality); words are themselves the product of ignorance, attachment, and suffering, which they contribute in perpetuating. The external world, then, is essentially a linguistic and semiotic construction and thus devoid of ontological reality. This connection between words and things needs to be deconstructed with the help of Buddhism if one is to attain liberation from ignorance, suffering, and the cycle of rebirths. In this sense, at least, language is relevant for Buddhist soteriology in a negative sense, as something to be deconstructed and overcome (Rambelli 2013: 81).

The idea that words merely reflect the superficial aspect of things is one that is uncannily close to Calvino's words in a passage from *Palomar*: '«Solo dopo aver conosciuto la superficie delle cose [...] ci si può spingere a cercare quel che c'è sotto. Ma la superficie delle cose è inesauribile»' ('Dal terrazzo': RR2, 920). If Barthes underlines the absence in Japan of Western metaphysics, resulting in a Zen culture of pure surface, exclusively concerned with the signifier and ignoring or erasing the signified, Calvino develops very similar thoughts once he describes his surrounding environment, even when there is no longer a Japanese framework to solicit a similar approach to reality. It is in this retention of a Zen (non)discourse that I identify one of the major outcomes of Calvino's acquaintance with Japan.

2.2.4. Silence in the practice of meditation

In his posture of thinking Palomar draws near the practice of meditation, which characterises in particular the last section of *Palomar* as a book (whose title is, quite tellingly, 'Le meditazioni di Palomar'). This practice, in Buddhism (Tollini 2018: 667-668) as well as in Daoism (Watson 1968: 44-45), pushes the boundaries of language to the limit, eventually transcending words altogether to enter the realm of the experience of an enlightenment not covered by words.[4] In Zen Buddhism, this enlightenment is defined as *satori*: it can be attained once confusion of mind, dualism and mental discrimination are overcome, in order to let any form of egoism fall. Language plays a key role in this respect, especially in the Rinzai school – one of the two main Zen schools, together with Sōtō: whereas Sōtō is also called *mokushō zen*, 'silent enlightenment', Rinzai is defined as *kanna zen*, 'contemplation of words'. Rinzai makes wide use of *kōan*, inherently insoluble, or even nonsense riddles, whose aim is to put the practitioner's mind before insolvable problems which can only disclose their profound meaning by leaving the intellect behind (Tollini 2018: 668).

Experience overcomes expression in the 'logic' of Zen (Sueki 2018: 45), and – surprisingly enough – the same happens at the end of 'Le meditazioni di Palomar', as I am going to analyse in detail in the chapter regarding death (see § 5.3.7.). The particular kind of silence that is accessed by meditating is at any rate as eloquent as being wordy: it is not against the word, but rather subsumes the word itself (Suzuki 1960: 65). As it is often the case with Buddhism, the Aristotelian Law of Non-contradiction is subverted (Morton 2015: 244), and again this element is going to be key for a novel understanding of the paradoxical conclusion of *Palomar*. Kūkai, the founder of the Shingon sect mentioned above, used to say that 'the Dharma [truth taught by the Buddha] is beyond speech, but without speech it cannot be revealed. Suchness transcends forms, but without depending on forms it cannot be realized' (Hakeda 1972: 145). With Scaffai's paradigms in mind, Kūkai's words lend themselves to envisage a Buddhist

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[4] In one of Daoist canonical texts, *Zhuang-zi* (*Chuang-tzu*), the perfect human being is described as detached from the world and neglectful of the use of words, able to teach by means of silence and impartiality and without 'denomination', since the word is only needed to express an idea, but once the idea is grasped, the word has to be forgotten.

variation on the *distinctive* theme, which will be taken in due account when addressing Calvino's trajectory towards the *distinctive* paradigm in his late works.

2.2.5. Japanese language and logography debasing anthropocentrism

Before moving to the literary treatment of the themes of language(s) and silence in the books that Calvino read, there are aspects of Japanese language itself that allow for brief ontological annotations. Indeed, Japanese is said to be strictly connected to the formation of the so-called *milieu* in Japan, that is, the relationship of society to space and nature already analysed in the previous chapter (see § 1.2.2.). According to Berque (1997: 223), the redundancy of the Japanese language as to the grammatical subject (Japanese is a null-subject language), results in a glorification of the collective subject at the expense of the individual. Communication thus happens more fully between the self and other agents of the natural surroundings (humans included, but by no means exclusively), rather than between individuals only, in a non-verbal context that prevails over the verbal one.

As seen when discussing Berque's definition of the Japanese *milieu*, natural and social environments intertwine, and the subject – and language accordingly – allegedly pervades these realms with a greater harmony than in other cultures. Japanese language thus seems to be inherently prone to represent the debasement of anthropocentrism, and even if Calvino might have not been aware of the epistemological reasons behind this mechanism, he certainly got acquainted with its artistic expressions. What is more, as Marshall J. Unger (2003: 114) puts it, 'ideograms are supposed to have specific, inherent meanings unrelated to how you might express them'. That is to say, Japanese representation of language, more logographic than phonographic if considering Geoffrey Sampson's systematisation (1985), naturally leads to an internalisation of words, mated to an external silence. It is in the very status of Japanese language, then, that the two-fold literary analysis that I am about to engage (attention to non-human languages on the one hand, openness towards silent non-conceptuality on the other) finds a solid basis.

2.2.6. Non-human in human language, between prose and poetry

The most compelling example of nature's anthropomorphic voice is probably Natsume Sōseki's *I Am a Cat*, published serially in 1905-1906, whose narrator and main protagonist is the domestic cat of a teacher. From a feline point of view, the book describes the lives of a number of middle-class Japanese men and women, in what is an avant-garde narrative experiment of human and animal perspectives turned upside down. Natsume does not create a brand-new language to let his cat express, rather assigning him an ordinary bourgeois form of expression. Yet, it is a non-human, natural voice the one that the reader approaches, as per a narrative transposition of the *confusive* paradigm. This is at stake, even if deployed in a different manner, also in Natsume's *Kokoro* (1914), which reports in detail the relationship between a young man and what he identifies as his 'Sensei',[5] also reconstructing the latter's youth and the reasons behind his decision to commit suicide. In a passage of this book, the human

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[5] As the translator notes right at the beginning of the book, 'the English word "teacher" which comes closest in meaning to the Japanese word *sensei* is not satisfactory [...]. The French word *maître* would express better what is meant by *sensei*' (Natsume 1957: 1, n. 1).

voice of one of the characters (K) beats Sensei's consciousness 'like the waves of the sea' (Natsume 1957: 205). As Valdo H. Viglielmo (1976: 176-178) notices, the book is riddled with similar comparisons: Sensei at certain points likens his mental state 'to a tide, which ebbs and flows continually' (Natsume 1957: 210), and elsewhere he describes his 'sense of defeat' as 'so violent that it seemed to spin around in [his] head like a whirlpool' (Natsume 1957: 228).

Mishima's *Runaway Horses* offers another instance of the *confusive* paradigm when giving human connotations to natural sounds: 'He [Isao] could sense the peril of the ice catching the full force of the evening sun. He felt as if he could hear distant, shrill *cries of pain* as it was being ruthlessly dissolved by the final heat of summer' (Mishima 1975b: 194 – emphasis mine). In Kawabata's *Snow Country* and *Sound of the Mountain*, the echoing sounds of alpine landscapes suggest an ambiguity that has been compared to that characterising Japanese language itself (Boardman 1971: 103). This ambiguity, stemming from Kawabata's poetic spirit, leads to the relevance of the *confusive* paradigm in *haiku*, the quintessentially Japanese form of poetry, at times defined as 'not a product of intellection' (Suzuki 1959: 227), precisely because of its openness towards a sensibility beyond rationality. *Haiku*'s features often chime with Buddhist precepts, among which there is, as previously analysed, the principle that existence is defined by relation (Colligan-Taylor 1990: 26). Whilst I am going to discuss this principle in depth in the chapter on void (see § 3.2.5.), it is relevant for now to notice how silence is perceivable only through, or after, other noises in *haiku* like the following:

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

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

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

2.2.7. Literary expressions of silent non-conceptuality

Leafing through the collection *Cento haiku* by Irene Iarocci, which Calvino owned, it is possible to find *haiku* representing also the second thread delineated at the beginning of this section, that is, the ability of silence to testify to the non-conceptual dimension emerging from the gap between human and non-human forms:

> «Oh, guarda!»
> e null'altro da proferire,
> dinanzi ai ciliegi in fiore
> del monte Yoshino

What Western aesthetics tends to define as 'sublime', in Japanese aesthetics is traditionally referred to as *yūgen*, that is, according to Noh playwright Zeami, 'true beauty and gentleness', a set of feelings that cannot be expressed through words (Ray 2020). These feelings, customarily inspired by nature, reach a 'transcendental beauty behind the surface that exists on another plane of reality to which the work of art may help to lead the reader' (Rimer 1978: 16). Even if the concept of transcendence referred to Japanese culture is contentious – as I argue in the chapter on time (see § 4.2.2.) –, it is undoubtedly this aesthetic mechanism, where silence plays a prominent part, the one that underpins Japanese poetry. Zanzotto (2014: 9), in his introduction to Iarocci's selection, remarks that *haiku* rely on a specific rhetorical tool to evoke the silence that lies beneath, and at the same time above, material reality: that is the use of *kireji*, barely translatable pause-words strikingly similar to *men* and *de* in ancient Greek, whose value is that of a rest, as much precious as semantically useless.

As far as narrative forms are concerned, the non-conceptual realms evoked by silence in the books that Calvino read are multifarious, and only partially ascribable to analogies with what has been analysed above in respect to Buddhism. The story of Natsume's *I Am a Cat* fades away into silence when the cat, who is both the main character and narrator, drifts slowly into peace through death. According to Mikuzawa et al. (2007: 154), this final embracing of silence and death testifies to Natsume's understanding of Shin Buddhism as concerned primarily with peace and sustenance in the next world, thus with the transcendence of materiality altogether. But Buddhism is far from dominating the scene of Japanese modern literature. Endō's *Silence* (1966), for instance, addresses the problem of the silence of the Christian God, as experienced by a Jesuit missionary in XVII century Japan: Endō was brought up as a Roman Catholic, an Easterner with a Western faith – a condition which did not fail to cause him interior troubles, but which also prompted his literary production (Rimer 1978: 252-253). Interestingly enough, even this different religious perspective entails an overcoming of dualities such as immanence and transcendence, silence and communication, that has much in common with Eastern traditions of thought. As Endō explained with regard to his novel: 'I wasn't writing that God was "silent", but that there was a "voice in the silence"' (Endō 1994: 99).

Some novels have not fallen short of psychoanalytic interpretations, and silence itself has been the objective of those. For instance, in Kawabata's *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, where the male protagonist Eguchi pays to sleep beside sleeping girls, the reader is confronted with a form of uni-directional communication on a level beyond language. As Sharif Mebed (2019) has argued, the subject alienated and oppressed by law (thus by language) is unconsciously desirous of a return to the body of the mother, the quintessentially pre-linguistic place. Even if this psychoanalytic context seems to move away from the analysis conducted so far, the silence where Kawabata's character seeks refuge in is strictly connected to the continuum of nature, symbolically represented by a uterine place, from which language cuts the individual apart. It is thus possible to corroborate the hypothesis outlined above, according to which enlightenment, as the transcendental passing of the materiality of human condition, can be gained by means of a child-like mind. Another text which Calvino owned, *Vita Sexualis* (1909) by Mori Ōgai, revolves around the sensuality and sexual desires of a professor of philosophy from his adolescence to his adulthood, and is shot through by the protagonist's familiarity with the subconscious

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meaning of the language of symbols (Nakai 1980: 230). Here the reader is confronted again with the depths of silence as a form of non- or hyper-communication, beneath or beyond common language.

Further instances of the extent to which the non-conceptual meaning of silence recurs in Japanese narrative can be found in Abe Kōbō's novels and short stories. As Yamamoto Fumiko (1980) points out, physical metamorphoses of human beings play a major role in Abe's early works, between 1950 and 1955, but do not cease to surface also in novels such as *The Box-Man* or *The Woman in the Dunes*. What distinguishes the alienated man is the deprivation of language and sounds: 'when a collapse occurs in man's consciousness, there is also a concomitant loss of language ability' (Yamamoto 1980: 187). However, this psychological mechanism presupposes an assumption according to which language usually connects man's interiority and external reality: an assumption that contradicts the relevance which Buddhism assigns to non-linguistic means. I am including Abe's eccentricity here to account for the inevitable multiplicity of paths that literature can follow, as opposed to more or less consistent philosophical views. Calvino, a man of letters himself, had the opportunity to get in contact with these different approaches to language and silence in Japanese culture. The literary outcomes of this encounter will be discussed in the following section.

2.3. Silence in Calvino's mature production

When visiting Japan, Calvino experiences two main eccentricities of language. On the one hand, he is confronted with a system of signs that is not only foreign, but totally indecipherable to him, which prompts a relativisation of the given habits of communication. On the other, he experiences the crucial importance that silence assumes in Zen Buddhism, on which he draws some reflections regarding a relativisation of language altogether. The first set of thoughts is delineated in the text 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola', and allows a recovery of the structural categories of *separative*, *confusive* and *distinctive*, which I have been drawing on throughout this analysis. It can be read *vis à vis* the second chapter of Barthes's *Empire of Signs*, namely 'The Unknown Language' (Barthes 1982: 6-8). The second thread, regarding silence more specifically, is developed in 'I mille giardini', a key text to connect the previous reflections on perspective and the present discourse about silence. In a linear sequence that is probably not fortuitous, it chimes with Barthes's third chapter of *Empire of Signs*, entitled 'Without Words' (Barthes 1982: 9-10).

Taking into account Calvino's narrative production, if the author has been questioning reality as a given and unchangeable system since 'La spirale' in *Le cosmicomiche*, *Il castello* and *La taverna dei destini incrociati*, to name but a few instances, in *Palomar* he represents the ultimate challenge to fixed linguistic and heuristic coordinates. In his last book, the author not only takes into account communicative systems that are beyond Western habits, by collecting articles from his travels, but he even deconstructs the logocentric matrix of human expression. As I am going to illustrate below, *Palomar* can be considered as a *summa* of Calvino's life-long dialectical engagement with the human and the non-human world, whose modes of expression are finally connected in syntheses which debunk hierarchical statuses, finally opening towards silence as a fertile porosity to explore. Pietro Citati (1986: 3) locates in Palomar's penchant for silence the symbol of a total expressive crisis, which he opposes to

the unconcluded project of *I cinque sensi*, where the sensuality and reality of the world are, in his opinion, more forceful. I, on the other hand, aim to deconstruct such a dichotomisation, by sustaining that the representation of life has never been more compelling than in the depiction of Palomar's death, and language has never been more communicative than in the book's final silence, which does not annihilate the senses, but rather sublimates them.

2.3.1. Semiotic travels: 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola'

In 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola', the opening text of the section 'La forma del tempo. Giappone' in *Collezione di sabbia*, Calvino tries to decipher the dynamics of a conversation between an old haughty lady and a young girl, whose contents he inevitably cannot understand (S, 569-570). While travelling in Japan, Calvino is completely unaware of the language spoken: for instance, Wada Tadahiko remembers that, during the visits around Kyoto that they did together, Calvino never failed to remark upon the number of *pachinko* halls that they encountered, but he always misread the signs in *roman-ji* characters, 'italianising' as /paˈkɪŋko/ what is supposed to be pronounced, in Japanese, as /paˈtʃiŋko/.[7] Therefore, Calvino's travels develop on an a- (pre-? post-?) linguistic level, which itself dialogues with the overcoming of language, crucial in Buddhist meditation and in some of the Japanese novels above analysed. But the language that Calvino does not master is not simply limited to the Japanese system of sounds and words. Rather, his lack of points of reference encompasses the entire system of Japanese society, with its customs and traditions, hierarchical constructions and interpersonal interactions – the Japanese *milieu*, as per Berque's definition:

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

This reflection raises a number of questions regarding Calvino's position as a Western tourist, but one with a significant semiotic awareness.

Prior to discussing the key linguistic problem at stake in this section, I shall first consider the relevance of a semiotic framework as far as Calvino's experience is concerned, which inevitably leads to Roland Barthes. In *Mythologies* (originally published in 1957), Barthes dwells upon the general tendency of a culture to convert history into nature: that is to say, to mask the mythological, constructed function of objects as if they were merely responding to practical, natural needs.[8] The task of the semiotician should be to identify the signs by penetrating their mythological depth. A sort of dull semiotic investigation is, instead, what is pursued by tourists, who are not interested in the mechanisms used by the societies that they visit to re-functionalise their practice, but address things as mere signs of themselves, as an instance of a supposedly typical cultural practice (Culler 1988: 155). In the Japanese

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[7] I am here reporting an anecdote that Professor Wada told me during one of our conversations in Kyoto, in April 2019.
[8] Not by chance, Barthes re-elaborates this very concept in 'The Unknown Language', the chapter of *Empire of Signs* that I put in ideal dialogue with Calvino's text here analysed: '[...] a culture which, precisely, history transforms into "nature"' (Barthes 1982: 6).

context, Marxist thinker Tosaka Jun (1900-1945) similarly questions the power of customs in concealing concrete class interests, by means of an appeal to naturalness (Harootunian 2020: 125). But Calvino's lack of overt ideological commitment in the late 1970s does not bring him to dialogue with a similar critique, with the author rather leaning towards a semiotic approach to this set of problems.

The picture just outlined gets more blurred once those who travel are semioticians themselves, as happens with Barthes and Calvino.[9] Indeed, semioticians are aware that 'once society exists, every usage is converted into a sign of this usage', as Barthes writes in his *Elements of Semiology* (1967: 41). Therefore, on the one hand, semioticians add a relevant quantum of awareness to the touristic behaviour: they are aware of the conventionality of things as signs, as well as of the temporal partiality of the semiotic void which produces marvel or simple interest in the 'other' (Colucci 2016: 42, n. 2) – as Calvino shows in the passage above. But, on the other hand, the process at stake is inherently analogous to any form of tourism, which is engaged by nature in reading cities, landscapes and cultures as mere signs of themselves. On top of this already intricate short circuit, Zen culture, which both Barthes and Calvino engage with, is said to emphasise surfaces, forms, etiquette, rituals, in a 'play of forms without content and surfaces without depth' (Rambelli 2013: x).

By drawing on a definition by Paul Fussell, I would suggest referring to Calvino – similarly to Barthes – as a semiotic traveller. 'If the explorer moves toward the risks of the formless and the unknown, the tourist moves toward the security of pure cliché. It is between these two poles that the traveler mediates, retaining all he can of the excitement of the unpredictable attaching to exploration, and fusing that with the pleasure of "knowing where one is" belonging to tourism' (Fussell 1980: 39). Calvino approached Japan by means of philosophical and literary mediations that distanced himself from a *naïve* exploration. Yet, as Amano Kei recalls, in Kyoto Calvino did not settle for the itinerary organised for him by the Japan Foundation, but longed for a plunge into Kyoto's daily life and popular culture. Moreover, he elaborated on his Japanese experience by integrating it in his semiotic trajectory, with the 'nature-culture' of Japan getting to offer alternative models for rethinking universality.

This discourse deploys its structuralist potential when combined to Lévi-Strauss's perspective on cultures, as proposed by Monserrati (2020: 176-182). Calvino was well acquainted with the French ethnologist, often brought into play in essays and letters. In 1983, he writes as follows:

> Quanta onestà intellettuale vi sia in Lévi-Strauss, quanta capacità di non restare prigioniero del metodo, viene confermato dal suo ultimo libro, *Le regard éloigné*. Ma quel che vorrei dire va più in là, ed è che la cultura della discontinuità, se alimentata da una sensibilità analitica sempre più esigente, può essere il solo metodo che renda ragione dell'unità dell'umano nell'unità dell'universo, e tenti di saldare ancora microcosmo e macrocosmo (S, 1022).

In this reflection, Calvino identifies in Lévi-Strauss's relativistic idea of culture a useful method to understand not only different human groups, but even the relationship between human and other-than-human. It thus corroborates my proposal to draw a parallel between Calvino's encounter with a cultural otherness and his explorations of other natural ontologies. While *Le regard éloigné* was published in 1983, thus after Calvino's Japanese journey, the analysis of how different 'reference systems' interact was already introduced by Lévi-Strauss in a public lecture delivered at UNESCO in 1971. Therefore, it is fair to follow Monserrati in his identification of Lévi-Strauss's ideas at the theoretical foundation of

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[9] Calvino's interest in semiology is testified by a relevant number of references to Barthes in his essays ('Cibernetica e fantasmi', 'Due interviste su scienza e letteratura', 'L'ordinatore dei desideri', 'I livelli della realtà in letteratura', 'Il raggio dello sguardo', to name but a few).

the beginning of 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola', where Calvino fuses his long-standing interest in Levi-Strauss's and Barthes's theories.

2.3.2. Equivalence between 'The Written and the Unwritten World'

Bearing in mind the theoretical context just outlined, it is possible to go back to the linguistic problem. If the semiotician recognises that everything *can* be read as a sign, if anything, of itself, and if Zen culture *must* be addressed with this awareness in mind, then to navigate surfaces and things is itself a self-contained heuristic act, which does not envisage the need to resort to language in order to grasp the surrounding reality. Moreover, if the world can be read visually, as Calvino states, what emerges then is a tangible equivalence of written and unwritten worlds. Indeed, on the one side, the written world loses its categorial mastery over the unwritten world, as Calvino experiences by approaching the indecipherability of Japanese language.[10] On the other, the unwritten world comes forward as something to be read, thus with its own grammar and semiotic status. As a result, human language, landscape and social environment emerge as equal systems of signs which stem from, and in turn reinforce, the *confusive* model.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the *confusive* stage naturally develops into the *distinctive* one, where human and non-human realms re-emerge as distinct but enriched by a mutual recognition. I would identify this further passage, a consequence of Calvino's first impressions in Japan, in a later paper which he delivers at the Institute for the Humanities of New York University on the 30th of March 1983, under the title of 'The Written and the Unwritten World' – from which I have been drawing my definitions so far. Here Calvino declares to be totally convinced neither by the thesis according to which 'il mondo non esiste; esiste solo il linguaggio', nor by the opposite view claiming that 'il linguaggio comune non ha senso; il mondo è ineffabile' (S, 1867). He denounces the impossibility of doing without language, at the same time acknowledging that in the world also exists a 'silenzio pieno di significato' (S, 1869) that language strives to suggest. Thus, his well-known pragmatic view:

> In un certo senso, credo che sempre scriviamo di qualcosa che non sappiamo: scriviamo per rendere possibile al mondo non scritto di esprimersi attraverso di noi. Nel momento in cui la mia attenzione si sposta dall'ordine regolare delle righe scritte e segue la mobile complessità che nessuna frase può contenere o esaurire, mi sento vicino a capire che dall'altro lato delle parole c'è qualcosa che cerca d'uscire dal silenzio, di significare attraverso il linguaggio, come battendo colpi su un muro di prigione (S, 1875).

In other words, *Homo legens* (Calvino coins this expression in the essay at stake) cannot but approach reality by means of language, but this operation is truly sound only if paired with the awareness of the partiality of this very language.

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[10] When reaching this awareness, Calvino undoubtedly follows the footsteps of Barthes' 'The Unknown Language': 'The dream: to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication or vulgarity; to know, positively refracted in a new language, the impossibilities of our own; to learn the systematics of the inconceivable' (Barthes 1982: 6).

2.3.3. Variations on silence: 'I mille giardini' and 'Il mihrab'

If Barthes's fascinating analysis of 'The Unknown Language' praises a cross-cultural openness which 'would at least have the advantage of casting suspicion on the very ideology of our speech' (Barthes 1982: 8), Calvino seems to privilege a particular form of such a deconstruction, that is, its post-human variation. In the text 'I mille giardini' he connects in a decisive way Japanese attentiveness towards changing perspectives and the crucial relevance of silence in meditation, at once subsuming the human experience in the garden under a broader conception of life, where the human does not seize a privileged position:

> qui [nel giardino di villa Katsura] è il percorso la ragione essenziale del giardino, il filo del suo discorso, la frase che dà significato a ogni sua parola.
> Ma quali significati? [...] il contrasto tra la civiltà e la natura? [...] una lezione sul modo di muoversi nel mondo? Ogni interpretazione lascia insoddisfatti; *se c'è un messaggio, è quello che si coglie nelle sensazioni e nelle cose, senza tradurle in parole* (S, 583 – emphasis mine).

Here Calvino reiterates a parallel, already suggested in 'Il rovescio del sublime' ('qui poesie e giardini si generano gli uni dagli altri a vicenda': S, 576), between a linguistic and a non-linguistic system of signs: both are based on a finite number of units (phonemes on the one hand, plants or stones on the other), whose combinations constitute ever-expanding mechanisms of signification. But he also advances a notion of signification as bursting forth from things, without any linguistic counterpart.

In order to understand fully the relevance of Calvino's Japanese encounter for the development of this non-linguistic hypothesis,[11] it is useful to compare 'I mille giardini' with the reflections about void and silence that the author expounds on when dealing with his journey to Iran (in the same section of *Collezione di sabbia* where Japanese texts are collected, namely 'La forma del tempo'). When visiting the Sheikh Loft Allah Mosque at Isfahan, Calvino seems to extrapolate a conclusion out of his contemplation of the mihrab:

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

The beholder, lay or worshipper, draws a nihilistic conclusion (if embracing a materialistic view) or rather a notion of transcendence (in a religious one). Neither of the two possible approaches conceives an interaction between the beholder and the object. Indeed, the object points at void, nothingness, absence, silence, without admitting any further development of thought beyond this human reflection.

As opposed to silence evoked by the mihrab, which is the conclusive pinnacle of a cultural *trajectory*, silence in Japanese gardens rather enshrines a dynamic *trajectivity*, a continuous mediation of the borderline between human and non-human, culture and nature, which I would suggest reading in light of the *confusive* stage. Augustin Berque (1997: 120) has proposed the notion of *trajectivity*, drawing upon the root *trans-*, which encompasses the idea of *transcending* dualism and making

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[11] Barthes explores the same hypothesis in 'Without Words': '*How did you deal with the language?* Subtext: *How did you satisfy that vital need of communication?* Or more precisely, an ideological assertion masked by the practical interrogation: *there is no communication except in speech.* Now it happens that in this country (Japan) the empire of signifiers is so immense, so in excess of speech, that the exchange of signs remains of a fascinating richness, mobility, and subtlety, despite the opacity of the language, sometimes even as a consequence of that opacity' (Barthes 1982: 9-10 – emphases in the original text).

connections, thus overcoming the inherent centration implicit instead in the *pro-* of *projection.* This concept of *trajectivity* meaningfully illuminates the temporal dimension sustaining Japanese gardens and traditional architecture, which I am going to analyse in a dedicated chapter of this thesis (see § 4.2.4.). To anticipate its main characteristic, *trajectivity* combines linear temporality, circular temporality and achronisation, similarly to Deleuze's and Guattari's (1987) concept of *itineration,* discussed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). As far as language is concerned, the relationality constituting the main tenet of *trajectivity* inevitably disposes of any logocentric presumption, as Calvino deftly remarks more than once in 'I mille giardini'.

In particular, at the end of this text, Calvino dwells upon the relevance of non-linguistic means in three crucial pillars of Japanese culture, namely tea ceremony, meditation and *haiku*:

> L'arte del più grande maestro della cerimonia del tè, Sen-no Rikyu (1521-1591), sempre ispirata alla massima semplicità, s'espresse anche nel progettare giardini intorno alle case del tè e ai templi. Gli avvenimenti interiori si presentano alla coscienza attraverso movimenti fisici, gesti, percorsi, sensazioni inattese.
>
> Un tempio vicino a Osaka aveva una vista meravigliosa sul mare. Rikyu fece piantare due siepi che nascondevano completamente il paesaggio, e vicino ad esse fece collocare una vaschetta di pietra. [...]
>
> L'idea di Rikyu probabilmente era questa: chinandosi sulla vasca e vedendo la propria immagine rimpicciolita in quel limitato specchio d'acqua, l'uomo considerava la propria pochezza; poi, appena sollevava il viso per bere dalla mano, lo coglieva il bagliore dell'immensità marina e acquistava coscienza d'essere parte dell'universo infinito. *Ma sono cose che a volerle spiegare troppo si sciupano*: a chi lo interrogava sul perché della siepe, Rikyu si limitava a citare i versi del poeta Sogi:
>
>> Qui, un po' d'acqua.
>> Laggiù tra gli alberi
>> il mare! (S, 586 – emphasis mine)

The awareness of the interconnectedness between the individual and the 'infinite universe', rather than being explained linguistically, has to be experienced, or at least suggested by means of the peculiar *praxis* represented by gardens or *haiku*.

2.3.4. A semiotic approach to *praxis*: Calvino between Barthes and Buddhism

Eric Cazdyn has advanced a stimulating re-theorisation of *praxis* in his comparative analysis of Buddhism, Marxism and psychoanalysis (2015), which I shall read in light of the theoretical horizon of dialectical materialism. In his view, *praxis* should be understood 'as the problem of the relation between theory and practice', or better, as 'the desire to unite theory and practice' (ivi: 106). In the philosophical approach to reality expressed by Marx and Engels, practical activity engenders human knowledge in a constant, dialectical interaction between things and ideas. Buddhism has always been affected by the problem of *praxis*, too, emerging in particular in its commitment to the question of enlightenment as 'an unthinkable, undreamable, unknowable state that can only be thought, dreamed, and known from a state of non-enlightenment' (ivi: 110). Moreover, the apparent contradiction between theory and action, which actually give substance to one another, sustains many forms of aesthetic expression based on Buddhist principles, *haiku* included.

This very problem seduces those who, like Barthes and Calvino, investigate the status of signs: these are fixed neither practically nor theoretically, but have to be constantly negotiated on the bedrock of the material world (practice) and of other systems of signs (theory). This is the reason behind Barthes's fascination with Japan, as expressed in the opening chapter of *Empire of Signs*: 'What can be

addressed, in the consideration of the Orient, [...] is the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems' (Barthes 1982: 3-4). Calvino himself is fascinated by the structuralist discourse dealing with the arbitrariness of linguistic signs (S, 2071), and I would suggest that his Japanese experience significantly affects his ongoing semiotic research, progressively aware of the constant dialectics between senses and knowledge. In several passages of his *Lezioni americane*, Calvino addresses the problem of the relation between things and words, without endorsing any pre-established logocentrism, but rather acknowledging the ability of things to communicate without words and to engender dialectical processes – precisely as presupposed by *haiku,* Zen gardens and other Japanese forms of *praxis.*

> In 'Esattezza' Calvino admits to oscillating constantly between two almost opposite poles:

> Da una parte la riduzione degli avvenimenti contingenti a schemi astratti con cui si possano compiere operazioni e dimostrare teoremi; e dall'altra parte lo sforzo delle parole per render conto con la maggiore precisione possibile dell'aspetto sensibile delle cose.
> In realtà sempre la mia scrittura si è trovata di fronte due strade divergenti che corrispondono a due diversi tipi di conoscenza: una che si muove nello spazio mentale d'una razionalità scorporata [...]; l'altra che si muove in uno spazio gremito d'oggetti e cerca di creare un equivalente verbale di quello spazio riempiendo la pagina di parole, con uno sforzo di adeguamento minuzioso dello scritto al non scritto, alla totalità del dicibile e del non dicibile (S, 691).

Considering that the author's intellectual roots lie securely in an Illuminist, rational tradition, it is possible to locate the activation of the second pole which he claims to be attracted by – the apparently less rational one – in an influence of different descent, that is, in the contact with the 'emptiness of language [...] with which Zen, in the exemption from all meaning, writes garden, gestures, houses, flower arrangements, faces, values' (Barthes 1982: 4). While overcoming the all-too-human need to harness the world via words, and uncovering the insufficiency of a language that 'refers only to itself and to its own history' (Franchi 1997: 759), it is thus possible to attain a post-human *distinctive* awareness, as many passages of *Palomar* illustrate.

2.3.5. *Palomar* between words and silence

As seen above, in the opening text of the Japanese section of *Collezione di sabbia* Calvino defines travels as responsible for a reactivation of a visual reading of the world ('riattivare [...] una lettura visiva del mondo': S, 566). A few years later, in the opening text of *Palomar*, he dedicates himself precisely to the activity of reading a specific fragment of the world – a wave – with 'Lettura di un'onda' being the very title of this text. From the outset, *Palomar* seems to look for a literary answer to the silent questions posed by the Japanese experience, as I have been delineating them in the previous sections. To wit, is it possible for a human subject to approach the surrounding world without projecting pre-established, fixed values upon it? Can a dialectical connection be established between subject and object, human and non-human, word and silence – and, contextually, West and East?

As Mauri Jacobsen (1992) points out, in *Palomar* Calvino represents the incessant and literary prolific confrontation between the two opposite poles delineated in the memo on 'Esattezza'. On the one hand, he displays a specific attention towards scientificity and adherence to phenomena ('intende guardare [...] un'onda singola e basta [...] un oggetto limitato e preciso': RR2, 875). But even Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* admits that space can be disjointed from the material world and

determine a subjective experience that does not coincide with the objectivity of the world itself: Calvino reflects upon this in an essay dedicated to Eugenio Montale's poetry (S, 1182). As a result, the phenomenological posture, which puts in the foreground the intentional activity of the subject, has to be relativised, as Calvino does whenever he represents Palomar succumbing to the second pole of the opposition, that is the 'totalità del dicibile e del non dicibile' (S, 691). A discontent of sorts is what Palomar experiences at the end of almost every phenomenological adventure that he sets out to: an intellectual unrest that asks to be considered in its heuristic significance, as representing the subject's awareness of the need to acknowledge the unpredictable, ungraspable objectivity of the world.

In this dynamic, Palomar gradually disentangles himself from the *separative* presumption of subjugating the world via his language-oriented mind. To be sure, the starting point is that of a challenge to the labyrinth of reality, and an attempt to read the unwritten world.[12] At the same time, while focusing on single images, situations, or events, Calvino finds a way to suggest the underlying, silent, somewhat threatening but at once undeniable presence of the non-linguistic, non-speakable, non-describable: 'Forse il vero risultato a cui il signor Palomar sta per giungere è di far correre le onde in senso opposto, di capovolgere il tempo, di scorgere la vera sostanza del mondo al di là delle abitudini sensoriali e mentali?' ('Lettura di un'onda': RR2, 879). The answer to this question is 'No, egli arriva fino a provare un leggero senso di capogiro, non oltre' (RR2, 879). Yet, a 'substance' beyond all-too human 'sensory and mental habits' is recognised, albeit negatively, just as multiplicity is recognised beyond oneness ('non si può osservare un'onda senza tener conto degli aspetti complessi che concorrono a formarla e a quelli altrettanto complessi a cui essa dà luogo': RR2, 876), and the invisible beyond the visible ('a ogni momento crede d'esser riuscito a vedere tutto quel che poteva vedere dal suo punto d'osservazione, ma poi salta fuori sempre qualcosa di cui non aveva tenuto conto': RR2, 878).

The vertigo that Palomar experiences at the end of 'Lettura di un'onda' points at the 'unexpressed not otherwise expressible' (Carbone 1989: 76) that, according to Jean-François Lyotard, represents the postmodern variant of the 'sublime'. Not by chance, Barthes too speaks of 'a faint vertigo' affecting him when confronting 'the pure significance' of the unknown Japanese language, 'the interstice, delivered from any fulfilled meaning' (Barthes 1982: 9). In this very vertigo, in this tension towards the ineffable – which Paolo Fabbri (1987) identifies in Calvino's works as constantly opposed to the nausea of a too-close adherence to things – I would recognise the outcome of Calvino's contact with Japanese *holism*, more precisely to the Buddhist category of 'the inconceivable'. Tibetan modernist writer Gendun Chopel refers to 'the inconceivable' as something that 'is there even if it is not present to the senses or mundane consciousness, and insofar as it is formally posited, it is only posited with reference to a practice or practices which engage with "it"' (Boon 2015: 68).[13]

Taking this definition into account, it is enticing to read Calvino's creation of *Palomar* as a form of 'practice' pursuing the expression of 'the inconceivable'; or rather, to return to Cazdyn's definition (2015: 106), as a form of dialectical *praxis* in terms of 'relation between theory and practice'. Not by chance, in a 1985 interview with Sandra Petrignani in which he discusses his take on fantasy, Calvino connects his attempt to chase the non-written by writing and the practical outcome that can be thus achieved:

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[12] In 'Cercare la complessità' Calvino openly elucidates that *Palomar* addresses '[la] problematica del non-linguistico: cioè come si può leggere qualche cosa che non è scritto, per esempio le onde del mare' (SNiA, 572-573).

[13] Even contemporary artist Arakawa Shusaku, whom Calvino knew and appreciated – as I am going to discuss in the chapter on the representation of void – aimed to challenge conventional mental and bodily perceptions of the world, in order to make sense of it in a renewed fashion (Weller 2003: 47).

io credo che esista anche il non linguistico, il non dicibile, il non scrivibile e che lo scrivere sia appunto un rincorrere sempre questo mondo non scritto e forse non scrivibile. In tal senso il mondo è fatto anche di immagini, di pensieri [...]. Quindi sul mondo aleggia sempre una specie di nuvola, una fantasfera, che è un'atmosfera creata dalle nostre immagini del mondo. Di queste immagini abbiamo bisogno per agire, per crescere, per operare, per giudicare (SNiA, 628).

This *praxis*, entailing 'una particolare dote di astrazione e di adesione al particolare contemporaneamente' (SNiA, 628), exceeds a *separative* approach to reality, which would not permit such an openness towards what human mind and language cannot grasp. Rather, it leads to the subject's permeability to other forms of life, as per the *confusive* stage, and, through that, to the *distinctive* comprehension of human specificities. As far as language is concerned, Palomar undergoes these two steps by tuning in to animal forms of communication, comparing those to human language, and finally decentring language altogether in his praise of silence.

2.3.6. Animal languages in *Palomar*: approaching dialectical syntheses

In 'Il fischio del merlo', Palomar advances a parallel between modes of communication of blackbirds and humans ('Il fischio dei merli ha questo di speciale: è identico a un fischio umano': RR2, 892). As Fitzgerald (1994: 50) analyses, Palomar engages in a serious reflection triggered by the linguistic aspect of the whistle. Indeed, the latter is always almost identical to itself, thus breaking the basic rule of human language, which has to be variable in order to convey the variations of thought. What changes in the communication of blackbirds is rather the duration of silence between each whistle ('Dopo un po' il fischio è ripetuto – dallo stesso merlo o dal suo coniuge – ma sempre come fosse la prima volta che gli viene in mente di fischiare; se è un dialogo, ogni battuta arriva dopo una lunga riflessione': RR2, 892-893). Therefore, either the whistle has a merely phatic function ('tutto il dialogo consiste nel dire all'altro "io sto qui"': RR2, 893), or what truly has a meaning is silence instead ('E se fosse nella pausa e non nel fischio il significato del messaggio?': RR2, 893).

Through this parallel, Calvino envisages two key factors behind human communication: not only is it possible that human beings do not understand each other either ('Ma i dialoghi umani sono qualcosa di diverso?': RR2, 893), but silence must be considered as a viable, alternative form of expression, and by no means a less productive one. If it is by a perception of the dissimilar that this potentiality behind human language becomes intelligible, this perception cannot but provoke the sense of vertigo that has been detected above as an indication of Calvino's fascination – frightening and inescapable at once – with the non-human, key in many forms of Buddhist meditation:

> Se l'uomo investisse nel fischio tutto ciò che normalmente affida alla parola, e se il merlo modulasse nel fischio tutto il non detto della sua condizione d'essere naturale, ecco che sarebbe compiuto il primo passo per colmare la separazione tra... tra che cosa e che cosa? Natura e cultura? Silenzio e parola? Il signor Palomar spera sempre che il silenzio contenga qualcosa di più di quello che il linguaggio può dire. Ma se il linguaggio fosse davvero il punto d'arrivo a cui tende tutto ciò che esiste? O se tutto ciò che esiste fosse linguaggio, già dal principio dei tempi? Qui il signor Palomar è ripreso dall'angoscia (RR2, 895).

The fact that this comparison with the blackbirds' whistle encourages a renovated awareness of the mechanisms of human language is further proven by 'Del mordersi la lingua', a text which the reader encounters further on in *Palomar*. Despite the specific social context characterising this text (it is part of the subsection 'Palomar in società'), it is inevitable to perceive the echo of 'Il fischio del merlo' here, as evidence of the fruitful set of thoughts prompted by the decentralisation of the self:

> anche il silenzio può essere considerato un discorso, in quanto rifiuto dell'uso che altri fanno della parola; ma il senso di questo silenzio-discorso sta nelle sue interruzioni, cioè in ciò che di tanto in tanto si dice e che dà un senso a ciò che si tace (RR2, 961).

Stefano Franchi (1997: 761) identifies in this passage a declaration of ultimate inefficiency of both silence and language, since 'in a universe as saturated by communication as ours, silence is but a different form of communication', and 'true silence, like things, keeps escaping beyond words – or their absence'. However, in my opinion, 'true silence' is precisely what *Palomar* is heading toward, with the conclusion of the book constituting a subtle representation of the existence of the unrepresentable, otherwise definable as 'absent structure', as I am going to analyse in the chapter on death (see § 5.3.6.).

'Il gorilla albino' develops a further reflection upon language and silence, stemming from the observation of animal behaviour. Here language is no longer seen as the goal toward which everything in existence tends, but rather as that *quid* which burst forth in the depths of silence:

> il gorilla albino dispone solo d'un copertone d'auto, un artefatto della produzione umana, estraneo a lui, privo d'ogni potenzialità simbolica, nudo di significati, astratto. Non si direbbe che a contemplarlo se ne possa cavare molto. Eppure, che cosa meglio d'un cerchio vuoto è in grado d'assumere tutti i significati che si vuole attribuirgli? Forse immedesimandosi in esso il gorilla è sul punto di raggiungere al fondo del silenzio le sorgenti da cui scaturisce il linguaggio, di stabilire un flusso di rapporti tra i suoi pensieri e l'irreducibile sorda evidenza dei fatti che determinano la sua vita... (RR2, 943-944)

The semiotic mechanism here delineated allows us to understand the extent to which animality and Orient are similarly included in the decentralisation of a Cartesian standpoint. As much as Japan offers, for both Calvino and Barthes, 'the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system' (Barthes 1982: 3), which makes 'our' system stand out in all its relativity, similarly the gorilla's attachment to his tyre represents the possibility of finding meaning even in something 'alien', apparently naked of meanings, abstract.

In both cases, it is important to underline that a different form of life (animal life) and a different (Eastern) culture act as useful 'functions' in a discourse that, nevertheless, tends to be centred in anthropocentrism and eurocentrism. The point of reference keeps being 'our' – human and Western – symbolic system, in *Empire of Signs* as much as in *Palomar*. Yet, what characterises these texts, and what I would recognise as an elaboration of Barthes's and Calvino's contact with the 'inconceivable' that underpins Buddhist thought, is the tendency towards *distinctive* syntheses. Language emerges from silence, and contextually silence can potentially contain 'something more than language can say' ('Il fischio del merlo'). 'Pure significance' deconstructs 'meaning', but at once casts a fresh light on how 'the symbolic' works (Barthes 1982: 4-9). Meaning and absence of meaning, speakable and non-speakable, interact constantly, and it is only in the dialectic connecting these poles that writing can still find a possibility of existence. The significant step forward that Calvino makes with *Palomar* is the overt embracing of this constant oscillation, partly transfigured partly metanarrated, which is after all the mechanism informing *praxis* as a continuous materialistic dialectic of theory and practice.

2.3.7. In praise of silence

The 'metanarrative' approach to the awareness just outlined can be identified in the entire third and final section of the book, entitled 'I silenzi di Palomar', where the relevance of silence to deconstruct human and Western language underpins a number of reflections. Not by chance, this section opens with 'L'aiola di sabbia', describing Palomar/Calvino's visit to Ryōan-ji Zen garden in Kyoto:

> Questo è uno dei monumenti più famosi della civiltà giapponese, il giardino di rocce e sabbia del tempio Ryoanji di Kyoto, l'immagine tipica della contemplazione dell'assoluto da raggiungersi coi mezzi più semplici e senza il ricorso a concetti esprimibili con parole, secondo l'insegnamento dei monaci Zen, la setta più spirituale del buddismo (RR2, 951).

Calvino appreciates the wordless contemplation that Zen gardens should prompt, similarly to Zen *kōan* and other means of meditation 'overturning verbal and rational modes of thought' (Hume 1992: 148). As Nathalie Roelens (1989: 38) notes, Palomar is already inclined to practice silence in his relationship with other people, thus cannot but welcome and conform to the Buddhist suspension of language, aimed to dispossess the individual of the relativity of its own self.

More interestingly yet, even if Palomar is not able to experience silence directly during his visit, given the surrounding crowd of tourists, he nevertheless finds a way to extrapolate an interior silence out of the external confusion, in a mechanism that recalls what has been analysed above with regards to *haiku*. In other words, once confronted with a threatening *confusivity*, Palomar manages to extrapolate a *distinctive* understanding of himself and the world precisely by navigating their mutual entanglement, which is also one of the main objectives of Zen meditation:

> Egli preferisce mettersi per una via più difficile, cercare d'afferrare quel che il giardino Zen può dargli a guardarlo nella sola situazione in cui può essere guardato oggi, sporgendo il proprio collo tra altri colli.
> Cosa vede? Vede la specie umana nell'èra dei grandi numeri che s'estende in una folla livellata ma pur sempre fatta d'individualità distinte come questo mare di granelli di sabbia che sommerge la superficie del mondo... [...] E tra umanità-sabbia e mondo-scoglio si intuisce un'armonia possibile come tra due armonie non omogenee: quella del non-umano in un equilibrio di forze che sembra non risponda a nessun disegno; quella delle strutture umane che aspira a una razionalità di composizione geometrica o musicale, mai definitiva...
> (RR2, 953)

An apparently paradoxical synthesis emerges, and again nature and Orient converge towards a decentralisation of the self, not radical enough to allow animal or Eastern voices to speak for themselves, but at least useful to make the self realise that the rational, the verbal, the human, the Western, are 'merely [...] system[s] among others' (Barthes 1982: 33).

In an interview by Luca Fontana released in 1985, Calvino is directly asked to confirm whether a connecting line can be drawn between the texts composing *Palomar* and Japanese *ukiyo-e*, the so-called 'paintings of the floating world' produced, among others, by Utamaro (1753-1806) and Hiroshige (1797-1858). Calvino was certainly acquainted with this art, that flourished among the townspeople during the Tokugawa era (Hane 2013: 55). As highlighted in the introduction, in Calvino's 'Japanese shelf' there is a collection entitled *Le stampe del mondo fluttuante*, catalogue of an exhibition on Japanese xylography from the XVII and XVIII centuries curated by Gian Carlo Calza. Moreover, as Francesca Serra (1996: 69) points out, the first redaction of 'Lettura di un'onda' opened with a reference to Hokusai (1760-1849), painter of *The Great Wave*, widely-known for his powerful landscape prints. Calvino later decided to expunge this and other overt cultural references from his book, buttressing the very suspended atmosphere that Fontana refers to. Replying to Fontana's question, Calvino indeed states:

> Curioso che ci abbia pensato. C'è un rapporto di analogia e, in alcuni casi, di filiazione diretta, ad esempio in *L'aiola di sabbia*, dove il signor Palomar osserva un giardino zen in Giappone. Posto di fronte al mondo fluttuante, il signor Palomar cerca di arrivare a una qualche esattezza di tipo logico-matematico, però sempre con un'adesione non riduttiva. Io stesso sono ben lontano da una certezza assoluta nei risultati della razionalità. Per il signor Palomar la battaglia è tra il linguaggio e il mondo non scritto. Nel linguaggio io ho fiducia, come strumento di conoscenza, e ho fiducia nella narrazione: produce razionalità (SNiA, 646).

The reference to a logical-mathematical form of exactitude inevitably recalls Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, which at the same time Palomar emulates and overrides. Not only, as Belpoliti (1996: 102) suggests, does Palomar conduct an investigation upon the limits of language, but he (and Calvino accordingly) also oscillates constantly between trust in rationality and openness towards irrationality. The sort of rationality that a narration – or a *praxis* – like *Palomar* produces rests on the apparent paradox of rationally accepting an irrational hypothesis, of verbally representing a non-verbal alternative, of embracing with a Western mind some Eastern lines of thought.

This paradox, which constitutes the kernel of the *distinctive* stage, and which has been analysed at length by Iovino (2014: 222), entails the progressive familiarisation of the human – by hearing and observing silence – with a world that at once precedes and comes after the human itself, a world dwelt in by things and beings that prove that the status of human being is neither eternal nor unique. The creativity of Calvino's imagination, aided by the encounter with a nature-culture like the Japanese, leads him to the configuration of Palomar as an 'extended ego, a self "outside the subjective"': an 'intersection of city, birds, plants, roofs, things, and himself as a human individual who tries to "escape subjectivity", not so much in order to reach a supposed objectivity, but rather to embrace a wider portion of the neverending surface of things' (ibid.). Indeed, as De Lauretis (1976: 59) maintains, the traditional antinomy between self and non-self, individual and group, conscience and world, cannot but engender a dialectical process, and a dialectic is precisely what I propose to recognise in Calvino's passage from *separative* to *confusive*, and from *confusive* to *distinctive*.

In the progressive awareness concerning the 'landscape of materiality and signs' (ivi: 223), shared equally by human and non-human creatures and not reducible to human language exclusively, Iovino identifies the implementation of a post-human hypothesis in *Palomar*. The attempt to give voice to silence, or rather to find silence within voice, and voice within silence, has been defined by Carlo Ossola as a profusion of symmetry which ultimately cannot but withdraw within itself, in what the critic calls an 'Augustinian return to interiority' (Ossola 1988: 115). Since Calvino's atheism does not allow any superimposition on his intellectual figure of confessions of sorts but, if anything, mere interpretive suggestions, I would propose identifying in *Palomar*'s paradoxical development a Buddhist matrix, alongside an Augustinian one. After all, the very dialectical structure of the book binds it to Buddhism (Boon, Cazdyn, Morton 2015: 12), if not specifically to *yoga*.

In its traditional meaning, *yoga* stands for 'union', 'return to immanence', and it could indeed be considered as a useful interpretive tool to illuminate the process that informs *Palomar*, where the subject tries to establish a state of intimacy with the totality of the universe. 'Immanence' is a state towards which the subject 'returns', by overcoming the illusion of a *separation* and attaining a *distinctive* acquaintance of its role in the universe – precisely as happens in the last section of *Palomar*, entitled 'Le meditazioni di Palomar', and in particular in the texts 'Il mondo guarda il mondo' and 'L'universo come specchio'.

Silence is central both in the development of the book and in *yoga* meditation. While *yoga* is more distinctively recognisable as a *praxis*, Calvino's self-reflections regarding his use of language in *Palomar* situates his very act of writing in the prolific borderline between theory and action, between the abstraction of linguistic means and their material approach to things: 'Cerco di esercitarmi ad affinare il linguaggio, a renderlo più duttile perché aderisca e sia il più vicino possibile alla superficie delle cose' ('Il silenzio ha ragioni che la parola non conosce': SNiA, 624). As Calvino notices when analysing the work of Francis Ponge, when language confronts itself with objects, it puts itself into

perspective, eventually realising that its own de-centralisation does not downscale, but rather redefine its value (S, 1406).

To conclude, when Calvino states that Palomar befriends many Chinese and Japanese wise men ('I suoi amici sono… Monsieur Teste di Valery, il signor Keuner di Brecht… e molti saggi cinesi e giapponesi!' – Marabini 1976: 187), it is possible to find their common ground in the approach towards language, and silence accordingly. As Barthes states:

> if this state of *a-language* is a liberation, it is because, for the Buddhist experiment, the proliferation of secondary thoughts (the thought of thought) appears as a jamming: it is on the contrary the *abolition* of secondary thought which breaks the vicious infinity of language (Barthes 1982: 75).

In the final text of *Palomar*, which I am going to analyse at length in the chapter on death, this '*abolition of secondary thought*' is incisively represented. When Calvino defines *Palomar* as a book 'on' silence (Tornabuoni 1983), he is both declaring that one of its main themes is silence, but also that the entire book is materially constructed on the edge of silence (Serra 1996: 53). Once again, he thus deploys a form of dialectical materialism that is suggestive and useful to read in comparison with meditation, tea ceremony and *haiku* composition: *Palomar* is similarly imbued in silence and located on the productive threshold between thought and practice.

3. Everywhere and nowhere: thinking and representing the void

> It is not down in any map; true places never are
>
> – Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

The previous reflections on language in relation to Japan implied from the outset a counter-analysis of the role of silence in some expressions of that culture. By the same token, to address Japanese spatiality entails taking into account not only its 'positive' appearance, but also its 'negative' counterpart, namely the void. In this process, syntheses of opposite realms prevail over the Law of Non-contradiction, pinnacle of Western philosophy which trans-cultural approaches almost inevitably destabilise. Morton points out that, already within the Western nineteenth-century mathematics, a number of entities defying the Law of Non-contradiction have been discovered, with Georg Cantor's and Bertrand Russell's paradoxes indicating gaps between what a thing is and how it appears (2015: 231-232). Also during the long twentieth century artists and thinkers – with Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre among the most influential – explored nothing and its signifiers at length (Vicks 2015: 8-24).[1] But it is in Buddhism, in its recognition of the self-contradiction of things which remain the same, yet differing from themselves, and in its acknowledgment of a necessary paradox inherent to identity, that Western contemporary thought finds a particularly fertile ground for its own renovation – as Foucault suggested while dialoguing with a Zen monk in Japan in 1978.[2]

As far as narrative is concerned, its essential relationship with nothing notably established in the theoretical analyses of Jacques Derrida, Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva. As Meghan Vicks summarises (2015: 37-57), the de-centred centre of the structure is discussed by Derrida in 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (1966): in Derrida's analysis, the proliferation of meaning resulting from the play of signifiers requires nothing in order to take place. Similarly, the carnivalesque language investigated by Bakhtin in his study on *Rabelais and His World* (first published in 1965) develops as a play with structure and rule, a subversion of the very logic of official hierarchies and universal truths, which needs a nothing, a 'foundationless foundation' in order for the potentiality of meanings to proliferate. While keeping investigating nothing as the paradoxical generator of the narrative system, which is actually outside of the system itself, in 'World, Dialogue and Novel' (1969) Kristeva switches her focus on the role of the writer, defined as 'an anonymity, an absence, a blank space [...] permitting the structure to exist as such' (1986: 45), as proposed by Barthes, too, in 'The Death of the Author' (1967).

Calvino once declared his uncomfortable scarce familiarity with Derrida's philosophy ('si entra subito in un terreno più filosofico, Derrida, Lacan, dove io mi muovo male': S, 2788). On the other hand, in an article first published on *Pirelli* in 1970 and then collected in *Una pietra sopra*, entitled 'Il mondo alla rovescia', Calvino commended Bakhtin's carnivalesque 'modello di poetica' and its further

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[1] Nietzsche's perspectivism revolves around the mechanics of a nothing in the system that brings about man's fictionalised reality: see 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense' (1873), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Heidegger's *Dasein* is said to be conditioned by nothingness in 'What is Metaphysics?' (1929). Nothingness enables meaning-making mechanisms also in Sartre's philosophy, as expressed mainly in *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

[2] On that occasion, Foucault (1999: 113) asserted that 'if philosophy of the future exists, it must be born outside of Europe or equally born in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and non-Europe'.

development in Kristeva's *Semeiotiké* (S, 256-260).[3] Ten years later, in *La Repubblica* (15.2.1980), he also positively reviewed the Italian translation of Bakhtin's study on Rabelais in the article 'Rabelais con nostalgia' (S, 1286-1291).[4] While aware of these lines of connection – already investigated among others by Gerhard Regn (1989) and Marco Piana (2013) – the present research proposes to consider a further pole in the intellectual discourse concerning nothingness, as it is developed in Calvino's mature works. Indeed, the author thematises the void especially in the books that are more or less directly concerned with Eastern images and reflections. First in *Le città invisibili*, and more forcefully in the two books that Calvino writes after visiting Japan, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* and *Palomar*, nothing functions at the same time as the signifier and the signified, 'ultimately arriving at the notion of nothing as the transcendental signified that is infinitely restructured by the very signifiers it generates', to borrow Vicks's words (2015: 57).

I will first retrace the role and representation of the void in Calvino's production up until the mid 1970s. In the author's first narratives, set during the Italian Resistance or post-war industrial boom, the void appears as a separate entity opposed to the human realm, whose connection with animal alterity contributes to a still problematic destabilisation of human centrality. The more combinatorial constructions emerge in Calvino's semiotic experiments from the early 1970s, the more the void is explored as a potentially original core of human and narrative experiences, in a synthesis of immanence and transcendence that progressively involves Eastern coordinates.

The second section of this chapter aims to reconstruct the role of space and void in the other pole of the encounter at stake in this research, i.e. in some aspects of Japanese tradition. Starting with a broad contextualisation of spatiality in twentieth-century Japanese thought and in Calvino's Japanese readings, and moving on to an analysis of distance in a number of forms of Japanese art, I will then focus on the role of the void in Taoism and Buddhism, where dichotomies are overcome and replaced by the continuity of the void, thus engendering distinctive paradoxes and fruitful interrelations among things. Emptiness, recognised to be as essential as presence in the aesthetic continuum of interdependent events, will be then investigated in its rich expressive potentiality as far as rituals, forms of art and architecture and, most importantly, literature are concerned.

Finally, I will go back to Calvino's works aiming to connect his later fascination with the category of void to his meeting with Japan. I propose to define the void as the 'absent structure' at the basis of Calvino's mature 'weak structuralism'. In my view, a 'weak' form of structuralism is constantly aware of, and dependent on, its absent foundation: this foundation is represented by an all-encompassing, synthetic void in Calvino's later production, potentially influenced by his Japanese intellectual experiences. As far as *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* is concerned, I will link the void to the Zen-like open character of the book, as well as to the cognitive process described in particular in the Japanese incipit, according to which the void itself represents the basis of any perception and description of sensations. The functioning of an 'absent structure' in open works will be further explored when analysing Calvino's article 'Per Arakawa', related to an exhibition of Japanese contemporary art. A

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[3] The article was prompted by the Italian translation of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* by Giuseppe Garritano: *Dostoevskij, poetica e stilistica* (1968, Turin: Einaudi).

[4] It must be noted that, in this article, Calvino focuses more on Bakhtin's corporeality than on the sense of void that underlies the Carnival: 'Ciò che ci colpisce di più [...] è il senso di realtà piena che egli dà al Carnevale, con un accento a cui non eravamo più abituati, tanto la cultura degli ultimi anni ci ha convinti che viviamo in un universo di segni, tra sistemi di segni che rimandano ad altri segni, sotto i quali non si suppone ci sia nulla' (S, 1288). The Italian translation of Bakhtin's work, by Mili Romano, is *L'opera di Rabelais e la cultura popolare. Riso, carnevale e festa nella tradizione medievale e rinascimentale* (1979, Turin: Einaudi).

'weak structuralism' with the void at its core is what this article mainly refers to, contextually operating a decentralisation of the human being. 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola' will instead offer an instance of Calvino's less sharp semiotic tools, when it comes to analysing the *social* functioning of the void in the Japanese context. Conversely, his semiotics of the void of Japanese ascendancy will prove undoubtedly fertile in that *operative-contemplative* project that is *Palomar*, towards a *distinctive* overcoming of anthropocentrism and logocentrism which will be investigated in light of Barthes's analogous discourse.

3.1. Void in Calvino's early works

Calvino's treatment of the void encompasses an evolution in which diverse semiotic characteristics emerge from text to text. At first, the void is relegated to a circumscribed space which exists tangibly, separated but parallel to the human realm. It materially represents the *separation* entailed in the *separative* paradigm, and as such it makes room for animal alterity, which is there often represented as suffering and succumbing to human rapacity. It is indeed important to reiterate that, even if Calvino is deeply concerned with ecological issues since his early production, at least until his cosmicomic experiments he fails to find narrative tools to disengage himself from the traditional hierarchy dominated by human beings, which relegates all that is non-human to *separate* spaces. In other words, between the 1950s and early 1960s he does represent the struggles of the non-human when confronted to human standards, but he still does so from a glaringly human perspective, which in turn represents its own discomfort when confronted with the void of humanity that animal alterity points to.

Gradually, the void comes to acquire a more profound conceptual depth, and the subject understands that it underpins everything, that nothing and being are consubstantial, although not identical. Void still comes hand in hand with distance, as etymologically indicated by the very definition of *distinctive* stage. But such a distance is no longer aimed at *separating* human and non-human realms. Rather, it envisages *distinguishing* the human ability to reconnect itself with the natural world, to find in its rational tools the way to overcome rationality itself, in a synthesis of immanence and transcendence that is possibly imbued with some sort of spirituality. Between the former conception, pervaded by Western Cartesianism, and the latter, potentially influenced by Eastern thought, as I am going to discuss, there lie a number of intermediate positions which I aim to retrace in this section.

While drawing on contemporary ecocritical readings of Calvino's works, I propose to contextualise them more clearly within a trajectory that takes into account, alongside the author's longstanding ecological sensibility, the enrichment brought about by the acquaintance with Japanese natural-cultural landscape. Iovino recognises that *La formica argentina*, *La speculazione edilizia*, *La nuvola di smog* and *Marcovaldo* 'might provide a narrative stratigraphy of the Anthropocene at the time of the Great Acceleration, following its socio-ecological parable from a very specific observatory: Italy' (2018: 68). She also acknowledges the '*ars combinatoria* made of segments of potential natures and unstable material-semiotic orders' that intermingle in Calvino's mature works, especially in *Le cosmicomiche* and *Palomar* (2014: 217). I aim to underline the specific relevance of Japanese 'material-

semiotic order' in the progressive widening of the author's attention toward the environment, increasingly understood in its epistemological depth, beyond national and ontological borders.

3.1.1. Human separation from void and animality

In the trilogy dealing with ecological issues that Calvino wrote in the 1950s (*La formica argentina, La speculazione edilizia, La nuvola di smog*), the void epitomises a force that destabilises human beings while being connected with the natural realm. Contextually, distance plays a role in the human need to grasp a sense of the world which, at this stage, still does not completely challenge human centrality. The first aspect appears especially in *La formica argentina*. Here ants are depicted as jeopardising the stability of human dwelling precisely by creating the void underneath, and by digging grooves in those constructions that are supposed to be solid and stable (RR1, 454). As already underlined elsewhere (see § 2.1.1.), Calvino's representation of this battle between humans and animals is all but partisan towards the former. In fact, in *La speculazione edilizia* the threatening symbol of the void rather dialogues with the negative effects of human rapacity (RR1, 817), stressing the impact of environmental degradation (Aloisio 2017: 173). Yet animality, matched with a pervasive and undermining void, is still conceived as a *separate* alterity with whom the human being struggles to come to terms.

In the chapter on perspective (see § 1.1.1.), I have analysed the peculiar 'pathos of distance' which engenders *Il barone rampante*. If it is true, as Cesare Cases remarks (1958: 160), that the baron oscillates between solitude at a distance and a feeling of community, when it comes to his relation to nature, as opposed to society, the concept of distance blurs and changes over the development of the plot. Indeed, the protagonist lives within the arboreal kingdom, thus he does all but dissociate himself from nature materially. But intellectually he keeps his individuality well *separated* from the surrounding nature, at least until old age, love and passion intervene to obnubilate his mental capacity. *Il cavaliere inesistente*, the third and last text composing the trilogy *I nostri antenati*, is instead concerned with void, rather than distance, with the protagonist representing a hybrid of matter and void, presence and absence, as Iovino defines it (2014: 220). It is possible to individuate in this character a form of *confusiveness*, of ontological parity between void and non-void, which Calvino's subsequent elaboration of this concept will overcome, rather embracing a *distinctive* awareness.

'Il giardino dei gatti ostinati' in *Marcovaldo* represents a further instance of a space that is devoid of human presence, of a void that is not absolute, but relative to the lack of human agency: 'La città dei gatti e la città degli uomini stanno l'una dentro l'altra, ma non sono la medesima città' (RR1, 1163). As soon as reality empties out its human features, animality appears to be the realm to which Calvino is eager to give voice. As Sanna suggests, within the network-like industrial city a space is revealed in the hidden gaps, 'in which Marcovaldo's interest in exploring this animal space points to positive traces of his "biocitizenship"' (2016: 34). Certainly, the proposal which this text seems to prospect is a cohabitation of human and animal, getting away from a merely anthropocentric perspective. Yet, the ironic tone pervading the story, as well as its chiefly narrative connotation, prevent Calvino from developing a thoroughly philosophical discussion of this hypothesis, with *Marcovaldo* still oscillating between a socially imposed *separation* and his own disastrous attempts to some forms of *confusion*.

Confusion of disparate forms of life also characterises *Le cosmicomiche*, whose fantastic fabric unsettle the realism – albeit imaginative – of previous texts, while still not attaining a proper philosophical depth. The inspiration is rather scientific, as in 'Il niente e il poco', 'ispirato a questa

nuovissima teoria dell'*inflationary universe* secondo la quale l'universo nascerebbe letteralmente dal *nulla*' (SNiA, 643). Belpoliti remarks that *Le cosmicomiche* and *Ti con zero* offer a phenomenological image of space, which develop on a bedrock of constant confrontation with its opposite, namely the void (1996: 68). As Iovino maintains, this confrontation opens up to a 'coevolutionary gaze', to a 'relational ontology' which fluctuates 'between subjectivism and objectivism' and which has much in common with Deleuze and Guattari's theorisation of 'nomadic subjects' in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). But the 'nomadic and deterritorialized narrative technique' here implemented, while coming closer to the structural and thematic choices that will be further developed in *Palomar*, still lacks the allure of philosophical, if not properly spiritual depth which the book from 1983 encompasses: a depth that I shall put into dialogue with Calvino's Eastern experience.

3.1.2. Void and blanks in combinatorial constructions

To proceed along this virtual evolution – always remembering that, in fact, Calvino mixed to a large extent his ever-changing interests –, it is when combinatory experiments start taking the lead of the author's creativity that an alternative, conceptual void enters his books. As Guido Bonsaver points out, void and blanks ask to be read as existential *topoi* of Calvino's 'semiotic' phase (1994: 183). For instance, in *La taverna dei destini incrociati*, at the end of 'Due storie in cui ci si cerca e ci si perde', Parsifal states: '– Il nocciolo del mondo è vuoto, il principio di ciò che si muove nell'universo è lo spazio del niente, attorno all'assenza si costruisce ciò che c'è, in fondo al gral c'è il tao' (RR2, 589). The existence of the universe is here presented on condition that the void exists in the first place, as per the Taoist tradition which Calvino was acquainted with for having read foundational texts such as *Zhuang-zi* and *Tao-te-ching*. The void thus represents a conceptual origin of everything, and it is no longer merely connected to the animal realm. Cause and consequence, before and after are joined-up, in a subversion of linear temporality which I will explore further in a dedicated chapter.

In general, from *La taverna* to *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, from *Le città invisibili* to *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, Calvino probes the multiplicity of reality in order to retrieve the original nucleus of any human and narrative experience, which he seems to identify with the void – a properly 'absent structure'. As he wrote to Sandro Briosi in 1976, there is an '*intervallo di vuoto* che salta sempre fuori in quello che scrivo' (L, 1303). To address this void, he unavoidably falls into a paradox: the more he writes about hypothetical stories to be told by means of Tarot cards, about possible cities and potential novels, the more he sets limits to these potentialities. It seems like, in the attempt to grasp the void beneath multiple forms of reality, he ends up suffocating it. At this stage, the Law of Non-contradiction starts disintegrating, paving the way for a fuller acceptance of paradox that will emerge in *Palomar*, especially in its final pages, possibly thanks to Calvino's contact with Zen Buddhism, a discipline imbued with paradoxes.

Just to dwell on one of these combinatorial projects, and especially one where some Eastern influence already emerges, in *Le città invisibili* one can start appreciating Calvino's interest in the reversible passage from concreteness to abstractness, from the real to the unreal, from the visible to the invisible, or else from reality to dream. Many threads merge into the multifarious elaboration of this dialectic. Christian Rivoletti (2006: 318-325) highlights how close it is to Montale's opposition between *extra* and *intus*: as there is a recurrent oscillation between physical phenomena and their invisible

essence in *Ossi di seppia*, similarly, in *Le città invisibili*, the concrete dimension of Marco Polo's travels around Oriental cities constantly blurs into a mental and cognitive process.

Moreover, when Polo and Kublai discuss the possibility that they are dreaming instead of living (RR2, 447-448), Calvino is narratively processing the 'dream argument', that is one of the most prominent skeptical hypotheses of classical and modern metaphysics, referred to by Plato (*Theaetetus* 158b-d), Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 1011a6) and Descartes (*Meditations on First Philosophy*) among others. Nietzsche understands life as a dreamscape, as well, and argues in 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense' (1873) that men 'are deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images; their eyes merely glide over the surface of things and see "forms"' (Nietzsche 1999: 80). What interests this analysis the most, however, is that even in the Western world this argument is sometimes referred to as the '*Zhuang-zi* paradox'. At the end of the second chapter of *Zhuang-zi*, 'On the Equality of Things', the story 'Zhuang Zhou Dreams of Being a Butterfly' revolves around the dream-like hypothesis of the transformation of things. This story features in Mahāyāna and Tibetan Buddhism, too, and recurs in many authors that owe Buddhism some inspiration: Borges quotes it in 'New Refutation of Time', in *Other Inquisitions* (1975: 184-185), and includes it in *The Book of Fantasy* (1988: 95), coedited with Silvina Ocampo and Adolfo Bioy Casares, whereas Calvino himself refers to it at the beginning of the note accompanying his translation of *I fiori blu* by Queneau (2003: 217).[5]

In *Le città invisibili*, the frame of the eighth chapter is the jewel in the crown of the book's discourse about the presence of emptiness among different modes of existence. As it is typical in this work, each chapter is made up of descriptions of invisible cities, in roman type, framed by an initial and a final dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, in italics. The end of the eighth opening frame reads as follows: '*A forza di scorporare le sue conquiste per ridurle all'essenza, Kublai era arrivato all'operazione estrema: la conquista definitiva, di cui i multiformi tesori dell'impero non erano che involucri illusori, si riduceva a un tassello di legno piallato: il nulla...*' (RR2, 462). The appearance on stage of nothingness makes readers hold their breath as if they were facing an abyss. But descriptions of five cities follow right after the ellipsis, and in the closing frame of the same chapter the discourse goes on, by challenging the very concept of nothingness: '*La quantità di cose che si potevano leggere in un pezzetto di legno liscio e vuoto sommergeva Kublai; già Polo era venuto a parlare dei boschi d'ebano, delle zattere di tronchi che discendono i fiumi, degli approdi, delle donne alle finestre...*' (RR2, 469). The wooden *tessera* seems to be void, but it is actually full of sediments of the past and hints of the future. This reading of emptiness as bearing fullness in itself progressively draws near to the simultaneity that characterises Eastern conceptions of the world, and it is not by chance that it emerges in the first book by Calvino which is ostensibly linked to an Eastern atmosphere. The wooden *tessera* represents a counterpart of the invisible city par excellence in the book: Venice, the original city, at the same time absent and always present, symbol of the impalpable reality behind the commonly perceived world, which structures the construction of every other city precisely as Not-being does with Being in Taoist canons.

As a pure provocation in this context, it might be said that Japan itself historically represented an 'impossibility' against which Kublai Khan's power developed: among the few defeats that the Mongol

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[5] Interestingly enough, a blurred distinction between dream and reality also characterises the first part of *Nevsky Prospekt* (1831-1834) by Nikolay Vasilyevich Gogol, about the story of the young painter, Piskaryov, which in turn influences Calvino's last incipit in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, as underlined below.

Empire ever experienced, there are two unsuccessful attempts to invade Japan, in 1274 and in 1281.[6] Pushing further the interpretation of this fact, here lie the roots of Japanese traditional inviolability and long-lasting isolation, which have played an indisputable role in its Western mythological construction, to which descriptions such as Barthes's and Calvino's are indebted. Thus, if *Le città invisibili* constructs an ideal geography held by an underlying void, then it can be hypothesised that both Venice and Japan fluctuate in this void. Consequently, Calvino's travels in Japan can be read as a meandering through that void that a large part of his production has constantly supposed, sometimes suffocated, but never probed directly up until then.

Eastern familiarity with void and perishability as essential parts of every human and non-human experience represents a turning point in Calvino's notion of reality, as this analysis aims to prove below. Just to anticipate this substantial turn here, if Calvino acknowledges that the void is everywhere, as he does with regards to Zen gardens and temples in a text like 'Il tempio di legno',[7] I posit that in his later production his addressing the multiplicity of reality is no longer tantamount to challenging the 'labyrinth' or the world or the 'sea of objectivity'. In my opinion, this endeavour cannot be ascribed equally to Calvino's earlier fictions and to *Palomar*, as JoAnn Cannon maintains (1985: 189). In Calvino's last book I would identify a gradual process of acceptance of reality in its multifarious, contrasting traits: Palomar's veritable plunge into the materiality of things engenders a meta-physical abstraction, within a dialectical synthesis of opposites that welcomes contradictions and subverts the linearity of narration. The political by-product of such an acceptance is a rather regressive stance, which is far from Calvino's early neo-realist and resistential commitment to political and social critique. However, from an artistic point of view, it allows the creation of a character like Palomar, whose silences and reflections about void and death can be interpreted as final stages of an itinerary towards a harmonisation with the surrounding (especially natural) world.

3.2. Space and void in Japanese tradition

Both Taoism and Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, aim to overcome materiality, and temporality and spatiality accordingly. For instance, Zhuang-zi describes the Dao as something that

> exists beyond the highest point, and yet you cannot call it lofty; it exists beneath the limit of the six directions, and yet you cannot call it deep. It was born before Heaven and Earth, and yet you cannot say it has been there for long; it is earlier than the earliest time, and yet you cannot call it old (Chuang-tzu 1964: 77).

As far as Zen is concerned, Dōgen's *Genjō kōan* maintains that

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[6] In 1274 Kublai Khan sought to invade Japan but the Mongol fleet was destroyed by a typhoon, the so-called *kamikaze*. The second attack in 1281 resulted in the landing of Mongol troops in northern Kyushu but the Japanese forces were able to drive them out (Hane 2013: 22).

[7] '[...] ciò che perdura è la forma ideale dell'edificio, e non importa se ogni pezzo del suo supporto materiale è stato tolto e cambiato innumerevoli volte, e i più recenti odorano di legno appena piallato. Così il giardino continua a essere il giardino disegnato cinquecento anni fa da un architetto-poeta, anche se ogni pianta segue il corso delle stagioni, delle piogge, del gelo, del vento; così i versi d'una poesia si tramandano nel tempo mentre la carta delle pagine su cui saranno via via trascritti va in polvere' (S, 581).

when someone rides in a boat, as he looks at the shore he has the illusion that the shore is moving. When he looks at the boat under him, he realizes the boat is moving. In the same way, when one takes things for granted with confused ideas of body-mind, one has the illusion that one's own mind and own nature are permanent; but if one pays close attention to one's own actions, the truth that things are not self will be clear (Dōgen 1986: 33).

As these examples show, in order to foster the awareness of a materiality to be overcome, neither Taoist nor Zen masters dismiss spatial metaphors, but rather reconfigure them in order to subvert the very assumption on which they are grounded, i.e. the existence of an unambiguous category of space. To understand the apparently ambivalent approach to space is therefore paramount to understand these lines of Eastern thought, with the void playing a major role in them.

In this section I will first analyse the relevance that contemporary Japanese philosophy and sociology, and modernist literature, attribute to space. I will highlight the extent to which this attention towards spatiality has often triggered, in modern and post-modern Japanese discourses, the essentialist solidification of categories that, on the contrary, had originally been open and porous – first among them the category of the void. I will then focus on the role of distance in the cognitive process that both Taoism and Buddhism solicit, in order for them to be fully appreciated and properly embraced. Finally, I will investigate the presence of the void in Taoism, Mahāyāna Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. Only after an attentive analysis of those, it will be possible to go back again to a more contemporary context, seeking to understand more clearly the extent to which traditional views on void influenced the forms of art that Calvino came in contact with more closely, that are, architecture and literature.

3.2.1. Space of individuality and sociality

The more or less benign essentialism that has characterised analyses of Japanese ontology and sociology over the last decades rests on the assumption that, in Japan, categories like nature and culture are idiosyncratically embedded into one another – provided that this distinction is taken as valid. Space is thus conceived as embodying the interweaving of nature and culture, in what originates a 'specific situational, topological conception of order' (Eisenstadt 1995: 206).[8] The relevance of a spatial dimension has also been considered as paramount in light of human existence. In this respect, it is relevant to remember that, in the context of twentieth-century philosophy, the more forceful critique to Heidegger's over-emphasis on temporality in his *Being and Time* (1927) came from a Japanese philosopher, Watsuji Tetsurō, whose contribution brought Japanese philosophy to the world almost for the first time in history. Watsuji proposed in response a stronger emphasis on spatiality, advancing the category of *Fūdo*, which is also the title of his masterpiece (see §1.2.2.).

Fūdo is the fusion of environment and human beings' subjective perception of it. Watsuji reconnects what is normally conceived of as 'climate', that is, an exogenous factor outside human experience, to the human itself, with physical environment and human life seen as two sides of the same coin. From an ethical point of view, Watsuji focuses on the centrality of social groupings as syntheses of *nin* ('person', 'human being') and *gen* ('space', 'between'), which are the two characters composing the Japanese word to express the human person – *ningen*. A human being is thus formed by a balanced

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[8] Cornyetz (2007: 20), for instance, explains how the 'aesthetic rendering of the natural world' works in Kawabata: she refers to 'a nature anchored in a cultural specificity', and to an 'acculturated apprehension and representation of nature [that] has at its core a Zen Buddhist sensibility'.

and dual nature where individuality and sociality, as well as spatiality, intertwine. As already discussed in the chapter on perspective, Augustin Berque has analysed at length the social outcomes of Watsuji's *fūdo*, which he suggests translating as *milieu* and applies to the dual contingencies that inform society as an individual and collective, natural and cultural entity.[9]

This inextricable integration has unavoidably given rise to essentialist and nationalist conceptions, with the category of *fūdo* easily bent to form the basis of the legitimacy of the state institution (Befu 1997: 111). Watsuji saw the state as the sole institution which could take on the authority of totality, and expressed vocally his support of the Emperor system, contextually praising the superiority of traditional Japanese culture (Carter and McCarthy 2019). It is beyond the bounds of the present chapter to discuss the possible interpretations and mitigations of Watsuji's totalitarian state ethics. What is relevant to notice here, in light of the spatial focus of this analysis, is that the 'topological conception of order' (Eisenstadt 1995: 206) bound to Japanese traditional thought, while advocating a 'prehensive unification', a 'nonobstructed interpenetration between the whole and the parts' (Odin 2017: 125-128), might actually include a geographically and culturally essentialist seed, and indeed a nationalist seed as well. Such elements of self-Orientalism and determinism unavoidably play a key role to shape the Orientalist generalisations that occasionally characterise Calvino's idealisation of Japanese culture.

3.2.2. Inner and outer spaces in Japanese literature

At the root of Japanese literature lies what has been defined as 'probably the oldest novel in the world' (Keene 1971: 33), that is, *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) by Murasaki Shikibu. Worshipped by Kawabata (Phillips 2006: 422), translated in modern Japanese by Tanizaki in 1938 (Najita and Harootunian 1989: 756-7) and appreciated by Calvino, too,[10] this proto-novel revolves around a man's emotional response to his environment, illustrates art as governed by attentiveness to nature and represents the merging of moods of nature and man (Colligan-Taylor 1990: 13), while recounting the life and loves of the son of an ancient Japanese emperor. Such an essential sensitivity to nature was also admired by Calvino's friend and colleague Cesare Pavese, who identified in it a symbolic value that chimed with his own personal and literary sensitivity.[11]

The close connection between human being and environment that Watsuji reflects upon in the first half of the twentieth century thus finds a remote ancestor at the very heart of Japanese classical literature. Moreover, *Genji monogatari*'s construction has its basis not only in esoteric Buddhism, but also in Chinese literature (Karatani 1993: 167), an element that is important to bear in mind in order to uncover the fictitious and constructed character of the category of *nihonjinron* ('theories about the uniqueness of Japan'). In this respect, it is useful to remember that, according to Okakura (1903), the

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[9] See in particular Berque (1994; 2004).
[10] In 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola' Calvino refers to *Genji Monogatari* as 'il romanzo della squisita Murasaki' (S, 572). In 'Perché leggere i classici' he includes it among the classics of world literature (S, 1822). Moreover, as already noted in the introduction, in 1952 Calvino acts as a spokeperson for Einaudi's interest in publishing Murasaki's masterpiece.
[11] See in particular an entry in Pavese's *Il mestiere di vivere* (1952: 246), which dates back to 14.11.1943: 'La natura, in Murasaki, è insomma simbolica. Un ramo fiorito, un germoglio, un paesaggio stilizzato riassumono sempre una situazione, ne contengono il profumo. Sono del resto monotoni come tutti i simboli: il significato è sempre lo stesso'.

most peculiar trait of Japanese identity lies perhaps in the capacity to imitate, assimilate, maintain and preserve the artifacts of other civilisations.

Another cornerstone of Japanese early literature is represented by monks' travel diaries which, again, connect the places described with internal, more than external, quests. As Karen Colligan-Taylor points out, these diaries are organised by geographic units, as opposed to traditional time units, and mention 'famous places' (*meisho*) such as dwelling places of native deities, Buddhist temples, or natural mandala, which thus become fixed in the literary tradition (*utamakura*) (1990: 23). During the pre-modern Tokugawa period (1600-1868) this primitivist ideal, which sees nature more as a literary construction than in its present reality, finds its higher form of expression in the *haiku* of poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), many poems of which are part of the collection *Cento haiku* that Calvino owned. In general, it can be said that Japan's finest arts, albeit diverse and multifarious, find in the appreciation of the beauty of nature a secure *trait d'union*. Ueda (1982: 132) maintains that 'one thing permeates Saigyō's *tanka*, Sōgi's linked verse, Sesshū's painting and Rikyū's tea ceremony. That is the spirit of the artist who follows nature and befriends the four seasons'.

Calvino is undoubtedly acquainted with Japanese poetry, painting and even with the specific school of tea ceremony established by Rikyu, as his Japanese travelogues reveal. Furthermore, he finds compelling examples of the relevance of nature and space in Japanese tradition when it comes to twentieth-century literature. Kawabata's admiration for Murasaki mentioned above resonates with this author's 'longing to melt into "nothingness", to become one with even the objects of nature all around him, [a]s a part of his youthful quest for, and fear of, acceptance' (Gessel 1993: 140). As seen in the first chapter (see § 1.2.6.), this personal disposition gives shape in *Snow Country* to the representation of flow dynamics connecting man and nature, and in *The House of Sleeping Beauties* to the main character Eguchi's desire to plunge in the continuum of nature by sleeping next to young women.

Cornyetz's feminist and Marxist critique does not fail to highlight the political outcome of such a regressive stand in Kawabata's oeuvre: 'The merging [...] with the natural universe mediated by poetry [...] can easily be compared to the fascist's "dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feeling of the community"' (2007: 39). Referring to fascism as a broad set of ideology and aesthetics, as variously analysed by Benjamin, Chow, Griffin, Hewitt, Neocleous, and Sontag, Cornyetz's analysis proves particularly illuminating in order to recognise also in Calvino's mature intellectual position, which openly praises Kawabata's aesthetics, a regressive inclination which aims at describing, if not properly aestheticising, reality, and possibly dissolving the subject into it – as opposed to Calvino's earlier challenging approach to things, both politic and ontological.

Always taking into account Calvino's 'Japanese shelf', one of the most zealously political writers of post-war Japan, Ōe Kenzaburō, rejected firmly Kawabata's aestheticisation. Ōe responded to Kawabata's Nobel Prize speech *Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself* with a provocative counter speech titled *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself*, when awarded the same prize in 1994. Not by chance, Ōe's very approach to space is more material and less ethereal, without losing in allegorical power. Indeed, in a sort of 'post-modern' revival of the tradition of monks' travel diaries, a book like Ōe's *The Silent Cry* is characterised by a symbolic centrality of space. While exploring the impact of a historical incident over several generations, thus while dealing with a repeated temporality, the plot overcomes the chronological sequence of time and strongly ties the symbolic and metaphorical development of events, characters and narrative situations to specific spaces and microcosmos (Yoshida 1985: 90). Ōe's 'spatialized novels' thus bring to the fore some specific landscapes – in *The Silent Cry* a massive

bamboo forest – which connect life and death of different generations, providing a spatial continuity to cyclic temporal patterns (Yoshida 1995).

In the post-WWII literary landscape, Abe Kōbō disquiets traditional construction of spatiality, too. In *The Ruined Map* he describes disturbing and ill-ordered spaces in the newly built and chaotic suburban landscape that is the post-war Japanese city (Seaman 2012). To acknowledge the presence of lone voices like Abe's in Calvino's library is paramount in order to understand what the author chose to see or not to see once visiting Japan. Indeed, Calvino deliberately opted for an ideal, rather than real, Japan, thus confirming his penchant for an aestheticism *à la* Kawabata. The best example of this process can be found in 'Il novantanovesimo albero', closing text of the Japanese section of *Collezione di sabbia*. Here, while briefly describing Kyoto's periphery, Calvino swiftly reminds himself and the reader that, despite the suburban neglect, 'il Giappone è un paese «diverso»', mainly because of its traditional dwellings, its gardens and its nature. Thus, the author is undoubtedly aware of the extent to which space, in contemporary Japan, is far from merely offering a conceptual matrix for contemplation, crossed as it is by the contradictions of uneven social and urban developments described by Ōe and Abe. Yet, he chooses to refer mainly to the auratic quality of distanced and void spaces, which better symbolise and synthesise the cognitive processes that his travelling experience fosters, feeding some long-lasting intellectual preoccupations of his.

3.2.3. Necessary distance

If Massimo Raveri is right when he states that Japanese spatiality refuses an immediate and easy understanding, with space as a whole often being accessible as the arrival point of a cognitive process – of an inner synthesis – (2006: 50), what emerges as a consequence is the relevance of distance for many Japanese forms of thought and art. Distance appears to be a prerequisite of the cognitive process Raveri refers to – both of its existence and of its disclosure to comprehension. According to Stephen R. Kellert (1991: 302), the kind of love for nature that underpins many Japanese artistic forms only operates from a distance: 'to go to the edge of the forest, to view nature from across the river, to see natural beauty from a mountain top, but rarely to enter into or immerse oneself in wildness or the ecological understanding of natural settings'. Gardens epitomise vividly this penchant: the very 'reductionism' (Lee 1984: 75) that allows gardeners to condense, or miniaturise, broader landscapes, requires a separation from real landscapes which only enables human beings to relate to nature on their terms (Kalland and Asquith 1997: 18).

On the one hand, gardens entail distance from nature in its wild forms. On the other, by creating a secluded space from which nature itself can be grasped, gardens also engender a number of reflections which are all characterised by a needful distance from their objects. Klaus Kracht remarks that 'it is necessary for all human beings to show respect to what is above and at the same time to keep at a distance from what is above' (1986: 224-226 – trans. in Ackermann 1997: 40). Enclosed gardens point precisely to a similar synthesis: while reducing nature's diversity, quantity or size, gardens at the same time refer to something else which cannot be grasped within a single gaze. Reduction and openness thus come hand in hand, as much as concrete distance and its immaterial transcendence do. 'La distanza necessaria per la contemplazione' (S, 578), which Calvino refers to in his Japanese travelogues, thus acquires an importance that is not only instrumental in creating the conditions for further

reflections, but itself represents the interpenetration between apparently opposite forces, such as concreteness and abstraction, closeness and openness.

The spatio-temporal perception in which some perspectives are concentrated while others disclose to sight is usually synthetised in Japanese in the concept of *ma*. *Ma* is a free space among things, a neutral interval within events. It is precisely a distance which separates while connecting beings, a void which engenders a creative virtuality (Galliano 2004). As a consequence of the centrality of this concept for many Japanese notions of beauty, both traditional Zen aestheticism and its reformulation in the Kyoto school of modern philosophy revolve around artistic detachment, that is, the aesthetic counterpart of physical distance. With regard to literary expressions, Odin (2001: 1) remarks that artistic detachment is often 'built into the structure of an impartial narrative that records *satori*-like epiphanies, or *haiku* moments of sudden illumination, whereby the hidden depths of ordinary events are disclosed through acts of disinterested contemplation'. Aesthetic distance recurs in modern Japanese fiction, too. Medieval poetic ideals like *aware* (sad beauty), *yūgen* (profound mystery), or *sabi* (impersonal loneliness) have indeed been reformulated by a number of twentieth-century Japanese authors which Calvino had the opportunity to read, such as Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki, Kawabata Yasunari, Mishima Yukio, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō.

Mori Ōgai's dual career in literature and medicine allowed him to write his *Vita Sexualis* as a keen analytical parody of naturalist fiction:[12] 'curiously detached and clinically dispassionate account of sexual awakening narrated by a professor concerned with writer's preoccupation with sex, the work challenges both the artistic and moral basis of the prevailing *bundan* trend' (Marcus 2003b: 76).[13] A rational and analytical detachment characterises Natsume's exploration of modern individualism (Orbaugh 2003: 90), as well, as it emerges particularly in *Kokoro*. Most of all, Kawabata's descriptions of feminine bodies owe their vividness to the distance which separate these bodies from the observing eye, creating an aura of untouchable and uncanny beauty. If a limited point of view characterises both *Snow Country* and *The Sound of the Mountain*, as Akiyama points out (1989: 195-198), it is in *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* that Kawabata presents distance in its inextricable link with contemplation, albeit an aestheticising one, which fetishises virgins' bodies as well as landscapes (Cornyetz 2007: 40). Even Honda, the main character of Mishima's tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility*, is characterised by an analytical intelligence that distorts over time, until turning into a voyeuristic inclination in the last two books. In all these instances, chosen among the books that Calvino owned, what emerges forcefully is the centrality of physical and mental distance in aesthetic and cognitive processes. Distance proves to be an essential aspect of Japanese literary conceptualisation of spatiality, allowing the void which substantiates everything to emerge clearly, with the artistic and intellectual outcomes that I am going to analyse below.

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[12] For a brief introduction to Japanese naturalist fiction, see Orbaugh (2003: 31-32).
[13] The so-called *bundan* is the Tokyo-based literary establishment that, in Meiji Japan (1868-1912), saw literary activity predominantly centred on elite universities, each serving as 'headquarters' of a major literary faction with its own literary journal (Marcus 2003a: 52).

3.2.4. Taoist and Buddhist conceptualisations of the void

As Giangiorgio Pasqualotto (1992) analyses in his seminal study of the void in Eastern cultures, the most direct reference to the crucial importance of emptiness in Taoist tradition can be found in chapter XI of *Tao-te-ching*:

> We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel;
> But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the wheel depends.
> We turn clay to make a vessel;
> But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends.
> We pierce doors and windows to make a house;
> And it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends.
> Therefore just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the usefulness of what is not (DDJ, xi).[14]

The void in the original Chinese text is represented by the ideogram 無, *wu*: it cannot be simply translated as 'not-being' because it does not refer to a merely ontological opposite of 'being', nor to an original 'Nothingness', but rather to a 'determined absence', to a 'determined void', to 'what that is not in something'. Thus, *wu* has an empirical – rather than abstract – nature, which at the same time admits a metaphysical outcome, as proved by DDJ, xl: '[...] though all creatures under heaven are the products of Being, Being itself is the product of Not-being'.[15] The apparent contradiction between empirical and metaphysical features is sustained by the inherently dialectical and paradoxical feature of the void in canonical Taoist texts: DDJ, ii reads that 'Being and Not-being grow out of one another'.[16]

A paradoxical instance associates Taoist *wu* and *wu wei* ('practice of inaction'), Mahāyāna Buddhism with its *sutra*, Chan/Zen Buddhism with its *kōan*, as well as Induist *maya* ('illusion of phenomenic world'). Moreover, as analysed by Yao (2020: 112), Buddhism revolves around crucial existential propositions expressed by means of empty terms: *anātman* ('no-self': the self does not exist), *anitya* ('impermanence': a permanent entity does not exist), *śūnyatā* ('emptiness': intrinsic nature does not exist). An ethic of paradox is thus directly connected, within Eastern Asian traditions, to an ontology of the void – and it is precisely the superficial and apparent lack of sense in things that Calvino probes in many descriptions of *Palomar*. As a further proof of the viability of a comparative reading of the conceptualisation of the void in Zen and in *Palomar*, Calvino's acquaintance with Zen *kōan* is confirmed by a reference to this peculiar form of (non)conceptualisation that he includes, as Einaudi editor, in the text in the inside flap of the first edition of *Le galline pensierose* by Malerba (1980): '[le galline] si librano tra lo humour sospeso nel vuoto del *nonsense* e la vertigine metafisica degli apologhi zen'.

Once dichotomies are dialectically overcome – as in the Taoist texts above and in the Buddhist notion of the universe –, replaced by the continuity of the void, it follows that any subject-object differentiation blurs, with natural phenomena subsuming inner ones, and vice versa. As Lebra states, analysing Buddhism:

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[14] DDJ: *Tao-te-ching*; ZZ: *Zhuang-zi*. While Calvino's copy of *Zhuang-zi*, edited by Liou Kia-hway, only dates back to 1982 (Milan: Adelphi), both of his two editions of DDJ (a 1967 Gallimard edition translated from the Chinese by Liou Kia-Hway, and a 1973 Italian translation by Anna Devoto, edited by Jan Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak) do not contradict the chronology according to which he drew near Taoism at the beginning of the 1970s.

[15] See also ZZ, xii.

[16] See also ZZ, xxi.

in the boundless self, relativity is overcome by the mutual embracement of self and other, subject and object. Far from being actively assertive, self is supposed to be absolutely passive and receptive, and passivity entails the state of being empty. The ultimate self is then equated, paradoxically, with the empty self, non-self, non-thinking, mindless, or nothingness (Lebra 1992: 115).

I am going to suggest that it is precisely an 'empty self' of this kind that engenders Palomar's peculiar receptivity towards inner and outer phenomena, all of them being read as signs of an all-encompassing semiotic discourse.

Moreover, the hypothesis of reading Calvino's experience in Japan under a semiotic light finds a solid support in one of the most vivid symbols of the void in Buddhism, in particular in the Tendai school, which most probably Calvino had the opportunity to encounter in his readings. I am referring to the spotless mirror, whose characteristics uncannily resemble the elements of language as they are described by semiology. As Fosco Maraini (2000: 290) analyses, a mirror's brilliance belongs to the first form of existence, that is *kū* ('emptiness'); reflected objects belong to the second one, *ka* ('contingency'), but only the mirror itself represents *chū*, literally 'what is between', which could not exist without its brilliance and its reflected objects. Thus *kū*, *ka* and *chū* only exist in a system of relations, and 'nothingness' cannot hold if separated from the 'whole', as much as the 'whole' needs its complex connection with 'nothingness' (see also Tollini 2018: 639).

Similarly, in a linguistic system, any element counts inasmuch as it is not another element that the former excludes, by evoking it, according to its differential value. In order for meaning to emerge, it is required the presence of one of the terms of this opposition. If one term does not appear, the absence of the other term cannot be perceived either. Thus, as in the Tendai parable of the spotless mirror, the empty space between two entities that do not appear counts only if presence, absence and space among them subsist in mutual tension (Eco 1998: xii-xiii). This comparative reading of a Buddhist image and a semiotic concept represents a specimen of how different cultures and disciplines can fruitfully collide, as happens in Barthes's and Calvino's reflections (curiously, one of the last texts of *Palomar* is entitled 'L'universo come specchio').

What is noteworthy about Buddhism, then, is the crucial idea that phenomenal things are not independent, but mutually interdependent and interrelated. This denial of the freestanding substance of things is what Mahāyāna Buddhism calls *kū* ('emptiness') and, alongside with *muga* ('non-self') and *mujittai* ('insubstantiality'), this concept clearly differentiates itself from any nihilistic conception. As Watts states, 'the Buddhist principle that "form is void" does not mean that there are no forms. It means that forms are inseparable from their context – that the form of a figure is also the form of its background, that the form of a boundary is determined as much by what is outside as by what is inside' (1971: 68). Or, as Nishitani Keiji states, 'I am not empty, but emptiness is me; things are not empty, but emptiness is things' (see Isaac 2010). Neither *kū* ('emptiness') nor *mū* ('nothingness') is world-denying. Rather, they connote the elements of potentiality and opportunity inscribed in a 'nondiscriminating mode of consciousness' (Shaner 1989: 170), and open up space to encounters of porous alterities (Midal 2013: 163). This negation of a substantial differentiation between self and environment, inside and outside, is what I argue drives Palomar in his prehensile approach to the surrounding reality, an approach that, while lacking in terms of ideological and socio-political depth, is utterly remarkable under an ecological and post-human point of view.

3.2.5. Dynamic void in Japanese artistic *praxis*

It is important to clarify now that to talk about Eastern art involves a certain degree of approximation, given the problematic definition not only of the East (Pasqualotto 1992: ix), but also of Eastern aesthetics (Munro 1965: 4-6), since China and Japan have never developed a radical separation between theory and practice. Bearing this in mind, it can be said that the artistic use of the void can be detected in almost every form of artistic *praxis* of the far East (Izutsu 1984: 225). Pasqualotto (1992) analyses its 'absent presence' in several Japanese traditions, such as tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), meditative discipline (*zazen*), ink painting (*sumie*), art of flower arrangement (*ikebana*) and Noh theatre.

The ecological vision of nature as an 'aesthetic continuum of interpenetrating events' (Odin 2017: 129), which characterises Buddhism, engenders aesthetic events mirroring the whole universe from unique perspectives, as microcosms of the macrocosm in which emptiness is as essential as presence. And here we are back to the rich expressive potentiality of the concept of *ma* analysed above. Tea ceremony revolves around *ma* both as far as the environment of *chanoyu* (lit. 'the way of tea') is concerned, and as for its ritual gesturality: anthropologist Dorinne Kondo's (1985: 291-294) structural analysis of the tea ceremony describes it as a 'path to Enlightenment' which, in Zen, is supposed to lead precisely to a state of 'emptiness'. In the Zen tradition of *sumie*, monochrome inkwash paintings represent the beauty of shadows in landscapes, where visible phenomena shade off into the dark void of nothingness. The void thus appears to be, in *sumie* as much as in *ikebana*, an open space which human beings and nature have in common, as a 'connective structure of the universe' whose 'dynamic stability' (Pasqualotto 1992: 98-100) chimes with Calvino's mature leaning towards the conception of an 'absent structure'.

A dynamic void is also at the foundation of traditional Japanese architecture. In fact, in the Edo period (1603-1868), Japan developed two almost opposite architectural styles, epitomised by Nikko and Katsura: the former with its pavilions, gates, walls, wooden stables for holy horses, stone and bronze lanterns, chapels and towers, all of them variously painted and adorned with colourful relieves, the latter minimalist to the maximum degree, with its white and black contrasts and its perpendicular lines (Ōkawa 1975). This helps us remind the multifarious character of traditions, as well as the artificiality of unidirectional cultural constructions. Interestingly enough, Calvino visited both the temples in Nikko and Katsura Imperial Villa, but only described Katsura in his travelogues: a detail that speaks to the author's deeper fascination for the architectural line where the void plays a major role.

If the first extensive documentation on Katsura was a set of loose-leaf folios for study and research, published in the late 1920s, today it is German architect Bruno Taut to be generally credited with 'discovering' the seventeenth-century villa in 1933 and 'presenting' it to the West. He included it in a sketchbook, in several general-interest works and in the concluding chapter of his *Houses and People of Japan* (1937), where Katsura is presented as the epitome of Japanese traditional expression. In the context of the reactionary debates around the overcoming of modernity which inflamed Japan in the 1940s, and which discussed the overcoming of Japanese dependence upon the modern West altogether (Harootunian 2020: 38), Katsura soon started to be presented as a visual feast of traditional Japanese culture, precisely by virtue of its idiosyncratic play of voids, in opposition to other traditions. In fact, Ōkawa's comparison of Katsura and the shogunate mausoleum at Nikko mentioned above represents the *climax* of such trajectory, with the style of Nikko being defined as 'Chinese' (Ōkawa 1975: 146).

Increasing interest in Japanese tradition engendered a number of texts on Katsura in the post-war era, among which the 1960 *Katsura: Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture*, by Japanese architect Kenzo Tange and Japanese American photographer Yasuhiro Ishimoto: the architecture of Katsura thus started to be married to a twentieth-century modernist abstraction, and to influence the works of leading Japanese architects, such as Kenzo Tange himself or Arata Isozaki, an architect who has long been interested in the concept of *ma* as 'no space, no time', and whose exhibition entitled *Ma. Espace/temps au Japon* (Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris, Autumn 1978) has been appreciated by Foucault and Derrida.

Furthermore, absence is what characterises the very city of Tokyo in Barthes's section of *Empire of Signs* titled 'Centre-City, Empty-City':

> The city I am talking about offers this precious paradox: it does possess a centre, but this centre is empty. The city turns around a site both forbidden and indifferent, [...] inhabited by an emperor who is never seen, which is to say, literally, by no one who knows (Barthes 1982: 30).

Barthes constantly comes back to 'emptiness' in his book, finding it in Japanese gardens, in the face of *bunraku* ('puppet show') masters, in the traditional way of greeting and, above all, in *haiku*. Considering Calvino's intellectual affinity to the French critic, it is no wonder if Calvino found himself wondering about this concept while visiting Japanese buildings and, as I am going to analyse below, Japanese art exhibitions.

Not only has the void in Japan influenced the very arrangement of cities and grand buildings, but it has characterised over time the traditional Japanese house, as well. The open character of interior design is defined by spatial and temporal flexibility of mobile elements, such as *shoji* (traditional room dividers and windows consisting of translucent paper in a wooden frame) and *fusama* (solid rectangular room dividers, usually painted) which, while reminding the impermanence of forms, contribute to corroborate the sense of void that empty domestic spaces already convey, as Alberto Moravia noticed in one of his articles about his travels to Japan:

> Dobbiamo dire che la casa giapponese, tutta fatta di legno e dei sottoprodotti del legno, è un luogo straordinario nel quale l'animo affaticato dalle tante tensioni della giornata, ritrova come d'incanto la calma e la serenità dei suoi momenti migliori. Più volte penetrando a piedi scalzi in queste dimore giapponesi, ci siamo domandati donde ci venisse questa sensazione così piacevole di distensione contemplativa; e alla fine abbiamo dovuto dirci che essa veniva dal *vuoto*, ossia dalla mancanza di spessore e di volume che nelle case europee è rappresentata dalle presenze sporgenti, ingombranti e massicce dei mobili. [...] Esse ci liberano, in altri termini, con il loro vuoto e la loro piattezza, dalla dimensione affaticante del volume, dello spessore, della profondità (Moravia 1994: 793).

Calvino himself describes the Japanese traditional house as 'a series of empty rooms and corridors' (Calvino 2013: 163). It can thus be said that even the many expressions of Japanese material culture that Calvino came in contact with are informed by a dominant sense of void, which the author did not fail to reflect upon.

3.2.6. Void in Calvino's 'Japanese shelf'

Most importantly, for this analysis, the void characterises many expressions of Japanese literature. Whether the void is summoned to convey an alleged specificity of Japanese sensibility – as in *haiku* and in Kawabata's prose –, or it is investigated in light of Western nihilism – as in Mishima –, or rather

symbolises a post-modern existential condition – as in Abe –, this theme intersects the majority of the Japanese books which Calvino had the opportunity to read. I shall now address this polysemous category as it appears in Calvino's 'Japanese shelf', in order to lay the foundations for the last section of this chapter, where I propose interrogating Calvino's own reflections on the semiotic value of the void as the result of a cross-cultural dialogue.

In the traditional poetry of *haiku*, emptiness appears at first graphically: a total of 17 syllables compose three phrases of 5, 7 and 5 syllables each, which make the blank on the page become a predominant factor in the poetical composition. Pauses, omissions of words and so-called *kireji* ('cut words' with no semantic value) create emptiness in terms of sound, metre, and dynamics of images.[17] Moreover, the very core of *haiku* can be detected in an emptiness that is both subjective (related to the poet) and objective (related to the event):

> While being quite intelligible, the *haiku* means nothing (i.e., it is 'empty'), and it is by this double condition that it seems open to meaning in a particularly available, serviceable way – the way of a polite host who lets you make yourself at home with all your preferences, your values, your symbols intact; the *haiku*'s 'absence' (i.e., 'emptiness' again) suggests subordination, a breach, in short, the major covetousness, that of meaning (Barthes 1982: 69-70).

As Barthes himself notes, the void in *haiku* is partly a lack of subject: the poet is missing, s/he does not describe, nor does s/he comment an event, but only takes note of it, as if her/his mind was a mirror, an empty surface (Pasqualotto 1992: 108).[18] On this surface, there can be multiple *foci*, contemporary and equivalent, each of them making sense only in their relation with the others: this link can work only if every element is not self-enclosed and fixed – thus, if *it is not*.

To better explain this concept of a relation that is only conceivable on the basis of a void, Calza analyses Bashō's *haiku* about a frog jumping in a pond, where the crucial element of interpretation is the link between the apparently self-sufficient and dominant image in the forefront ('The old pond | A frog jumps in') and its counterpart ('The sound of the water') (2002: 58-59).[19] In this case, both writing and reading are affected by the void, by the break that at the same time distances and melts the two elements of the poem in a brand-new perception, precisely as in the Tendai parable of the spotless mirror analysed above. As Bonnefoy remarks, in the *haiku*, as in everything, emptiness is equivalent to fullness (2015: 22),[20] and Zanzotto remarks upon the aesthetic value of this paradoxical lack of a centre, too:

> [...] la grazia mai tracotante, la tenuità del germoglio dello haiku presenta come suo clou piuttosto un non-luogo, un vago mancamento, un sussulto dolcemente ritualizzato, il non-rumore del senso che si affaccia dentro il nonsenso della natura quasi a volerlo preservare (Zanzotto 1982: 12).

Calza also states that in the works of the greatest Japanese novelists, such as Murasaki, Natsume, Saikaku, and Kawabata – all of which Calvino has in his library – this same method involves chapters and episodes, rather than words and concepts, which variously exalt or soften passions and feelings,

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[17] For instance, the word *kana* usually marks the end of a *haiku*, whereas *ya* divides a *haiku* in two parts that are to be equated or compared. *Kireji* are barely translatable in languages other than Japanese: in the Italian translations of *haiku* that I quote from Iarocci's edition they are mainly conveyed by dashes.

[18] This strikingly chimes with Wittgenstein's view of linguistic propositions, that are not supposed to interpret nor to explain facts, but should only aim to show them (Eco 1962: 225).

[19] The Italian translation of this *haiku*, as it appears in Iarocci's collection, reads as follows: 'Nello specchio antico | d'acque morte | s'immerge | una rana. | Risveglio d'acqua' (Matsuo Bashō, in Iarocci 2014: 50).

[20] Bonnefoy (2015: 22) expresses this concept by referring to waves, whose recesses are cyclically substituted by interceding water: it is interesting to draw a parallel between this analysis and *Palomar*'s 'Lettura di un'onda'.

always on a bedrock of an incompleteness that gives space to multiple possible interpretations. Calvino himself addresses this feature of narrative constructions in his Japanese incipit in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, which will be further analysed below.[21]

As Boardman (1971: 95) notes, for instance, in Kawabata's *Snow Country* mirror images engender symbolic questions concerning the interrelation between natural and human elements, all based on the void. The contemplation operated by the subject transforms the object into what it should or could be, depending on its innermost empty essence. Kawabata himself, in his Nobel lecture, analyses the peculiar relationship of Zen with images, both pictorial and poetical, which in his view epitomises 'the emptiness, the nothingness, of the Orient':

> Zen does have images, but in the hall where the regimen of meditation is pursued, there are neither images nor pictures of Buddhas, nor are there scriptures. The Zen disciple sits for long hours silent and motionless, with his eyes closed. Presently he enters a state of impassivity, free from all ideas and all thoughts. He departs from the self and enters the realm of nothingness. This is not the nothingness or the emptiness of the West. It is rather the reverse, a universe of the spirit in which everything communicates freely with everything, transcending bounds, limitless (Kawabata 1981: 56).

As discussed previously (see § 3.2.4.), the negation of bounds between things does not entail a negation of things altogether. As Edward G. Seidensticker (1970: 117) maintains, in Kawabata's writings emptiness often becomes affirmation, as much as sadness turns into a sort of enlightenment.

However, what is certainly lacking in Kawabata's 'narrative-aesthetic gesture toward reordering the world as it ought to be, or the movement to reconstruct the real for greater aesthetical pleasure', is any interest in things political or social, as Cornyetz points out (2007: 34). Kawabata's absolute 'aestheticentism' (as per Cornyetz's definition), and his penchant for a spiritualised nature, results in a reactionary reconceptualisation of Zen as the mythic ground of Japanese culture and acculturation of nature. Cornyetz maintains that 'in place of political *praxis*, Kawabata retreated into the purified domain of a culturally exceptionalized and essentialized aesthetic of the past to be regenerated in the present', which is one of the main characters of fascist aesthetics (2007: 35). When praising Kawabata as one of the most significant exponents of Japanese literature, Calvino might have not actively perceived the political regression entailed in his choice, but this is itself telling about late Calvino's dwindling political progressiveness which, as I am going to argue, finds a significant epitome in his conceptualisation of the void as an 'absent structure', which does not properly call for progressive innovation.

Another author whose works – and life – remarkably revolve around the void is Mishima Yukio, to whom Marguerite Yourcenar dedicated a biography entitled, not by chance, *Mishima, ou La vision du vide*.[22] Whereas Kawabata distances himself from Western nihilism, Mishima appears to be constantly seduced by it, letting nihilism create an overarching narrative encompassing his most relevant works, as Marmysz (2017) points out. Not only does the ontological dimension of nihilism insistently intrude upon the reader's experience of Mishima's books, but these very books encourage a meditation on the author's 'nihilistic alienation and despair' (Marmysz 2017: 178).

In Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask* the void emerges as the illusion which constitutes the self, who deludes itself and others under a series of masks. Death represents the conclusion of such strained

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[21] '[C]'è sempre qualcosa d'essenziale che resta fuori dalla frase scritta, anzi, le cose che il romanzo non dice sono necessariamente più belle di quelle che dice, e solo un particolare riverbero di ciò che è scritto può dare l'illusione di stare leggendo anche il non scritto' (RR2, 812).
[22] Calvino had its Italian edition, *Mishima o La visione del vuoto*, trans. by Laura Guarino (Milan: Bompiani).

identity construction, since the only resolution to the conflictual relationship between the 'real' and the 'ideal' would be either the abandonment of the aspiration toward the latter, or the destruction of the former. The non-viability of idealised perfection re-emerges in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, where nihilism characterises the main character, Mizoguchi. His frustrated quest for the ideal beauty reflected in the objective reality of the titular temple ends when he realises that the temple itself can be subjected to a logic of destruction and nothingness: Mizoguchi actualises this dynamic, by burning down the temple he has always felt attached to, and liberating the monument's immortal essence at the expense of its material manifestation. He thus puts into practice Nietzsche's fusion of destruction and action, also known as 'active nihilism', explicitly applauded by Mishima in his *Sun and Steel.*

As John Marmysz's analyses, Mishima proposes murder as a solution to nihilism in *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, after representing identity confusion and vandalism in his previous books and until delineating an ultimate resolution in *Patriotism*: 'in an imperfect world, the only way to avoid compromising, and thus betraying, one's ideals is to destroy one's own body, the vessel that ties the perfection of conceptual ideals to the finitude of an impermanent, physical world' (Marmysz 2017: 194). This suicidal intention, this redirection of nihilistic energies inwards, guides Mishima up until his very last days, and such gradual and destructive path to perfection is summarised and sublimed in his last literary effort, the tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility.* The first book of the tetralogy, entitled *Spring Snow*, is permeated by the theme of void:

> Kiyoaki faltered and his words came to a stop. Beyond this interruption spread a vast great void, unfathomable to Honda. He shuddered.
> 'These words we exchange', he thought, 'they're like a mass of building blocks lying scattered over a construction site in the dead of the night. With the immense, starry sky spread out about them and its awful pressure of silence, what else can they do but be mute?' (Mishima 1975a: 267)

As this instance shows, the void recurs under a veil of *miyabi* ('refinement') in its quasi-material presence. Its constant opposition/complementarity to fullness goes hand in hand with a number of analogous antitheses in the books, such as active and passive nihilism, love and death, modernity and tradition, each of them potentially symbolised by the two main characters of the first novel, Honda and Kiyoaki (Piccirillo 2001: 163). Alongside a Buddhist influence, to which Mishima overtly refers in his texts, Hagiwara (1999) also identifies a metaphysical system revolving around the womb at the root of the author's deconstructive 'aesthetics of the absolute and unattainable', which in turn spans the binary pairs above mentioned.

To discuss but a further instance drawing on Calvino's Japanese shelf, in Abe Kōbō's books the void recurs as an internal vacuum shared by the most diverse characters (Yamamoto 1980: 187). Hock Soon Ng (2009) remarks that these characters' metamorphoses into sticks ('A Stick'), box men (*The Box Man*), trees ('Dendrocalia') or cocoons ('A Red Cocoon') evokes a sense of emptiness that twins with Japan's abrupt modernisation and Westernisation. 'Confronted with a "System" that threatens to alienate him and grotesquely alter his self-perception, the Japanese self struggles to assert his identity, only to face dissolution in the end' (Hock Soon Ng 2009: 317). At times, even specific spaces in Abe's books, such as the suburbs, get to represent a void where identity disappears, as in *The Ruined Map* (Seaman 2012: 60). Finally, in the conclusion of *The Box Man*, when the narrating voice shares his last piece of advice on how to live in a paper box, Abe writes:

> Oh, yes, before I forget, one more important addition. In processing the box the most important thing in all events is to ensure leaving plenty of blank space for scribbling. No, there'll always be plenty of blank space.

> No matter how assiduous one is in scribbling, one can never cover all the blank space. It always surprises me, but *scribbling of a certain type is blank itself* (Abe 2001: 177-178 – emphasis mine).

The surreal dimension of the book allows Abe to question stable cognitive coordinates, and he openly advances the equivalence between emptiness and meaning that I have been investigating so far.

The number of diverse literary examples just analysed contributes to deconstruct any stable meaning of the void in a tradition which, far from being fixed in essentialist themes, proves to be fruitfully open to multifaceted interpretations. In the next section, I am going to analyse the presence of the void in the works that Calvino wrote following on from his encounter with Japan, retracing the potential influence of this category over Calvino's choices in terms of structure and content.

3.3. Void in Calvino's mature production

As seen in the first section of this chapter (see § 3.1.1.), the more Calvino approaches semiotic research, the more his works revolve around some sort of void, absence, or vertigo. And the more the void is explored, the more Calvino makes sense of it by referring to images of Eastern descent. More precisely, he refers to Kublai Kan's Oriental empire in *Le città invisibili*, built around the empty space of an ineffable Venice, whose material counterpart is a blank *tessera* in Kublai's chessboard. And he summons Taoism in *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, where the empty space left in the midst of combinations of tarot cards – which lets these very combinations emerge – is compared to the Tao. The 'absent presence' of the void encroaches upon the books that Calvino wrote after visiting Japan, too. In *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* a looming void can be detected at the base of the whole book, as well as of each incipit (Segre 1979). Also, Seamus Heaney's review of *Palomar* beautifully highlights the role played by the void in Calvino's last narrative work:

> What is most impressive about *Mr. Palomar* is a sense of the safety net being withdrawn at the end, of beautiful, nimble, solitary feats of imagination being carried off not so much to dazzle an audience as to outface what the poet Philip Larkin calls 'the solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do' (Heaney 1985).

Interestingly enough, it is precisely in 1976, the year of Calvino's Japanese travels, that he openly exposes, in more than one occasion, the role that the void plays in his narrative constructions. When writing to Sandro Briosi on the 10th of May, he states:

> Lei documenta molto bene sui testi un punto che corrisponde alle mie intenzioni e convinzioni: la presenza (non negativa) del Nulla che è certo il punto che più mi avvicina all'esistenzialismo sartriano ma anche il punto di maggiore separazione perché non arrivo all'*angoscia* né alla *libertà* insomma non seguo Sartre in quella che è la démarche esistenzialista propriamente detta, perché al momento soggettivo della libertà ci credo sempre meno (L, 1303).

Calvino here throws light on the relevance of nothingness in his production, as a prime mover upon which his subjectivity only has limited agency. Furthermore, the author evokes this concept in two interviews released in Japan. Replying to a question by Kawashima Hideaki (1980: 216-217), one of his Japanese translators, he maintains that he is pervaded by *mu*, by the void, from which he nevertheless

tries to extrapolate something through the slow process of writing.[23] Yonekawa Ryōfu recalls the same image coming up in his conversation with Calvino at Tokyo Italian Cultural Institute:

> During our conversations, I had the nerve to ask a stupid question. I said: 'All of your works can be thought of as allegorical, but it is unclear to me what exactly you are hinting at. What is hidden behind it?' Calvino responded 'Probably...' and then said 'there is just emptiness' (Yonekawa 1977: 235-236).

Thus, during the 1970s Calvino has been recursively referring to the void as the foundation of anything he has written. I shall propose identifying in this void the 'absent structure' of Calvino's late 'weak structuralism'. I will first delineate what I mean when referring to 'weak structuralism', adapting Vattimo and Rovatti's philosophical category of 'weak thought' (1983) to Eco's reflections in *La struttura assente* (1968), and I will consequently motivate the choice of this notion to illuminate Calvino's mature production. I will then move on to illustrate the role of Japan as a function of such discourse, with Calvino's approach to Japanese tradition in this context engendering both narrative creation and a certain degree of cultural misunderstanding.

3.3.1. Calvino's development of a 'weak structuralism'

Umberto Eco devotes a large part of Section D of his *La struttura assente* to the understanding of Lévi-Strauss 'ontological structuralism', in order to highlight the paradox of the titular 'absent structure' into which, according to Eco, any form of structuralism inevitably runs. Considering the centrality of the void as a sort of 'absent structure' in Calvino's structuralist experiments, a preliminary understanding of Eco's discourse promises to shed light on Calvino's intellectual position in the 1970s, and contextually on the role of Japan in it.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological research aims to explain multifarious phenomena through invariable rules – or structures. While being largely acceptable on a practical level, this position starts being questionable once structures cease to be externally used to describe and understand phenomena ('methodological structuralism') and start being considered as inherent to phenomena themselves ('ontological structuralism'). Eco identifies in this leap from an *operativistic* to a *substantialist* conception the most debatable element of the French anthropologist's structuralism (1998: 291). Lévi-Strauss also assumes the existence of an Ur-structure able to justify all other structures – namely, the 'spirit', as theorised at the end of *Le cru et le cuit* (1964).

However, in Eco's view, the alleged existence of an Ur-structure is contradicted both within a 'methodological' and in the context of an 'ontological' structuralism. In the former, any located structure is actually a cognitive model, thus not a proper structure: the structure put in methodological terms does not exist ontologically. But even if postulated as an ontological reality, the structure can only be evoked: if it really is the ultimate structure, there will be no metalanguage able to grasp it. In this second case, again, the structure does not exist objectively, but it can only depend on a mystic

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[23] Kawashima (1980: 216-217) recalls having asked Calvino whether he was thinking about establishing a new journal or a new literary movement. The author rejected both of these hypotheses, stating that he lacked the human and intellectual inclination needed to lead a movement, which he rather identified in his friend Vittorini. Calvino went on by saying that he was a rather pessimistic person, who believed that the world is void, nothing (*mu* in Japanese). As a consequence of this void perceived in his own self, he tried to slowly but relentlessly extrapolate something out of this void.

postulation according to which there exists a Source of meaning guaranteeing the legitimacy of any located meaning. In both cases, the Structure is 'absent' (Eco 1998: 355).

The paradox entailed in this concept of 'absent structure' is that on this very absence lies any ontological and epistemological construction of what I would define as a 'weak structuralism', that is to say, a structuralism that is constantly aware of its weak, in fact absent, foundation, and nevertheless cannot do without it. Vattimo and Rovatti, from which I borrow the adjective in the proposed definition, state as follows:

> 'Pensiero debole' è allora certamente una metafora, e in certo modo un paradosso. [...] È un modo di dire provvisorio, forse anche contraddittorio. Ma segna un percorso, indica un senso di percorrenza: è una via che si biforca rispetto alla ragione-dominio comunque ritradotta e camuffata, dalla quale, tuttavia, sappiamo che un congedo definitivo è altrettanto impossibile (Vattimo and Rovatti 2011: 10).

Encouraged by the close link that the two philosophers establish with the realm of paradoxes investigated above, I propose interpreting the void that recurs so often in Calvino's works from the 1970s as an 'absent structure', which gives shape to his reflections and to his 'weak' (in the sense just discussed) creativity. Once the structure is recognised as absent, then its knowledge can take two possible shapes: there can be an *operative* knowledge, which tries to transform that reality which is otherwise ungraspable; or there is the option of a *contemplative* knowledge, which manipulates the falsifications of the real in order to contemplate as closely as possible the mysterious Origin of this contradictory, fleeting real (Eco 1998: xi).

While *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* falls quite firmly in the realm of an *operative* knowledge of the void, and *Palomar* oscillates between the two stances, it is interesting to analyse the sort of *contemplative* knowledge which arouses from Calvino's visit to the exhibition of Japanese artist Arakawa Shusaku at Galleria Blu in Milan in 1985, which is largely devoted to the understanding of the void within and without one's mind. Indeed, as seen above, many Japanese forms of art and thought rest upon the centrality of the void, and Calvino does not fail to notice the extent to which this factor resonates with his own mature 'weak structuralism'.

3.3.2. Void at the core of open works: *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*

In his analysis regarding Zen and the Western world in *Opera aperta* (1962), Umberto Eco refers to the role of the void for the rising allure of Zen in USA and Europe from the 1950s onwards. According to Eco, if in Zen the entire universe takes roots in the void, if it lacks a given structure and if everything constantly changes, then conventional thoughts and ideologies are easily defused, and so are canonical forms of artistic expression. Moreover, if Zen non-logic rejects any form of pre-ordered outcome both in meditation and in art, its influence over 'open works' comes as no surprise. As much as blanks in *haiku* and *sumie* leave room for free interpretation, similarly, in Western contexts, Zen-inspired musical avant-garde, Informalism and neo-Dada create open pieces of art. In the context of Italian literature, two books best exemplify this idea of 'open work' that much has to do with the Eastern conceptualisation of the void: namely, *Lector in fabula* by Umberto Eco and *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* by Italo Calvino.[24]

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[24] Eco evokes the memory of Calvino right at the beginning of his first *Walk in the fictional woods*, and states: 'Today, anyone who compared my *Lector in fabula* with *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* might think that my book was a

Not only is the void at the basis of the 'open' character of *Se una notte*, but it even has an agency which affects the subject. In the frame of the book, emptiness troubles Silas Flannery in his attempt to grasp the world by means of writing:

> Anch'io vorrei cancellare me stesso e trovare per ogni libro un altro io, un'altra voce, un altro nome, rinascere; ma il mio scopo è di catturare nel libro il mondo illeggibile, senza centro, senza io. [...] io non credo che la totalità sia contenibile nel linguaggio; il mio problema è ciò che resta fuori, il non-scritto, il non-scrivibile (RR2, 788-790).

Belpoliti (1996: 85) notes that *Se una notte* investigates the topography of the written world not so much to deduce the unwritten world, but rather to make room for the multiplicity of things.[25] Despite its apparent linearity, I find two different issues posed by this view. Firstly, multiplicity is actually circumscribed by its very deployment, therefore the image of 'making room' should be presented at least as controversial. Secondly, it should not be overlooked that, in order for this multiplicity to emerge, an interplay with its counterpart, that is absence, is what the book frequently suggests as necessary, especially in several among its incipits.

In the first incipit, the eponymous 'Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore', the author addresses the reader and writes: 'le frasi che stai leggendo sembra abbiano il compito di dissolvere più che di indicare le cose affioranti da un velo di buio e di nebbia' (RR2, 621). Likewise, in the final incipit 'Quale storia laggiù attende la fine', the first-person narrator gradually erases elements of his city that he decides not to take into consideration, which are therefore reduced to empty spaces: 'Camminando per la grande Prospettiva della nostra città, cancello mentalmente gli elementi che ho deciso di non prendere in considerazione' (RR2, 854). Apart from the ostensible reference to Nikolai Gogol's *Nevsky Prospekt* (Mario 2015: 1-29), Calvino here seems to transpose – from a graphic to a narrative dimension – an idea that Georges Perec expresses in his *Species of Spaces* (1974), according to which the blank page has to be at the same time the starting and the final point of literature. Calvino's narrative progressively revolves around this idea: even in the body of the text, in 'Senza temere il vento e la vertigine', a soldier compares his story to an incomplete bridge over the void:

> Mi faccio largo nella profusione di dettagli che coprono il vuoto di cui non voglio accorgermi [...] Anche il racconto deve sforzarsi di tenerci dietro, di riferire un dialogo costruito sul vuoto, battuta per battuta. Per il racconto il ponte non è finito: sotto ogni parola c'è il nulla (RR2, 690-691).

As Melissa Watts underlines, Calvino inserts here almost verbatim Barthes's description of writing, according to which 'we may disentangle the readings [which constitute *Traveler*'s writing] but not decipher them, range over but not pierce them' (Watts 1991: 708). Again, as I argue, the unattainable void beneath each word stands for the 'absent structure' of Calvino's 'weak structuralism'.

An insight into Calvino's ever-specifying conception of the essential role of the void is expressed, not by chance, in the Japanese incipit 'Sul tappeto di foglie illuminate dalla luna':

> [...] nella contemplazione della pioggia di foglie il fatto fondamentale non era tanto la percezione d'ognuna delle foglie quanto la distanza tra una foglia e l'altra, l'aria vuota che le separava. Ciò che mi sembrava d'aver capito era questo: l'assenza di sensazioni su una larga parte del campo percettivo è la condizione necessaria

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response to Calvino's novel. But the two works came out at about the same time and neither of us knew what the other was doing, even though for a long time we had both been deeply preoccupied with the same problems' (Eco 1998: 1-2).

[25] According to Belpoliti (1996: 105), the essay 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto' (1985) will mark the definitive ending of Calvino's juvenile illusion regarding a mutual enlightening of written and unwritten world. But I would not agree with this allegedly fixed point of arrival.

> perché la sensibilità si concentri localmente e temporalmente, così come nella musica il silenzio di fondo è necessario perché su di esso si distacchino le note (RR2, 811; see also RR2, 819).

Thus, the void does not come before nor after the act of perceiving and describing sensations, but is rather its very basis, it is the premiss upon which that act can be implemented. In other words, it represents its ungraspable, yet necessary condition of existence: its 'absent structure'.

Possibly thanks to his acquaintance with Buddhist and Taoist texts, Calvino is able to pinpoint the centrality of the void in Japanese tradition in a way that is more nuanced than that expressed by Umberto Eco in a passage of *La struttura assente*. Eco states that 'gli occidentali sentono lo spazio come un vuoto tra gli oggetti, mentre i giapponesi (si pensi all'arte dei giardini) lo avvertono come una forma tra le forme' (1998: 242). Calvino's understanding of the relevance of the void in Japanese terms is largely due to a resonation with the author's own 'weak structuralism'. This, together with his Japanese readings, makes him better prepared to perceive that, in the traditional Japanese approach to reality, it is not so much that the void is a shape among others, but that only an empty – or rather emptied – mind can sense the external reality altogether (Pasqualotto 1992: 5-73). If a mind is – or conceives itself as – already full, nothing can be truly detected and held. Conversely, silence sharpens hearing and emptiness sharpens the sense of sight.[26] That is to say, the void, in the capacity of 'absent structure', is what makes artistic experiences possible.[27]

3.3.3. Calvino's reading of Arakawa's blanks

Between the 26th of November 1985 and the 15th of March 1986, Galleria Blu in Milan hosted an exhibition of works by Japanese-born conceptual artist and designer Arakawa Shusaku, mostly known for his neo-Dadaist creations and his idea of 'reversible destiny', to which he and his partner Madeline Gins attempted to give material shape through a considerable number of architectural projects (Bernstein 2008; 2010).[28] In view of this exhibition, Calvino wrote an article titled 'Per Arakawa' between the 22nd and the 27th of March 1985, published first in English in *Artforum* in September 1985, then in *Tuttolibri* on the 23rd of November 1985, with the title 'Un Calvino inedito: il colore della mente nei quadri di Arakawa'.[29] This article is in fact among the first ones to be published in Italy posthumously, after Calvino's death on the 19th of September 1985. Considering that the reference to Hokusai's *The Great Wave* in 'Lettura di un'onda' had been deleted in the making of *Palomar*, Arakawa's drawings represent Calvino's most direct engagement with a form of Japanese art, alongside his descriptions of those artistic-natural creations that are Zen gardens, and his brief allusion to illustrations of manuscripts dating back to Heian era at the end of 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola'.[30]

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[26] As Faure (1987: 348) recalls, Ch'an masters, prefiguring structuralism, say: 'Remove everything, so I can see'.

[27] Minh-Ha and Gray (1982: 41) explicitly maintain that void makes writing possible: by quoting Barthes' *Empire of Signs*, they state that void 'is what permits Zen, in the suspension of all meaning, to "write gardens, gestures, houses, flower arrangements, faces, violence" (Barthes 1982: 4)'. This awareness, certainly not new but newly realised, seems to provide Calvino with the key that every artist has ever yearned for: the key for a long-lasting sensorial virginity. Perhaps consequently, the unfinished project titled *I cinque sensi* is triggered by an alleged lack of those very senses on Calvino's part: 'Il mio olfatto non è molto sviluppato, manco d'attenzione auditiva, non sono un buongustaio, la mia sensibilità tattile è approssimativa, e sono miope' (S, 1874).

[28] According to Platzer (2007: 3), Calvino had met Arakawa and Gins in New York years before this exhibition.

[29] The subtitle was 'Si apre a Milano una mostra del grande artista giapponese'.

[30] As far as Japanese art is concerned, Calvino was presumably also acquainted with prints, as two collections in his library suggest (*Le stampe del mondo fluttuante* and *Vedute celebri di Tokyo*, both edited by Gian Carlo Calza).

The text rests upon a conception of the drawing at the same time as containing and being contained by the human mind ('Un quadro di Arakawa sembra fatto apposta per contenere la mente, o per esserne contenuto': S, 2001). From the outset, then, artistic creation proves a *medium* able to detect common features between inner and outer reality – that is, precisely the purpose that Palomar pursues when trying to describe his interior geography and to trace 'il diagramma dei moti del suo animo' (RR3, 974). Arakawa's arrows, lines, and trajectories are read as representations of mental circuits, which move, intersect, interpenetrate or overstep one another and, most importantly, are defined by the void and the silence they emerge from.

When drawing a parallel between Arakawa's arrows and the direction of his own ideas, probably thanks to a re-functionalisation of his Buddhist readings, Calvino ends up illustrating a crucial feature of Buddhism itself, which is the principle of 'Non-obstruction'. He states: 'Nella mia mente i circuiti dove scorrono le idee vanno tenuti sempre sgombri perché una qualsiasi idea potrebbe ostruirli e bloccarli' (S, 2002). In Hwa Yen School,[31] 'Non-obstruction' is usually defined as the complete freedom from bindings: although boundaries are acknowledged in their intangibility and abstractedness, they are also required to be broken through in order for the infinite possibilities of interpenetrations among realms to be attained. The interconnection among elements is only possible if these elements are not singularly defined, but rather follow on interconnection itself. Connection among elements – as among ideas in Calvino's passage – is feasible if, and only if, the elements that it involves are 'non-obstructed', devoid of self: in other words, empty (Pasqualotto 1992: 51-52).

Calvino highlights the role of emptiness in the mechanism of communication that Arakawa's drawings represent, both within themselves and in their interconnection with other drawings:

> è sicuro che i suoi quadri comunicano tra loro, ci sono linee che passano da un quadro all'altro, mappe di città che sono la stessa città, oppure città comunicanti, ma questa comunicazione avviene attraverso una discontinuità, un divario, un intervallo vuoto [...]. A guardar meglio, però, queste interruzioni non hanno luogo solamente fra i dipinti ma si verificano soprattutto all'interno del quadro (S, 2003-2004).

A similar interrelation among things is what Palomar tries to abandon himself to when visiting the Ryoan-ji garden ('osserva le rocce una per una, segue le ondulazioni sulla sabbia bianca, lascia che l'armonia indefinibile che collega gli elementi del quadro lo pervada a poco a poco': RR2, 951). Despite the different cultural matrices behind Zen gardens and Arakawa's art, Calvino does not fail to notice the peculiar impalpable harmony of the void which paradoxically gives shape to both. Jean-François Lyotard, interviewed by Bernard Marcadé in 1988, notices the same common trait:

> Dōgen belongs to a school of Zen that says: No, it's not a question of jumping out of the sensible; it's a question of jumping into the sensible... There is, in Arakawa, a respect for sensible presence... But of course this notion of presence becomes, in his work, impalpable; it can only be approached at the price of a renunciation and a relinquishing of the subject... (Lyotard 2013: 214).

The sensible, in other words, is all but negated but, in order for it to be fully perceived, the centrality of the 'absent structure' which shapes it has to be prioritised.

Similarly, communication cannot occur without emerging from silence, in a convoluted twist of the two which Calvino describes as follows:

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[31] School based on the *Hwa Yen Sutra*, written in China between the VII and the VIII century.

> E tutte queste frecce in volo emettono un ronzio come quello che si sente al fondo del silenzio, come quello dei canali delle linee di comunicazione, il ronzio dell'attesa del silenzio in attesa della linea in attesa del suono in attesa dell'attesa (S, 2002).

Calvino's description also highlights a major distinctive feature of Arakawa's art, that is, the material representation of emptiness via blanks:

> Poi ci sono macchie di *blank*, di non-quadro, che interrompono il tessuto dell'universo-quadro e ci danno la sensazione che il significato e la forma di tutto il resto fluttuino attorno a queste lacune dell'esistere (S, 2004).

Indeed, especially in his cooperative works with Gins, Arakawa constantly aims to create 'placeless places' by destabilising any differentiation between mind and body, inside and outside, up and down, life and death (Weller 2003: 48). Blanks function precisely as 'fictions of place', as a 'specific kind of not simply located space' which is devoted to construct, on an immanent basis, a severe subversion of immanence itself (Bearn 2010: 44): as Arakawa and Gins state in their *Architectural Body*, 'transcendence is here and now' (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 81), and it is only by pursuing this sort of paradox that it is possible *To Not To Die*, as their 1987 book theorises.

The connection between blanks, the overthrow of time, and singular lives' perishability is what Calvino's article entails, as well. He identifies in Arakawa's paintings the representation of a mind that is, at the same time, his own mind, Arakawa's mind, and a universal mind that encompasses the others (S, 2001). This creates a further significant link with *Palomar*, in particular with the text 'L'universo come specchio', where a comparison between inwardness and astronomy is advanced:

> Gli apparirà il suo mondo interiore come un calmo immenso ruotare d'una spirale luminosa? Vedrà navigare in silenzio stelle e pianeti sulle parabole e le ellissi che determinano il carattere e il destino? Contemplerà una sfera di circonferenza infinita che ha l'io per centro e il centro in ogni punto? (RR2, 974)

Arakawa's drawings, which are supposed to represent the mind in Calvino's view, are made out of the same interplay of silence, light ('I quadri di Arakawa sono pieni di luce, luce fatta di tutti i colori e dell'assenza di colori': S, 2004), curved trajectories ('Siano le loro traiettorie rettilinee o (come sembra più frequente) ricurve': S, 2001), movement and infinity ('C'è chi crede che le linee stiano ferme, invece le linee stanno sempre andando da un punto a un altro punto, oppure continuano ad andare indefinitamente e forse all'infinito': S, 2002).

It can thus be said that Calvino's understanding of the art of Japanese designer Arakawa offers him a perfect field where to prove the functioning of the 'absent structure' in an open work, which envisages infinity both inside and outside its boundaries, and can finally dispose of the conception of life as a closed whole – which troubled Palomar in 'Come imparare a essere morto'.[32] Consequently, it also points at a fruitful decentralisation of the human. In 'Il mondo guarda il mondo' Palomar realises that, whenever he embraces a promising reflection, he ends up spoiling it by letting his self interfere.[33] If the only possible solution is to realise that the self is such substance as the world is made of (RR2, 969), this is precisely what Arakawa's drawings represent, with them being projections of particular minds and a universal mind at the same time, and of the void that shapes them. Once again, Japan offers Calvino some elements of reflection that integrate fruitfully into his mature vision of the world,

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[32] 'Questo è il passo più difficile per chi vuole imparare a essere morto: convincersi che la propria vita è un insieme chiuso, tutto al passato, a cui non si può più aggiungere nulla, né introdurre cambiamenti di prospettiva nel rapporto tra i vari elementi' (RR2, 978).

[33] 'Presto s'accorge che sta guastando tutto, come sempre quando egli mette di mezzo il proprio io e tutti i problemi che ha col proprio io' (RR2, 968).

in the direction of an avant-garde post-humanism which revolves around the subversion of traditional structural coordinates, while embracing a 'weak structuralism' with the void at its core.

3.3.4. Invisible social barriers in 'La vecchia signora in chimono viola'

In the first text of the section 'La forma del tempo. Giappone', in *Collezione di sabbia*, Calvino addresses some interesting elements regarding the role of the void in the socio-political structure. He proves to be aware of the fact that Japanese body politic revolves around an empty centre: he defines the emperor as someone who has been for long 'invisibile e inavvicinabile' (S, 568), and describes the imperial palace in terms that remind Barthes's passage from *Empire of Signs* analysed above:

> A Tokyo una via centrale fiancheggia il canale che cinge la verde zona dei palazzi imperiali. L'ingorgo ininterrotto del traffico lambisce una linea oltre la quale tutto è silenzio. [...] È quello l'ultimo limite cui possono giungere i comuni mortali nei giorni normali; più in là comincia la residenza dei sovrani, dimensione quasi ultraterrena (S, 569-570).

As Ikegami (1986: 10) has pointed out, Japanese society revolves around the key concept of harmony (*wa*), according to which 'the empty top is dependent on the subordinates and the subordinates are dependent on the empty top'. This creates a 'suspension of opposition' among the parts which is at the root of many expressions of eclecticism in Japanese culture, ranging from clothing to food, from housing to language, from religion to art. Calvino himself notices a promiscuous aesthetics in the old lady's fashion choices and in certain food habits:

> Nella vecchia signora, invece, quei pochi elementi occidentali, anzi americani – gli occhiali con una montatura argentata, la permanente azzurrina fresca di parrucchiere – che si sommano al costume tradizionale danno la sensazione precisa del Giappone d'oggi (S, 566-567).

> Cibo occidentale in una confezione tradizionale, stavolta: il contrario di quel che si vede di solito, nei frequenti spuntini volanti dei giapponesi: per esempio durante i lunghissimi spettacoli del teatro kabuki gli spettatori aprono crepitanti contenitori di cellophane e ne estraggono con le bacchette bocconi di riso bianco e pesce crudo (S, 567).

However, when it comes to the relationship between the old lady in a purple kimono and her young caring, yet neglected assistant, which Calvino observes during his train journey from Tokyo to Kyoto, he seems to shy away from a deep understanding of their roles and mutual relation, rather relying on the invisibility of social links as a justification of his vaguely superficial comments:

> In Giappone le distanze invisibili sono più forti di quelle visibili (S, 569).

> [...] questo è un mondo in cui il dentro e il fuori sono separati da una barriera psicologica difficile da valicare (S, 571).

Calvino is right in pointing out the invisible, yet powerful presence of a social barrier between 'inside' (*uchi*) and 'outside' (*soto*). As Hendry (2012: 42) analyses, this division has to do first and foremost with the house, then with the school, the place of work, and more broadly with the sense of community in Japan, always opposing the security of the inside to the danger and fear associated with the outside.

While claiming to be unable and unwilling to comment on this social feature, Calvino eventually abandons himself to a rather violent rant:

> Anche chi come me cerca il più possibile d'astenersi dal formulare giudizi su ciò che non è sicuro di capire, può essere soggetto a improvvisi scatti d'ira. Così in questo momento m'infurio dentro di me contro la vecchia

dama che mi pare incarni qualcosa di terribilmente ingiusto. Ma chi si crede d'essere? Ma come può pretendere di meritarsi tante attenzioni? (S, 570)

Ma forse c'è anche altro, un fondo d'invidia, una rabbia che viene dall'identificarmi in qualche modo con la parte della vecchia signora, la voglia di dirle a denti stretti: «Ma non sai, scema, che da noi in Occidente mai più sarà possibile a nessuno essere servito come sei servita tu? Non sai che in Occidente nessun vecchio sarà mai più trattato con tanta devozione da un giovane?» (S, 571)

Indeed, the seeming decline of traditional mores that, in the second post-war period, has led some in Japan to wish for a return to the uniqueness of Japanese national character, has never really undermined family values. Still in the late 1980s a survey indicated that 'filial piety and the concept of *on* (social and moral obligation) were still valued by the vast majority' (Hane 2013: 205). Calvino's analysis does not seem to engage particularly deeply with this peculiar social mechanism. Rather, he embraces what Johannes Fabian (1983: 31) defines as 'denial of coevalness', in light of which Japanese social structures are considered to belong to a past that has been successfully overcome by Western civilisation, in an evolutionistic and Orientalistic conception of time. In dealing with Japanese society thus Calvino shows once again a rather conservative socio-political position, which here intertwines Orientalism, sexism and antiquated affection for family hierarchies.[34]

3.3.5. *Palomar*'s 'empty self' ranging over the appearance of things

Barthes's definition of the process of writing, above recalled in passing, offers a valid key to understand how the void acts in that *operative-contemplative* project that is *Palomar*. In 'From Work to Text', the French critic describes the play of signifiers as a 'serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations' (Barthes 1977: 158). Among these variations, there stands the crucial role of nothingness:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning (Barthes 1977: 147 – emphasis in the original text).

Beneath everything there is nothing. Absence supports presence of meaning and writing. The very Barthesian concept of 'zero degree' can be compared to a void that is not absolute, that does not mean annihilation, but rather acts as a *conditio sine qua non*, as a 'significant absence' (Barthes 1967: 77), as the 'absent structure' of every full concept.[35] In his *Cours* at the Collège de France, Barthes proves to be aware of the similarity between his seminal concept and the philosophical base of Taoism, which understands nothingness as the ultimate context of our being. As Lucy O'Meara (2012: 132) carefully examines, even Barthes's idea of 'critical distance' can be figured by means of the typically Japanese understanding of space and time, which the author often refers to in the *Cours*: that is, the concept of *ma* analysed above.

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[34] Monserrati (2020: 181-182) underlines how 'Calvino successfully conveys the distortions implied in a Western view of a culturally distant country'. Indeed, he describes the young lady with a poetical lexicon borrowed from the tradition of Italian poetry, thus he indirectly suggests that 'our "reference system" condemns us to transmit our viewpoint through the signifiers adopted by our language'.

[35] See *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953), English translation: *Writing Zero Degree* (1967a); but also *Éléments de sémiologie* (1964), English translation: *Elements of Semiology* (1967b).

Among Calvino's books, it is in *Palomar* that the outward appearance of things ('la superficie delle cose': RR2, 920) gets precisely 'ranged over, not pierced'. The main character's 'empty self' opens up to the 'emptiness of things', it becomes 'thing among things' (Scarpa 1993: 531), world looking at the world (RR2, 968-970), searching for 'a relationship with the world which is not based on his own ego' (Wood 1994: 138). The labyrinth is no longer challenged, but rather accepted alongside its empty structure, which is recognised as informing the very self which approaches it. In my opinion, the 'continuity between consciousness and cosmos, between mind and matter' (Hume 1992: 153), which Calvino ostensibly refers to in 'Per Arakawa' and connects to a common empty ground, is here contemplated and thoroughly thematised.

In particular, in 'Il gorilla albino' the 'absent structure' that Palomar reflects upon is represented by a rubber tyre held by the gorilla, an empty circle from which any meaning can be generated, a silence from which language can spring, as analysed in the previous chapter. Here Calvino openly expresses his semiotic awareness of the inevitability of a fundamental void underlying language, as well as things and thoughts. By positing, as Carrie Rohman (2009: 66) argues, the 'simultaneous difference and sameness' between human and nonhuman animal, in the gorilla's attitude towards the void Calvino mirrors his own/Palomar's attempts at sense-making, at entering in the symbolic and in the proliferation of meanings arising from the void. Rohman maintains that 'Calvino constructs a dynamic of endless deferral here that reveals the futility or impossibility of signification: Palomar "uses" Snowflake as Snowflake "uses" the tyre, but neither human nor nonhuman creature succeeds in a final translation of meaning. We might say that the residue of signification, the outside of the word, links human and nonhuman in this final observation' (2009: 71).

In the prolific investigation of the threshold between emptiness and meaning it is possible to infer the long wave of Calvino's contact with some forms of Japanese thoughts, based as they are not only on the symbolic and ontological centrality of the void, but also on the equal influence of void itself on human and non-human beings. Meaningfully, in 'L'universo come specchio', when Palomar is determined to improve his relationship with the interconnected universe of things and human beings, both near and faraway, he starts off by getting used to 'fare il vuoto nella sua mente', in order to circumscribe 'il proprio posto in mezzo alla muta distesa delle cose galleggianti nel vuoto'. As in 'Per Arakawa', the void links the particularity of one's mind to the entirety of the universe.

3.3.6. Void opening to semiotic syntheses

Palomar's 'movement from the particular to the universal', as well as his 'need to determine whether the universe is "regular and ordered cosmos" or "chaotic proliferation"' (Sbragia 1993: 283-284), revolve around the void as the crucial 'absent structure' allowing semiotic oscillations, if not proper contradictions, to emerge. Indeed, as contradictory expressions such as 'Form and Emptiness, Distinction and Non-distinction' characterise Zen literature (Suzuki 1980: 36), and are validated by an underlying 'absolute totality, absolute identity, or, to use Buddhist terminology, a perfect state of Emptiness' (Suzuki 1980: 73), similarly *Palomar* accommodates ontological contradictions in the awareness of an 'absent structure' which justifies it.

The book is riddled with contradictory images and reflections: I would interpret them as signifiers generated by the notion of nothing. The latter acts as an overarching signified, which in turn the signifiers infinitely negotiate. Apart from the many instances in which the protagonist destabilises

his own human centrality, thus probing directly the contradiction of negating the self – as analysed in the first chapter of this thesis (see § 1.3.4.) –, Palomar's reflections constantly acknowledge opposite poles of ubiquitous dialectics. To name but a few instances from the section of the book dedicated to 'I viaggi di Palomar', the play of allegorical interpretation of Mexican statues and objects is said to be as valid as the refusal to comprehend more than what appears ('Serpenti e teschi': RR2, 955-956), whereas the hypothesis of an irreversible process of disintegration in the order of the world goes hand in hand with its opposite, in a reflection prompted by a chaotic Iranian bazar ('La pantofola spaiata': RR2, 959). In this context, the Japanese text presents a peculiarity that I would consider as a specific assimilation of Zen on Calvino's part. Here the contradictory co-presence of crowd and individualities, compared to sand and rocks of a Zen garden, is united by a sense of a possible harmonisation of nonhomogeneous harmonies ('L'aiola di sabbia': RR2, 953). In other words, the 'absent structure' discloses the pathway towards a potential synthesis.

To conclude, it can be said that *Palomar* brings to the most fruitful *operative-contemplative* consequences – to use Eco's taxonomy referenced above – the predisposition to the dialectical synthesis between form and void, and the consequent undermining of human centrality, which Calvino's contact with Japanese thought and art concurred to elicit. Japan acts as a function in a semiotic discourse oriented towards the overcoming of anthropocentrism and logocentrism.[36] But, it is worth to restate, the alleged universality granted to this discourse by the 'absent structure' recognised at the bottom of disparate systems is only possible by neglecting a proper exploration of Japan's alterity.

To adapt a distinction advanced by Cornyetz, following Lacan, Japan does not represent for Calvino an Other with the capital O – a 'radical, unrepresentable realm of absolute alterity' – but it is rather approached as a 'small o other' – 'a category of people homogenized by their heterogeneity' (2007: 2). By recognising a common 'absent structure' beneath different cultural expressions, the latter are indeed subsumed into an abstract semiotics with almost no connections to each culture's specificities. Not by chance, *Palomar* explores the surface of things without delving into the cultures which originated them,[37] in an ideological and political vacuum which nevertheless does not hinder, but perhaps solicits, the artistic value of the book.

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[36] After all, as Barthes (1982: 73) notes, Zen itself 'wages a war against the prefabrication of meaning', that is, it denounces the contrasts created on the basis of linguistic usage as groundless.

[37] In the passage from their publication in diverse journals to their volume collection, many texts of *Palomar* go through focused cuts aimed to eliminate open cultural references: in 'Lettura di un'onda' Calvino removes the link to Hokusai, in 'Il gorilla albino' he deletes the account of his encounter with Uruguayan writer Juan Carlos Onetti, in 'L'occhio e i pianeti' he does without the reference to the journal *Astronomia*, and in 'L'aiola di sabbia' and 'Serpenti e teschi' what gets cut is a number of touristic annotations (see Serra 1996: 69).

4. Time is a time is a-time is non-time

The hero, then, is not Time, but Timelessness

– Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*

This chapter investigates representations and problematisations of time in Calvino's literary evolution, in light of a number of Japanese approaches to temporality that he had the opportunity to explore and potentially absorb. Calvino's experiments with non-linear time have attracted some general recognition in the past: Beno Weiss (1993: 89) has focused on the author's subversion of 'chronological time sequence' in his narrative, while Olivia Santovetti (2007: 231) has emphasised the 'unmeasurable, non-chronological time' evoked by his plot construction. In a detailed analysis of *Le città invisibili,* Sambit Panigrahi (2017) has specifically connected the unusual temporal patterns of Marco Polo's account to Deleuze's 'eternal present' – as theorised in *Difference and Repetition* (2004) – and to Nietzsche's 'eternal recurrence' – in Aphorism 341 of *The Gay Science* (2001: 194). Contextually, Panigrahi has recognised a distinctive mark of postmodernism in Calvino's penchant for a 'conflated temporality', that is one of the ways to violate chronological time, according to Richardson (2000).

Indeed, the 'dissolution of time boundaries', which Catherine Burgass (2000: 177) has connected to the physical theories of the likes of Stephen Hawking, is widely accepted as one of the most peculiar traits of what Paul Smethurst has defined *The Postmodern Chronotope* (2000). If man's 'consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality', also defined as 'time-boundedness' by Peter Brooks (1985: xi), is subverted in a postmodern view of the world, Calvino's experiments are undoubtedly attuned to such subversion. It is my intention to enrich the postmodern approach by substantiating the potential contributions of Zen Buddhist tenets and Japanese literary constructions to the question of non-chronological and non-subjective temporality, explored by Calvino already in the Eastern atmosphere of *Le città invisibili,* and further developed around the time of his Japanese travels. In this way, the ascription of Calvino's works to a postmodern framework is going to be at the same time accepted and overcome.

The first part of this chapter is an overview of the wide range of chronological devices that Calvino adopts in his works: this section provides some important context for Calvino's structural treatment of time, which from the outset combines attention to detail in microscopic descriptions and indeterminacy on a macroscopic scale. This structural feature proves particularly relevant in view of the Japanese article 'Il tempio di legno', where Calvino reflects on the possibility of coexistence of a discrete, finite notion of time on the one hand, and of a continuous, infinite concept of time on the other. In this rather philosophical context, Calvino questions the ontological status of temporality, arguably mindful of the subsumption of discontinuous processes into an a-temporal continuity, which characterises many forms of Japanese thought, architecture, poetry and prose that he came in contact with in the late 1970s. *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* and *Palomar* repurpose this temporal suspension, thematising timelessness and contextually outlining a broad relativisation of time in the context of what I define as Calvino's mature 'weak structuralism'. In works that challenge the very coordinates upon which they are built, time is deconstructed by means of a metaphysical drive, which leads to the overcoming of human centrality, and indeed of its canonical spatio-temporal parameters.

The aim of this chapter is to examine how the author's contact with Buddhim is central in this passage from a narratological to a philosophical problematisation of time.

4.1. Time in Calvino's works before 1976

Calvino's creativity has often found a stimulating subject matter to experiment with in the category of time. From the atemporality of fables that he explores as early as his first narrative production, and develops at length during the late 1950s,[1] to the combinatorial chronology of his later works, he proves to be firmly inclined to a subversion of canonical time.[2] However, up until the moment when he comes in contact with Japanese culture, time still appears to be a referential structural category, whose fixity is certainly undermined, and yet simultaneously recognised as necessary. To refer to an image that I am going to analyse below, the lure of the crystal is initially preponderant.

In this section I am going to analyse the multifarious guises in which this lure operates, at least until such works as *Le città invisibili* and *La taverna dei destini incrociati*. The analysis of these experiments, which fall within a temporality that, albeit undermined, still stands, is required before taking into account Calvino's mature production and its progressive propensity for a 'weak structuralism'. That is to say, Calvino gradually draws near a structuralism that is aware of the impraticability of strong coordinates – temporal coordinates in the first place – and thus relies on void and atemporality as 'weak', or 'absent' structures that are inherently open to 'otherness', and, ultimately, to a peaceful acceptance of death. The encounter with certain expressions of Japanese subversion of linear temporality will prove key in this evolution, as I am going to discuss in the following sections of this chapter.

4.1.1. Playful atemporality

As a narrator, Calvino often confronts himself with an all but ordinary treatment of time. The very fact that only two of his works – *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* and *Il barone rampante* – can be designated as traditional novels,[3] and not without potential objections, is telling about the contamination of genres that Calvino operates against the backdrop of literary tradition, and within categories of time and space accordingly.[4] Even these novels call into question canonical chronological development through their playful atmosphere. In the former, the history of the Resistance in Liguria is transfigured into the progression of something like a treasure hunt, whereas the latter's setting in the eighteenth century, even

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[1] For Calvino's work on Italian folktales see Beckwith (1987), Bacchilega (1989), Miele (2011).

[2] As White (1984: 131) states, 'the ultimate thrust of the deconstructions of Zeno, Derrida, Borges, and Calvino is to cut us off from time, space and matter, that is to say, from the mimetic impulse'.

[3] Calvino himself often expressed doubts about his status as a novelist. Among many other statements, he once declared: 'forse non sarò mai un romanziere perché mi interesso troppo al "come" scrivere' (SNiA, 621).

[4] It is worth highlighting here, perhaps just as a curious coincidence, that the novelistic story line is not traditionally pursued in Japan, either. Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1972-1975: 76), states in this respect that 'to disregard the interest of plot is to cast away the privilege of the novelistic form. [...] [W]hat the Japanese novel lacks most is this ability to construct, the talent to geometrically assemble various intricately intertwining story lines'.

if apparently well specified ('Fu il 15 di giugno del 1767': RR1, 549), blurs into the fantastic atmosphere of the plot, characteristic of the entire trilogy *I nostri antenati*. Right before releasing *Il barone rampante*, and probably retaining in it a certain penchant for fable-writer devices (Dellacasa 2017: 64), Calvino engaged with the a-temporal genre par excellence: he closely studied the rich Italian tradition of regional folktales, and selected and arranged a considerable number of folkoric 'timeless and faceless stories' (Calvino 2000: xxii), in view of Einaudi 1956 edition of *Fiabe italiane*.

This interest in the category of time reemerges often, in different degrees, beyond this early literary and anthropological work. Calvino's diverse later production is characterised by a balanced and engaging fluctuation between specific time references and more general and indistinct temporality. For instance, *Marcovaldo ovvero le stagioni in città* is built upon a detailed seasonal turnover, but this succession actually entails an evaporation of the traditional concept of plot: the main character outlives his misadventures as a veritable cartoon hero, with his resilience meaning more, in ideological terms, than his circumscribed unlucky life events. Incipits are telling in this respect, given that they often combine the indefiniteness of the simple past tense with the definiteness of some temporal details (RR1, 1101; 1130; 1146; 1152; 1159).

Even the less playful and more politically committed *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* offers a further example of the dialectic between specific temporal signposts and the abstraction that can follow. The text opens with an exact time reference ('Amerigo Ormea uscì di casa alle cinque e mezzo del mattino': RR2, 5), but not only does it omit the relevant date to which that very morning refers to – 7th of June 1953, when one of the most controversial general elections of the Italian Republic took place – but it also develops some philosophical considerations that transcend the constrained chronological contingency. Indeed, the book stands out as an attempt at exhausting a polling place – *à la* Perec – during one single day. This is but the first *ante-litteram* instance of a long set of constraints that Calvino devises over the '60s and '70s, all of them blending temporal specificity with a certain suspension of canonical time. As I argue, however, it is by accepting history and time as 'strong' coordinates in the first place that the author can play with them at this stage.

4.1.2. Combinatorial atemporality

Il castello dei destini incrociati and *La taverna dei destini incrociati*, with their heavy macrotextual structure (McLaughlin 1998: 100-115), interweave modules flexibly and result again in a blurred temporality made out of single interchangeable stories. The combinatorial game weakens diachrony on a structural level, and time is consistently presented as vague throughout the narration, with phrases such as 'da tempo' (RR2, 504), 'non molto tempo prima' (RR2, 527), 'non so da quanto tempo (ore o anni)' (RR2, 589), usually followed by imperfect and preterite tenses as per folktale tradition. Not to mention the reference in the book to activities that actively interfere with the linear progression of time, namely divinatory practice (RR2, 535), poetic production (RR2, 541), and visual art (RR2, 599-600). In *Gli amori difficili* the breach of measurable time (and space) rather occurs in human life when reading and loving, as Ferroni (1998: 42) highlights.

All these diverse instances thus point at a penchant, on Calvino's part, for a non-static acceptance of a supposedly univocal, linear and discrete idea of time. Both through structural choices and thematic references, he proves inspired by the opportunity to open up to a differentiation of experiences and representations of the temporal category, which he discusses more specifically later on, within the

Eastern atmosphere of *Le città invisibili*, in his *Lezioni americane* and in his Japanese travelogues, where Eastern inspiration and essayistic approach blend. What the final section of this chapter investigates is, in particular, the connection between Calvino's reflections on temporality inspired by Zen Buddhism and Japanese literature, on the one hand, and the decentralisation of the self that has been explored in the previous chapters, on the other. Indeed, if Joseph Francese (1997: 17) is right in saying that, even in the experimental context of *Le cosmicomiche*, 'the subject [is] the only point of reference within the surrounding system of relativized space-time coordinates', I posit that Calvino's Japanese experience determines a gradual decentralisation of the subject within a broader relativisation of temporality.

4.1.3. Paradoxical time

The paradox of invisible cities' visibility, and their detailed descriptions contradicting their non-real status, are reflected by their very temporal coordinates. Following almost literally the opening statements of several among Marco Polo's accounts in his *Milione*, Calvino often starts illustrations of cities as if they were discrete knots tangled within a space-time continuum.[5] In particular, time halts its progression, that is in any case vague and non-measurable: 'Partendosi di là e andando *tre giornate verso levante*, l'uomo si trova a Diomira' (RR2, 362); 'All'uomo che cavalca *lungamente* per terreni selvatici viene desiderio d'una città' (RR2, 363); '*Di capo a tre giornate*, andando verso mezzodì, l'uomo si incontra ad Anastasia' (RR2, 366); 'L'uomo cammina *per tre giornate* tra gli alberi e le pietre' (RR2, 367). As Panigrahi (2017: 83) highlights, the non-chronological temporality of the book is reflected not only through 'Marco's recounted, hallucinatory experiences, but also in the incoherent and clumsy structural patterns of the cities themselves'.

In her analysis, Cristina Della Colletta (1997: 418) reads invisible cities as symbols of subjective experiences of time (and space): whereas travels develop progressively, their accounts unavoidably subvert temporality, given that each act of internalisation of experiences entails regression. But if the Bakhtinian concept of 'heterochrony' – simultaneous coexistence of multifarious temporal possibilities at any given moment – characterises storytelling at large, in *Le città invisibili* Calvino adds something related to their Eastern setting, as Bonsaver (2002: 58) remarks. Indeed, the book's 'weak chronology' is part of a broader relativisation of basic concepts of Western knowledge, and introduces what I define as the 'weak structuralism' of Calvino's mature production (see § 3.3.1.). In particular, relativisation of time in light of Eastern coordinates resonates with the 'cultural relativism' (Wheeler 2020) mandated by the philosophical framework of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, with whom, not by chance, a number of Japanese scholars, especially from the Kyoto School of Philosophy, have fruitfully engaged (Davis 2019).[6] Therefore, I argue that not only do abstraction and realism coexist in Kublai's and Marco's dialogues (Bernardini 1977: 190), but the comparison between these different notions of reality, and time, is more or less directly brought about by the conflation, in the book, of Western and Eastern categories, precisely as happens in Calvino's Japanese reflections.

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[5] See SNiA, 601: 'C'è [...] un libro, *Le città invisibili*, in cui cerco di esprimere la sensazione di un tempo rimasto cristallizzato negli oggetti, contenuto nelle cose che ci circondano'.
[6] On Heidegger's relationship with Buddhism and Japanese thought, see Midal (2013) and Tezuka (2013).

4.1.4. Conceptualisation of time

The analysis of specific passages of *Lezioni americane* where Calvino conceptualises time allows, in perspective, to appreciate more clearly the relevance of a potential Japanese influence over his gradual inclination for a 'weak chronology'. In 'Molteplicità' Calvino seizes on a brief summary of three kinds of time at work in Borges's *El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan* – punctual, set by willpower, and multiple time – in order to explain the basic idea underpinning his hyper-novels *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* and *Il castello dei destini incrociati*. He declares his predilection for multiple time, the premiss of which legitimises his modular and combinatorial structures: if time is a broad category that manifests itself in more than one story at a time, it is thus possible for a narrator to focus on well-written brief single stories without rejecting any other infinite possibilities (S, 728-730).

How to carve out micro stories within the macro evolution of time is instead at stake in some central pages of 'Esattezza':

> «da un lato il *cristallo* (immagine d'invarianza e di regolarità di strutture specifiche), dall'altro la *fiamma* (immagine di costanza d'una forma globale esteriore, malgrado l'incessante agitazione interna)». [...] due modi di crescita nel tempo, di spesa della materia circostante, due simboli morali, due categorie per classificare fatti e idee e stili e sentimenti. [...] Io mi sono sempre considerato un partigiano dei cristalli, ma la pagina che ho citato m'insegna a non dimenticare il valore che ha la fiamma come modo d'essere, come forma d'esistenza (S, 688-689).

As Albert Sbragia (1993: 284) highlights, traditional Western science has generally opted for the crystal, by keeping 'chaos offstage, focusing on the neat linear equations of Euclidean physics and ignoring the messy nonlinear and chaotic configurations of most natural phenomena'. Given Calvino's traditional scientific upbringing, his initial predilection for the crystal thus comes as no surprise. At the same time, his careful regard for the flame in this quote acquires even more relevance when one realises that, precisely when recounting his visit to some Japanese temples, he remarks upon the harmonisation of slow construction (crystal) and fast destruction (flame), base of cyclical renovations and subversion of canonical linear time.

As I shall endeavour to show, thanks to his Japanese experience, and by following Barthes's own encounter with Japan as a semiotic deconstruction of bourgeois logocentrism, Calvino gradually calls into question the Euclidean coordinates that he had long relied upon. His progressive anti-anthropocentrism informs *Palomar* in particular, whose ending represents the very abdication of human centrality. The novelty of this approach becomes clear especially if read in comparison to the previous all-too-human ending of *Le città invisibili*, where Western centrality is already questioned but man is still asked to 'cercare e saper riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio' (RR2, 498). On the other hand, when in 'Esattezza' Calvino envisages 'zone d'ordine [...] in un vortice d'entropia' (S, 687), he refers to the consubstantiality of opposite elements which lies at the very base of much Japanese thought and art, too. For instance, Arakawa's art, which Calvino had the opportunity to reflect upon (see § 3.3.3.), displays disorientation at its core, as a means to deconstruct conventional perceptions of the Euclidean and orthogonal world (Weller 2003: 47). It is thus reasonable to speculate about a more or less direct influence of Japan over Calvino's own departure from Western stable coordinates, be they temporal, spatial, or indeed cultural. The following sections build a bridge between Japanese idiosyncratic approaches to temporal conventions and Calvino's own mature treatment of time, while steering clear of reducing one to the other. As in any

relationship, both parties keep their own place, and it is my intention to examine how they can be related as well as independent at the same time.

4.2. Time in Japanese tradition

It is widely agreed that at the base of Japanese tradition lies a fusion of related East Asian ideas:[7] according to the Tokugawa concept of *ju-shaku-dō no hedate nashi*, 'Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism all in the end teach the same thing' (Ackermann 1997: 48, n. 10). Japanese Shinto, too, has variously mingled with Buddhism during the Edo period,[8] in addition to its originary contact with Taoism and Confucianism (Balmas 2018: 597). However, Okakura Kakuzō's view of a unique Japanese identity produced through an internalisation and overcoming of Asiatic civilisation as a whole (1903) has to be handled with care, considering the slippery slope of self-Orientalism that has often advocated this conception. The following thus aims to be but a functional description of three phases that appear to be common to a number of Japanese artistic expressions, without presuming it to cover the actual complexity of the uncountable expressions of temporality in Japanese thought and art.

1. The first stage is based on the *observation* of both natural and human *discontinuous* processes: in this sheer *immanent* stage, change and transformation are detected in the surrounding environment as much as within the observing self, in what determines a first awareness of the equal ontological status of all the beings inhabiting this world, human being included.

2. Secondly (but the distinction is more functional to this schematisation than clearly discernible in fact), there is the tendency to *abstract* from the observed processes, through meditation, an a-temporal *continuity* that can be variously defined as *transcendental* or, with Murakami Yasusuke (1990: 31), as an 'incremental expansion of *hermeneutic* reflection'.[9]

3. The third stage can be split into two parallel possibilities that open before the person who underwent the first two. On the one hand, the pure *experience* of the attained a-temporal enlightenment (what Buddhism calls *satori*). On the other, the *representation* of the covered mental itinerary by means of artistic forms that can help potential beneficiaries in their own similar, albeit personal, paths. The latter case – where discontinuity and continuity, temporality and a-temporality merge – gives birth to gardens, temples, and other artistic outputs as material counterparts of the described philosophical route.

A mirror of this dialectical approach to time that blends discontinuity and continuity, cycles and temporal suspension, unavoidably constitutes literary expressions, too. Both in *haiku* poetry and in novels and short stories that Calvino read, it is possible to retrace the two stages outlined above as

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[7] See van Gulik (1968), Needham and Lu (1983) and Kohn (1989) – all quoted by Ackermann (1997: 48).
[8] The symbiosis of Shinto with Buddhism has originated *ryōbu shintō* (lit. 'dual aspect shinto') and *honji suijaku* (lit. 'original substance, manifest traces'). See Tollini (2018: 673).
[9] According to Murakami (1990: 11), hermeneutics rely neither on a 'higher-order cognitive agent entitled to appraise and validate the ongoing effort of interpretation', nor on an 'infinite upgrading process toward the sacred "other world"'. Consequently, while 'humanity in the transcendental understanding is to be best expressed in abstract ideas', 'humanity in the hermeneutic sense is an image running through our life-worlds in their totality, including all concrete details and shadows'.

preconditions of an enlightened experience of reality and, potentially, of a description of the entire mental path leading to *satori*. Indeed, literary expressions can be considered as *specimena* of Japanese sense of nature and related temporality in the same way as this can be said with respect to architecture, as well as *bonsai* (artificially dwarfed trees), *bonkei* (miniature rock sceneries), and *ikebana* (flower arrangements). Therefore, in this section, I also aim to analyse the Japanese literature that Calvino came in contact with, characterised by creative descriptions of temporal changes and various attitudes towards time.

4.2.1. Observation of discountinuous processes

At the core of Buddhism there is the appreciation of the impermanence of things, which Japanese language expresses through the word *mujō* (Matsunaga and Matsunaga 1974; Nishitani 1982): things come to light, decay and die, giving birth eventually to new life in an endless cycle that connects everything in a continuum (Odin 1991: 354). It is paramount to acknowledge that it is not by means of a neutral accidental process that *mujō* has molded the aesthetic taste of the Japanese to the present (Hane 2013: 33). Conversely, behind the apparently perennial appeal of the Buddhist sense of the ephemeral nature of life lies a specific ideological purpose, promoted in particular from the 1940s onwards by a climate of dominant 'culturalism': that is, the 'effort to negotiate the uniquely local experience of Japan's modernity within a contemporary global process' (Harootunian 2000: 39). Indeed, in order to re-evaluate Japanese tradition into a living philosophy, in opposition to 'the West' and its 'modernity', a number of concepts has been rescued from history by prominent critics, thinkers, scholars and writers from the Kyoto School of Philosophy, the Japan Romantic Group, and the Literary Society. Among them, the idea of *mujō* as time which destroys timeliness altogether, thus leading to the overcoming of modernity as imposed by Western civilisation (Harootunian 2000: 38).[10]

According to the category of *mujō*, universal energy is constantly changing, and follows dynamic oppositions and eternal alternation. Complementary forces such as growth and decline, that Taoism configures as *yang* (summer, heat) and *yin* (winter, cold), are observed in the constant change and tranformation of natural phenomena, whose passing in the form of the Four Seasons has always attracted great attention in the context of Japanese art. As Peter Ackermann (1997) argues, the Four Season can be considered as a visualisation of a universal principle: despite the original account of the creation of the world that is in the *Kojiki*,[11] 'Japan (as well as every major East Asian culture) traditionally has not perceived the universe as something created by a god who places man, as a final token of his will, into his creation'.[12] Rather, 'Japan should above all be seen as a culture that shared (and shares) the

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[10] As Harootunian (2000: 38) recalls, thinkers such as Suzuki Shigetaka invoked the 'overcoming of democracy in politics', 'of capitalism in economics', 'of liberalism in thought', thus in general an 'overcoming of the world domination of Europe'. It is although difficult to establish which modernity Japanese were supposed to overcome, if 'the modernity of XIX century Europe or indeed everything since the Renaissance'.

[11] The *Kojiki* (lit. 'Records of Ancient Matters'), whose compilation was initiated by Emperor Temmu (673-686) to enhance the position of the imperial government, is one of the classical texts of ancient Japan, presented as actual historical records regarding the creation of the Japanese islands by the founding deities, the life of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, and the genealogy of emperors until the reign of Empress Suiko in 628. The history, however, incorporates materials from Chinese and Korean legendary tales, as historians have pointed out (Mikiso 2013: 16).

[12] Ackermann (1997: 38) clarifies his position by arguing that 'it seems doubtful that such an account has any deep influence on the people's perception of nature and the universe, especially in times preceding the propagation of State

Chinese idea of the universe as an orderly mechanism: something that just *is*, thanks to the flow of energy permeating everything, "nature" (in the sense of all those things the West has understood to be God's creation before making man) as well as man' (Ackermann 1997: 38). Reverse Orientalism has played at length with these comparisons, aimed to establish a nationalist discourse and contextually discredit Western universalism (Ueno 2005: 235). Considering that many among Calvino's literary sources are active players in this game, it is important to understand the extent to which the ideological construction of a specific culturalism has to do with the category of time here analysed, as I am going to do in the following sub-section.

For now, the connection between nature and man has to be recognised as crucial, since Buddhism is based on the impermanence of *all* beings on the same level. So close is this bonding that, according to Hubertus Tellenbach and Bin Kimura's etymological analysis (1989: 154), before the term *shi-zen* was taken over from China about 1500 years ago to express the concept of 'nature', Japanese language only had adjectival and adverbial expressions that shared a common root with expressions related to 'self', with this root being related to the idea of 'spontaneous becoming'. Nature and self, then, as both originating from (and being expressed in relation to) a process of change.[13] Not only are human-related words not distant etymologically from words expressing the world of nature, but, as Arntzen (1997: 61) claims, 'the perception of the natural object and the emotional state come into being simultaneously'.

The fact that Calvino's accounts fail to penetrate the ideological aspect of these dynamics bears witness to their pervasiveness throughout Japanese culture, and indeed literature. As far as the latter is concerned, the Buddhist sense of harmonic, simultaneous interaction between nature and man has two main relevant consequences on a literary level, which perhaps redeem the questionable ideological reason behind its diffusion. Firstly, if time, as conceived by Dōgen, is a function not only of nature, but of our own changing attitudes to the surrounding world, it thus comes as an inevitable consequence that humans sharpen their sensorial attention towards both inner changes and seasonal dynamics, which are particularly fruitful when it comes to literary creation.[14] Secondly, this conception of time entailing a balanced coexistence of nature and humankind strengthens an ecological and anti-anthropocentric perspective, the same that Calvino has been engaged with throughout his entire life, as I am going to dicsuss in the last section of this chapter.

4.2.2. Abstraction of a-temporal continuity

Since both world and subject perpetually change, then 'the world is not something the subject has to impose his logic upon' (Eisenstadt 1995: 191), with vegetal, animal and human beings following similar dynamics of birth, growth, decay and death. From the direct observation of immanent cyclical processes shared by the environment and the self, the latter can conceive a superior idea about nature as a

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Shinto in the Meiji period (1868-1912), and outside certain groups of Tokugawa period intellectuals who possibly had some knowldege of Western ideas of the universe as something expressing a plan or a will'.

[13] Tellenbach and Kimura (1989: 154) take into account the word *onozukara*, literally meaning 'of itself' ('objective state which begins of itself without any external mediation', related to a nonhuman dimension) and *mizukara*, 'self, oneself/itself' ('subjective state in which someone himself spontaneously carries something through to completion', related to a bodily human state).

[14] Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253) is the founder of the Sōtō school of Zen in Japan. His concept of *uji*, or 'being-time' – which recalls Heidegger's theories – refers to 'an understanding of time that is informed by our intentional interaction with persons and events' (Shaner 1989: 170).

continuum. While fruitful from a post-humanist perspective, this a-temporal continuity has often been bent by a reactionary politics of time that falls within the above-mentioned discourse on Japanese reaction to modernity. Starting with the Meiji revolution and continuing in the period between the wars, Western technology has been increasingly perceived as stifling Japanese traditional aesthetics. In this context, the return of a 'true aesthetic self' and the 'attachment to the native land as a pristine manifestation of nature' has led to the 'identification with an indigenous historical time distinct from the Western chronological scheme of human history' (Najita and Harootunian 1989: 756). 'Wholeness', 'nature', 'native place', 'aesthetic spirit' have all gradually pointed to a dimension of 'timelessness' which countered Western historicism and the conceptualisation of progressive historical time.

This 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' is what, according to Cornyetz (2007: 35), best represents the approach to time of many regressive discourses of the Kyoto school of philosophy, as well as Kawabata's narrative. As I am going to discuss below, it is indeed in accordance with this ideologically charged vision of beauty as universal, beyond historicism, that Kawabata's statements so often suggest transcendental concerns (Rimer 1978: 246). Given Calvino's appreciation of Kawabata and of Japanese beauty as codified in his novels, it is thus key to highlight the penchant for atemporality and timelessness that a passage like the following entails, from *First Snow on Fuji* (1958) by Kawabata:

> People who came to offer prayers at my grave would feel beauty. That beauty would be something I had seen, but not something that either I or my age had produced. It would be a beauty no longer capable of being produced. A beauty left to us by ancient Japan, a stone that would not decay, that would remain exactly as it was for ages to come (Kawabata 1999: 116).

However, Ackermann (1997: 42) stresses that in Japanese tradition, 'although human beings are seen as part of nature and part of a universal Principle, they are never understood as a wheel in the workings of nature. It has always been made clear that humans, and humans alone, have the capability of observing and thus understanding the universal Principle and that they are therefore able, by use of their intellect, to become more than a plant or an animal [...], to realize a Superior Way'. Ackermann's focus on 'overcoming the cycle of growth and decay as a mental process' (ivi: 51) aims to underline that, ultimately, 'evanescence and transitoriness lose their position as the central problem of existence'. In other words, his is just one of the possible ways to illustrate how, after (and thanks to the process of) visualising natural and human impermanence, the mind can attain 'a peaceful state of permanence, where the passing of time has lost its significance' (ibid.): namely, the second stage outlined above.

Enlightenment, or *satori*, is the definition that finds the largest consensus when relating to this phase.[15] Similarly to the concept of *mujō*, *satori* has been widely invoked in the debate around modernity, by drawing on Zen Buddhism as 'a philosophically stable basis of "life" that could transcend the limitations of material interest, historical change, and the Western bourgeois concept of egoism' (Najita and Harootunian 1989: 737). Less consensus can be found when it comes to the explanation, in philosophical terms, of such passage from contingency to a-temporality, from everyday impermanence to superior permanence. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (1989: 15) recall that Eastern philosophy shows 'resistance to abstract notions that are dependent upon the assumption of universalizing principles' such as 'unity' or 'transcendence'. Similarly, Eisenstadt (1995: 194) notes that dualistic principles such as *yin* and *yang* do not have to be subsumed 'under overarching abstract unitary principles'.

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[15] See, among others, Kondo (1985: 291-294), Lafleur (1989: 190), Shaner (1989: 173) and Ackermann (1997: 42).

On the one hand, Sueki Fumihiko (2018) states that 'in meditation time is transcended' (ivi: 75), and plays with the concept of a 'nothing' subsuming both something and nothing (ivi: 98); Eisenstadt (1995: 189) talks about an interrelation 'between the transcendent and the mundane world'; Ackermann describes East Asia teachings as concerned with 'transcending the way and the cycle of growth and decay' (1997: 43). On the other hand, the philosopher Augustin Berque (1987: 2-4) clearly states that 'in the Japanese tradition it is impossible to envisage either *logos* or the subject independently of the world', because 'there is no principle which transcends reality'. Or, on a similar line, Nakamura Hajime (1964: 11) highlights the Japanese's ambiguity in their religio-philosophical approach to the world, by saying that 'they show a tendency to regard the phenomenal world of observed events as Absolute and to reject any Absolute as something far above the world of phenomena'.

Perhaps the most convincing way out of this conceptual conundrum, which oscillates between the acceptance and the rejection of transcendence, has to be found in the paradoxical relation between unlimited (in the form of an independent unity) and limited (in the form of distinct phenomena) which characterises Buddhism. As Kiyozawa Manshi maintains in his two main works, *A Skeleton of Philosophy of Religion* (1893) and *Draft of a Skeleton of Philosophy of Otherpower* (1895), everything is connected with everything else, with its cause as well as with the circumstances that lead to its reality. As in one organic body, then, unlimited and limited are both defined in opposition to one another (Godart 2008: 81).

Even beginning and end of the universe have the same substance, which is what leads the endless circle of time taught by Buddhism to distance itself significantly from the Christian linear conception of time. I have already touched upon the paradoxical dialectics behind the harmonisation of time and timelessness, when discussing the so-called 'absent structure' that I identify in Calvino's mature approach to the void (see § 3.3.6.). As I will further elaborate below, it is precisely in a philosophical – but non-ideological – acceptance of paradoxes, and of a 'weak' form of structuralism, that the most significant proximity between Calvino and Japanese thought can be identified, with the consequences that a meditative book like *Palomar* brings to the fore.

4.2.3. Experience or representation of enlightenment

At the level of the individual, the transition to a dimension above the usual coordinates of time (and space) can take two different forms. Either the enlightened standstill that characterises the most solitary forms of meditation, or the dissolution of this 'trascendental, religious mode [...] into everyday worldly activities' (Murakami 1990: 25). As William R. Lafleur (1989: 203) clearly explains, 'there is no necessity of negating the physical and phenomenological world once it has served to point to something beyond itself'. In other words, given that natural cycles have served to reveal a superior conception of time,[16] a clear-cut division between concepts of nature and concepts of culture no longer makes sense,[17] therefore culture can recover nature, in a 'rediscovered' ideal state. It is this fresh re-visualisation of nature, in light of the philosophical awareness of the enlightenment it can lead to, that stands at the

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[16] According to Colligan-Taylor (1990: 22), it is especially in Tendai doctrine 'that Absolute Reality, or noumenon, cannot be perceived unless manifested as phenomenon. [...] By perceiving change in nature – "rain or dew, frost or snow" – man is able to comprehend the unchanging timeless reality – "water" – which constitutes the essence of all phenomena. That is, by observing natural phenomena he is able to develop his own Buddha-nature, and thereby attain enlightenment'.

[17] Kalland (1995: 254) argues that nature and culture do not make exclusive categories in Japan.

bottom of many forms of Japanese artistic expressions – and, as I will show below, of Calvino's very view of literature ('La letteratura dovrebbe essere questo: rendere l'unicità di ogni singola foglia per avvicinarsi a capire cos'è la foglia': SNiA, 312).

Kalland (1995: 254) maintains that the Japanese love nature not so much in its unaltered state, but rather in the idealised form that can only be attained after the two passages outlined above have been completed: its observation and its bypassing. This 'highly mediated, aestheticized, culturally particular' nature (Cornyetz 2007: 13) is again to be put in relation with Japanese reaction to Western modernity, thus to what Cornyetz (ivi: 25) has defined as a fascist approach to aesthetics: that is to say, a form of aestheticisation of everything, politics included, which severs the 'interest' from the art, as opposed to the politicisation of art advanced by Communism. 'To be natural, to be true to nature – this has been the basic principle pervading all the arts in Japan, both past and present' (Ueda 1976: 208), Kawabata once stated, and it is now clear how such claim must be read bearing in mind a precise ideological climate.

Gardens have often been included in this aesthetic discourse, together with *bonsai, bonkei,* and *ikebana*. In all these cases, nature is tamed – as per Hendry's seminal definition (1997) – by making de-materialised models of it that bring the 'outside' world into the 'security of the inside world'.[18] A passage from Mishima's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* describing the art of *ikebana* is particularly effective in this context:

> While Kashiwagi was talking, his hands had been moving delicately, first arranging the little, rusty flower holder in the bowl, then inserting the cat-tail, which occupied the role of Heaven in the arrangement, next adding the irises, which he had adjusted into a three-leaf set. Gradually a flower arrangement of the Kansui school had taken shape. A pile of tiny, well-washed pebbles, some white and some brown, lay next to the bowl, waiting to be used for the finishing touches. [...] Nature's plants were brought vividly under the sway of an artificial order and made to conform to an established melody. The flowers and leaves, which had formerly existed *as they were*, had now been transformed into flowers and leaves *as they ought to be.* The cat-tails and the irises were no longer individual, anonymous plants belonging to their respective species, but had become terse, direct manifestations of what might be called the essence of the irises and the cat-tails (Mishima 1959: 166 – emphasis in the English translation).

Mishima openly underlines the distinction between wild and culturised nature. In the importance that Japanese *ikebana* attributes to cunningly disguised artifices it is possible to detect the wider mechanism of aestheticisation of nature which, as discussed above, has acquired reactionary features over time, and that is often linked to a certain degree of fetishisation of female beauty, too.

Probably not accidentally, in the Japanese incipit that Calvino includes in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore,* the reference to the art of flower arrangement precedes immediately the sexual encounter between the main character and one of the women:

> La signora Miyagi era nella stanza vicina, seduta a suolo su una stuoia, intenta a disporre fiori e rami autunnali in un vaso. [...] intanto anche lei stava manovrando tra i rami, protesa in avanti; e accadde che nello stesso momento una mia mano confusamente s'infilasse tra il chimono e la pelle nuda della signora Miyagi e si trovasse a stringere un seno morbido e tiepido di forma allungata, mentre intanto una mano della signora di tra i rami di keiakì (detto in Europa: olmo del Caucaso; *n.d.t.*) aveva raggiunto il mio membro e lo teneva con

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[18] Hendry (1997: 84-86) explains that 'the distinction between inside (*uchi*) and outside (*soto*) is an important one at various levels in Japanese society', and that 'building a garden is a way of mediating between the threatening, fearful aspects of the "outside", of nature in the raw, and the safety and security of the "inside" world of social and cultural life'.

presa franca e salda estraendolo dagli indumenti come stesse procedendo a un'operazione di sfrondatura (RR2, 815).

As it is not rare in many Japanese novels, mainly by Mishima, Kawabata and Tanizaki, the two aestheticised activities of making love and taming nature almost evoke one another.

While allowing us to understand fully the mechanism behind art's self-concealment in Japanese gardens, the element of the human-nature relation is also telling with respect to the aesthetic-reflexive relevance of gardens and other Japanese forms of art. In the mutual influence that connects human beings and the natural environment, with the latter at the same time stimulating the former's contemplation and subsequently reflecting it materially, we can find the reason behind Calvino's predominant fascination for Japanese temples and, most of all, gardens. After all, if *shi-zen* ('Nature') is never just outside, but also within people's mental processes, then an idiosyncratic natural place such as the Japanese garden is created 'for the few who are artistically gifted' and 'requires one who is able to experience *shi-zen* as such' (Tellenbach and Kimura 1989: 158). Calvino is surely among these few.

As the section dedicated to *Palomar* in this chapter investigates extensively, in that book Calvino does not restrict himself to an external description of his experience of Japanese *shi-zen* (as in the articles of *Collezione di sabbia*), but he proves to have directly absorbed that experience. Calvino lets Palomar pass through the first stage of discontinuous descriptions of natural phenomena, then through the second stage of experience of an a-temporal continuum (in Palomar's final determination to describe time instant by instant) and finally, as an author, he retraces this intellectual path by writing *Palomar*, which can be considered a form of *praxis*, or a mirror of mental processes as much as Japanese gardens are.

4.2.4. Atemporality in Japanese architecture

The 'symposium on modernity', which took place in July 1942, questioned the massive Western importation that occurred in Japan since the Meiji period, ultimately identifying in the related culture of 'progress' what distorted the alleged 'spirit' of Japanese people. The call for an overcoming of modernity thus entailed what poet Miyoshi Tatsuji referred to as 'rediscovering the Japanese spirit' (2008: 128), by opposing eternalising forces within Japanese culture to Western consumption and 'surplus of historical consciousness' (Harootunian 2000: 48). According to Kobayashi, one of the most prominent participants at the symposium, Japan should have responded with a static, timeless vision of history to a Western modernism privileging relentless change, unending movement and timeful sequence. As Harootunian (2000: 91) explains, 'whether the symposium was appealing to rootedness or transcendence, it came down to the same thing'.

Since the 1940s, Japanese architecture has played an active role in these dialectics, which are embedded, as already seen, in different visions of time. For instance, an architect such as Isozaki Arata has thoroughly reflected upon *mu* as a void in which time should flow. His projects aspire to model time, as well as space, in an architecture that is conceived as a dynamic path (Filippucci 2006: 277-278). In his 1967 essay 'Invisible City' – whose title strikingly resonates with Calvino's 1972 masterpiece's – Isozaki states that, in architecture, 'only process is trustworthy' (Isozaki 1967: 403-404). In a flux of generation and destruction, construction and alteration, his interest revolves around the symbolic and material function of ruins. He claims to 'combine the dynamism of the Judaic idea of termination and the Buddhist concept of time as reduced to the instant' (Isozaki 1998).

Isozaki's appreciation of the movement of buildings in the direction of ruin, thus his attunement with Buddhist *mujō*, partly contrasts with a parallel architectural movement which has characterised Japan since the 1960s, that is, the Metabolic movement. Metabolist architects rather attempt to think of architecture in terms of natural (metabolic) cycles and of the Buddhist idea of transmigration, concerned as they are with 'the foreseen harmony of alteration systematically taking place within the flow of time' (ibid.). On the same line, famous German architect Bruno Taut,[19] when reflecting upon Japanese traditional architecture, in particular on the Ise shrines, underlines how their 'absent' origin, while engendering seduction, makes them appear as always new. In the chapter on the notion of the void, I discussed the concept of 'absent origin' in relation to Calvino's mature penchant for 'absent structures'.

As configured by this short survey of but two theoretical strands, different foci on temporal matters reflect, in architecture, some of the positions proposed during the 'symposium on modernity'. Isozaki, while critical towards modernism, does not agree with a rebirth of Japanese traditional architecture, rather advocating the liberation from anything that is autochthonous. Metabolist Tange Kenzo, conversely, in 'Contemporary Architectural Creation and Japanese Architectural Tradition' (1956), promotes a dialectical synthetisation of the modern (as creation of the new) and the national (as conservation of tradition and landscape). What distinguishes Japanese architecture in this period, and what ultimately interests this analysis the most, is that, whether focused on ruins (as in Isozaki's view) or on constant renewal (as in Tange's), temporal dialectics are always concerned with natural dynamics in the first place.

As Calvino does when describing his experience at Sentō Imperial Palace ('Il rovescio del sublime'), Ginkaku-ji and Manju-in ('Il tempio di legno'), it is mainly by focusing on natural materiality that the idiosyncratic temporal dynamics which sustain many forms of Japanese architecture can be grasped. These temporal dynamics dialectically combine linear temporality, circular temporality and achronisation, that is, the suppression of time through the assimilation of linearity and circularity. Even if Calvino proves not to be aware of the ideological load which this suppression has often entailed in Japanese cultural discourses, he does not fail to appreciate the allure of a dialectical harmonisation of construction and destruction, planning and extinction – as in Isozaki's view (Scott 2014: 27) –, and even transcendence and mortality – as in Arakawa's 'reversible destiny' (Bernstein 2008), which I analyse when dealing with the void and death (see § 3.3.3. and § 5.3.4.). These dyads emerge often in *Palomar*, which represents the most mature elaboration, not by chance in dialectical terms, of many themes that emerged in his Japanese travelogues.

4.2.5. Natural-temporal cycles in poetic sublimation

Many Japanese philosophical and sociological concepts have traditionally been described as dualistic: among them, the notions of purity and impurity, good and evil, front and back (*omote* and *ura*), inner feeling and outer pretence (*honne* and *tatamae*), inside and outside (*uchi* and *soto*) (Hendry 2012: 42). As Eisenstadt (1995: 194) remarks, if similar distinctions are not unknown in other world-views, 'what

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[19] As Rambelli (2014: 224, n. 6) recalls, Bruno Taut was one of the most influential Modernist architects, who played a key role in disseminating knowledge of Japanese traditional architecture in the West, while contributing to the modernist re-evaluation of traditional aesthetics in Japan.

seems to be rather unique or at least much stronger in Japan is that [...] the dualistic principles are not defined as contrasting, but rather as flexible, complementary categories – the movement between which is structured in definite contexts, which themselves may be continuously reconstructed, in topological and not linear modes'. Situating poetry within this view, it is possible to understand the reason behind *haiku*'s attention to seasonal changes, that are particularly appreciated precisely as they blend into one another.

As a consequence of this continuous reformulation of the natural principles sustaining reality, Japanese poetry has developed, from its very origins onwards, an idiosyncratic penchant for 'natural-temporal (above all annual) cycles' (Eisenstadt 1995: 202). A peculiar sensitivity to the passage of time and to the consequent grief over fragile beauty underlies Japanese old and new poems, which recognise the frailty of existence as 'the necessary condition of beauty. The Japanese not only knew this, but expressed their preference for varieties of beauty which most conspicuously betrayed their impermanence' (Keene 1969: 305).[20]

If regret over the passage of time and decline of beauty are key themes as early as the time of the *Kokinshū*, a collection of poems that dates back to 905 (Keene 1971: 30), these very topics go through the entire progression of Japanese poetry, as a contemporary collection such as *Cento haiku* aims to summarise. As per tradition, the collection is arranged according to the season that each poem refers to. Just to quote a few relevant instances from this book edited by Irene Iarocci in 1982:

> Nebbie della sera.
> Assorto, il pensiero indugia
> sui ricordi indistinti di un tempo –
> > (Takai Kitō, in Iarocci 2014: 64).

> Cadono i fiori di ciliegio
> sugli specchi d'acqua della risaia:
> stelle,
> al chiarore di una notte senza luna
> > (Yosa Buson, in Iarocci 2014: 73).

> Nella campanella che si schiude
>   stamani
> si specchia forse il ciclo della mia vita –
> > (Arakida Moritake, in Iarocci 2014: 84).

> Erba estiva:
> dei sogni di gloria dei grandi guerrieri,
> ora,
> rovine,
> e null'altro
> > (Matsuo Bashō, in Iarocci 2014: 92).

> Minuscolo, un fazzoletto di giardino:
> malata, vi cade,
> immensa,
> una foglia
> > (Tomiyasu Fūsei, in Iarocci 2014: 111).

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[20] Just to give a literary example, see *Beauty and Sadness* by Kawabata: '– The stone has a lovely patina' (ch. 9).

Even this small selection reveals how, in *haiku*, the human sense of time is entangled in natural events: that is, not merely in things, but in things steeped in time (Pasqualotto 2015: 11). Cherry blossoms and autumn leaves fall down, convolvulus blooms, summer grass grows up, and the temporal flow which they represent is not projected into a merely linear progression, but rather points to a recurring cycle, an 'immovable current' that, in times of opposition to Western modern capitalism, has served the cause of Japanese anti-modernists well (Harootunian 2000: 86). To highlight a further thread of agreement between Japanese poetry and Calvino's mature poetical inclination, it is worth recalling the author's similar view of his *Città invisibili*, as expressing 'la sensazione del tempo rimasto cristallizzato negli oggetti' (SNiA, 601).

Above I pointed out that, through the observation of transience in nature, best exemplified by a sensorial awareness of seasonal changes, the human mind can overcome this very transience and reach the a-temporal dimension that is, according to Calvino, the main teaching a reflection upon a wooden temple leads to: 'per entrare nella dimensione del tempo continuo, unico e infinito la sola via è passare attraverso il suo contrario, la perpetuità del vegetale' (S, 581). In my view, the atmosphere of suspended temporality that characterises *haiku* can be explained precisely in these terms. Similarly to what garden designers, *ikebana* masters or *bonsai* gardeners do, authors of *haiku* reduce the visual field at the mental level in order to focus on details and, at the same time, represent nature in its ideal and a-temporal state (Lee 1984: 75). Bonnefoy (2015: 74) talks about a perception of the most detailed aspects of reality that eventually brings to the evaporation of reality altogether: a particularly interesting definition since, also in physics, to evaporate means to reach a higher and at the same time more pervasive status of being.[21]

4.2.6. Porous chronology in Japanese prose

The flow of things in time, and the surrender of a helpless man in front of it, extensively characterises Japanese prose, too (Miyoshi 1974: 110). From a structural standpoint, many Japanese classics, from *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu to *Snow Country* by Kawabata Yasunari, lack in canonical story lines, partly because they reproduce in prose the medieval art of linked verse (*renga*), partly because they were born as novels by instalments (Ciapparoni La Rocca 2005: 128).[22] *Genji* creates its own time and space, as a proper masterpiece of world literature, by interconnecting atemporal romance and political turmoil (Phillips 2010: 378). If, in turn, Kawabata's works have been likened to *renga* and to classic Heian-period *monogatari* tradition, the porous chronology which brings these classics of different epochs together acquires the status of a canonical Japanese literary trait, not without ideological charge. Indeed, as Cornyetz (2007: 17) analyses, 'Kawabata sought to find in Japanese tradition (before Japan had been tainted by Western materialism and rationalism) a spiritual superiority to offset perceptions of Japanese technological inferiority'. Temporal vagueness, as well as other reminders of Japanese literary form from the Heian period (794-1185), which Kawabata re-elaborates in his own works, have thus been 'canonized as signifiers of Japanese convention' (ibid.). Canonical Japanese literary works achieve, by means of words, precisely that fusion of discrete and continuous time that Calvino reflects upon while describing the wooden temple.

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[21] For a compelling *Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* see Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975).
[22] Cornyetz (2007: 17) highlights the extent to which Kawabata is referential to classic Heian-period *monogatari* tradition.

Gessel (1993: 183) opts for the definition of 'linked prose', rather than 'novels', with specific regard to the absence of canonical story line and development in Kawabata's production: 'many of his works could end at any point, and specific chapters could easily be deleted' (ibid.). Suspension of time is also discussed as a proper theme in many of his Japanese fluid fictions. To mention but a few examples, *Snow Country* revolves around the emotional, therefore temporal, breach opening between the lives of 'a man unwilling to commit himself and a woman who cannot live without such a bond' (Gessel 1993: 184). *A Thousand Cranes* unrelentingly alternates past and present, with its characters fluctuating between what actually happens to them and what they remeber about their past lives. Also, *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* plays with a seemingly endless collection of memories that old Eguchi recalls while spending an undefined series of nights close to sleeping virgins.

Moreover, Kawabata 'always shifts the narrative line so that the human action or situation is implicitly compared with a natural object or event which has in itself no single definite meaning at all, though it may be powerfully evocative of certain emotions. [...] He reminds us to stop and look. [...] It is not all sadness, of course, because Kawabata finds quiet pleasure in this acceptance [of man's helplessness before time]' (ivi 109-110). It is not all sadness, one can reiterate, because it is at the same time *Beauty and Sadness*, as the title of Kawabata's 1964 novel suggests. This very book not only develops focused reflections about the perishability of time and beauty,[23] contextually underlining seasonal rotation[24] – these elements feature in almost every novel by Kawabata.[25] But it is structured into nine chapters whose titles, almost all of which refer to natural elements or situations, vaguely recall the partition of *haiku* collections discussed above, as to prove the common attention towards the cycles and manifestations of nature that underlie both Japanese poetry and prose.[26]

Again, the centrality of nature in Kawabata's works, and the temporal reflections which it engenders, must be considered in their political context. Nature symbolises a pre-industrial, pre-mass Japan which the author is keen to valorise in opposition to Western rampant capitalism. Nature, as thoroughly described by Kawabata, is associated to Japanese cultural specificity: it is a *cultured* notion of nature with a Zen Buddhist sensibility at its core. Cornyetz (2007: 20) invites readers to remember that 'Kawabata's rendering of Zen as *the* aesthetic sentiment of Japan throughout the age is, however, a modern construct'. Gardens signifying temporality and presenting the passing of time (Miller 2014: 267) are modern constructs. The flow dynamic in the fire scene at the end of *Snow Country* (Tsuruta 1971: 260-262) is a modern construct, too. And all these constructions evoke a Buddhist view of time as a continuum (Boardman 1971: 104) which is functional to a more or less overt nationalised and exceptionalised culturalism on Kawabata's part. Calvino shies away from an engagement with this problematic culturalism, only focusing on Kawabata's aesthetic constructions as if he does not recognise, or prefers not to recognise, the political design that sustains them.

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[23] 'The deep booming note of a huge Buddhist temple bell resounded at leisurely intervals, and the lingering reverberations held an awareness of the old Japan and of the flow of time' (ch. 1); 'Even philosophers don't seem to have any satisfactory explanation of time' (ch. 4); '– But how long will beauty last?' (ch. 4); '– So they have only a short life, and even if they survive they're dated – like the novels we write' (ch. 7); 'Time passed. But time flows in many streams. Like a river, an inner stream of time will flow rapidly at some places and sluggishly at others, or perhaps even stand hopelessly stagnant' (ch. 8); passim.
[24] 'Soon the blossoms along the road would signal the arrival of another spring. [...] Spring seemed to have turned back to winter' (ch. 2).
[25] See, among others, *Snow Country* and *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*.
[26] 'Temple Bells', 'Early Spring', 'The Festival of the Full Moon', 'A Rainy Sky', 'A Stone Garden', 'The Lotus in the Flames', 'Strands of Black Hair', 'Summer Losses', 'The Lake'.

In a Japanese context, an author who has not hesitated to criticise Kawabata's stance is the second Japanese Nobel Prize winner after Kawabata himself, namely, Ōe Kenzaburō. In his 1967 novel *The Silent Cry* he deploys an overall diachronic development of the plot, which occasionally becomes synchronic by the superimposition of older episodes in the narrative present. This 'simultaneity' (Yoshida 1995: 12),[27] otherwise defined as 'reversible time' (Loughman 1999: 418), attains an allure of mythic universality which has been read by Loughman (ibid.) in light of Mircea Eliade's view of sacred time.[28] However, if temporal suspension can be connected to an aestheticism of sorts, in Ōe's case 'past is not only recoverable, but also continually revised, and each revision makes the past both contemporaneous and ambiguous' (ibid.) – hence, the title of Ōe's Nobel speech, *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself* (1994). After all, Ōe describes Japan from a Marxist and materialist point of view, deeply concerned with the interconnectedness of historical patterns of violence and destruction, which resonates more with Calvino's early intellectual position, than with his fairly non-ideological evolution over the 1970s. Conversely, it is the ideal line represented by Kawabata and Tanizaki the one that Calvino mostly refers to when talking about Japanese literature, despite his acquaintance with Ōe's oeuvre.

As far as Tanizaki's relation with Japanese ideology is concerned, many traits associate it with Kawabata's stance, with the two authors arousing not by chance a similar criticism by Ōe Kenzaburō. Ōe has indeed disapproved how Tanizaki tended to exclude the social, economic, and political life of contemporary Japan from most of his works, especially from his middle period onwards (Lippit 1977: 223). As Tsuruta Kinya (2000) analyses, in his twenties and thirties Tanizaki had nurtured an adoration for the West, to which he had opposed an image of poor and disgraceful Japan.[29] After the great Tokyo earthquake of 1923, which led him to flee from the international Tokyo environment to the more insular Kansai district, Tanizaki embarked upon a veritable 'return to Japan'.

The alienated man who had been drawn by Western exoticism, thus deepening his condition of rootlessness, gradually returned to traditional Japan, contextually embracing a deliberate act of cultural construction (Dodd 2012: 166). This return to national ideology entails a homage to the past and its wilful adaptation to modernity (Ito 2003: 118). A perfect epitome of this cultural exercise is Tanizaki's 1938 translation of *The Tale of Genji* into elegant modern Japanese, aimed 'to preserve the spirit of that ancient classic for his contemporaries who had strayed too far from the "Japanese thing"', as Najita and Harootunian (1989: 756-757) put it. Moreover, and once again similarly to Kawabata, Tanizaki's mature construction of 'pleasure domes' outside canonical time and space (Lippit 1977: 224) goes hand in hand with the pursuit of unattainable, timeless feminine beauty. In Tanizaki's oeuvre the eternal woman par excellence is represented by his mother, timeless memories of which often resurface (Fowler 1980); but ladies of the demimonde, alongside a certain image of the Virgin Mother, often decorate his pages, too (McCarthy 1982: 247). Atemporality connects aestheticism and eroticism

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[27] Ōe has merged Japan's mythical and historical past and has addressed the cosmic cycle of life and death in a text meaningfully translated either as *A Game of Simultaneity*, or as *Contemporary Games* (1979) – analysed in depth by Yoshida (1985; 1995).

[28] Eliade (1961: 68) says that 'by its very nature sacred time is reversible in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a primordial mythical time made present'.

[29] In 'A German Spy' (1915) Tanizaki writes: 'I felt within me an irrepressible urge to know about these European countries that produced an astounding array of arts, and about the everyday activities of the superior people who lived there. Everything about the West was to me beautiful and desirable. It came to the point where I could not look at the West without seeing it as if it were a god. I resented that I was fated to be born in a country where no decent art could flourish' (quoted in Tsuruta 2000: 243).

in an entanglement that Calvino himself re-elaborates in his Japanese incipit in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, as I am going to analyse below.

In this discourse on temporality, Mishima's novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956), that Calvino read in its 1971 Italian translation, merits specific attention. It tells the story of the young Buddhist monk who set Kinkakuji on fire in 1950. The ravishing Kyoto reliquary, which has been used for different purposes since its construction, underwent several modifications and restorations over time. What characterises Mishima's narrative is the focus on a specific moment in the succession of the material changes of this temple, from the point of view of a pyromaniac's deviant mind. Therefore, Mishima's novel revolves around the intrinsic perishability of Japanese temples,[30] which Calvino observes in 'Il tempio di legno', and discusses the dialectic between material transitoriness and ideal beauty with Kinkakuji as its specific point of reference,[31] an element that illuminates Calvino's reflections with a distinctively literary tone.

Transience, caducity and vagueness characterise Mishima's *Spring Snow* (Piccirillo 2001: 160-161), as well, with its main characters all being young boys and girls in their first encounters with love and death. In order to extrapolate a temporal pattern out of Mishima's multifarious production, it can be said that many of his novels put into play a dialectical relationship between permanence (mainly of ideas, ideals, and beauty) and the fleeting life of objects and human beings. For instance, M.me de Sade, in the namesake play, after having waited for her imprisoned husband for years, leaves the stage and decides not to meet him in the last act, precisely when the Marquis has been released. In so doing, she proves her preference for a created, permanent idealisation of her love, in opposition to all worldly desires (Melanowicz 1992: 13). Similarly, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea* (1963) activates what Hagiwara Takao (1999) has defined the 'metaphysics of the womb', that is, a womb-like imagination which fuses beginning (life, fetus) and end (death, emptied uterus), linear and cyclic time, materiality and idealisation, precisely as in many Japanese forms of art analysed above.

In the utterly different context of Abe's surrealism, *The Box Man* presents the 'paralysis of the sense of time' as one of the main diseases suffered by that particular creature that is a box man:

> When time stopped, the causal relationship among things was naturally interrupted; and no matter what indecent act I might commit, I had absolutely no fear of being blamed (Abe 2001: 27).

> When he's used to the town, wherever he is, time begins to describe concentric circles around the box man as the center. One is absolutely never bored, for the background goes by swiftly; but the foreground passes at a snail's pace, and at the center things are perfectly still (Abe 2001: 146-149).

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[30] '[S]ince the Meiji Restoration the old temples in and about Kyoto had hardly ever burned down. Even on those rare occasions when fires did accidentally break out, the flames were immediately cut up, divided and controlled. It had never been like that in the past. The Chion Temple had burned down in 1431 and had suffered from fire numerous times thereafter. The main building of the Nanzen Temple had caught fire in 1393 [...]. The Enryaku Temple was turned to ashes in 1571 [...]' (Mishima 1959: 228).

[31] 'I replied that, before going anywhere, I should like to have a thorough look at the Golden Temple, because after tomorrow it would no longer be possible for us to see it at this hour of the day, and because while we were away working in the factory, the Golden Temple might very well be burned down in an air raid' (Mishima 1959: 39-40). 'Later, when I came to know Kashiwagi more intimately, I understood that he disliked lasting beauty. His likings were limited to things such as music, which vanished instantly, or flower arrangements, which faded in a matter of days' (ivi: 131). Thoughts about Japanese temples' fraility and perpetual reconstruction recur in other novels, too, but elsewhere they are not treated as main themes: see, for example, *Beauty and Sadness* by Kawabata: 'All those buildings had been destroyed. The garden must have been restored many times, after floods and other calamities' (ch. 5).

Not only does the box man eschew society, but he pursues this objective by living in a cardboard box in which he hides his personality and from which he attains an utterly personal 'temporal-spatial tunnel through human society, inuring him against it' (Guest 2004: 170).

Manipulation of time, in Abe's narrative, does not aim to an ideological or ideal construction of the world, as in Kawabata and Mishima. Rather than projecting ideology or ideals onto time structures, Abe represents the effects of alienating time and social structures onto his characters, whose vulnerability is expressed in various guises and degrees. He thereby continues along the road previously beaten by Akutagawa, with his representation of the anxiety of fragmented consciousnesses by means of blurred temporal borderlines (Lippit 2003: 128-129). The detective protagonist of *The Ruined Map* by Abe, for instance, at first sight deploys an agency that distinguishes himself from the rather passive box man, but he is only able to solve the case he has been hired for – to find a woman's missing husband – in a dreamlike atmosphere where time evaporates. As Christopher Bolton (2003: 195) notes, 'the map of events that the detective and reader have been searching for is finally irrelevant', in a meaningful representation of the absence of secure coordinates that contemporary society imposes upon the subject. Another detective story by Abe is *Inter Ice Age 4* (1959), where time and causality are again subjected to utterly alienating paradoxical mechanisms. The main character here is a time-traveling detective whose self is split into two: a present persona and a future hologram which allow him to perform at once the roles of detective, murderer and victim.

In light of a comparative reading with Calvino's mature production, Abe's approach to time acquires a twofold relevance. On the one hand, while undermining the dimension of time and space, he contextually tends to decentre and blur generic points of view, rather giving voice to alienated, transformed, non-human selves (especially in his short stories, where the theme of trans-human metamorphoses is recurring). An analogous process of 'reterritorialization' (Guest 2004: 167) is what characterises *Palomar*, as the last section of this chapter is devoted to prove. Moreover, Abe has avowedly declared his interest in the *nouveau roman* and in Alain Robbe-Grillet's ability to destroy the law of cause and effect: a reference point which Calvino too has often invoked with respect to *Palomar*'s descriptive method (SNiA, 611-612). Interviewed by Nancy S. Hardin, Abe stated as follows:

> Robbe-Grillet used the conflict of time and space as a theme, but I think it is rather a method. [...] In Robbe-Grillet's static space, there are wrinkles and shades in which we can see the technique of conceiving time. I try not to overlook time. Gazing at the static space very carefully, so that it seems as if no time is going on, is a process that deeply concerns me. For example, take this white wall. I must be able to gaze steadily at this white wall – that is, look at it with a special eye – if I want to make a single book about it. That is what I mean when I say the novel is a struggle against time (Hardin 1974: 456).

The short texts composing *Palomar* similarly look at objects in the attempt to penetrate their symbolic, cultural, emotive, even psychological depth, which their outward appearance often conceals. In the genealogy which has variously expressed this literary, but also philosophical, phenomenological interest, and in which Calvino inscribes his 1983 book, Robbe-Grillet occupies a pivotal role, together with Francis Ponge, Jean-Paul Sartre, William Carlos William and Marianne Moore. Albeit it is not possible to identify a direct influence connecting Calvino and Abe in this respect, it is still stimulating to suggest Calvino's interest in Abe's books (proved by their rather conspicuous presence on Calvino's 'Japanese shelf') on the basis of a common appreciation for Robbe-Grillet's experiments and 'struggle against time'.

4.3. Time in Calvino's mature production

In this section, I shall endeavour to analyse some of the most representative texts of Calvino's mature production, comparing the temporal posture of these works with Japanese materialisations and representations of time. I propose considering the latter, alongside many other influences, to underline the author's peculiar development of the 'postmodern chronotope' (Smethurst 2000) in its philosophical outline. If Calvino organises his books around unconventional forms of temporality from the outset – as the first section of this chapter explored – from *Le cosmicomiche* onwards he problematises the category of time more directly. Indeed, he gradually envisions the opportunity to surmount the cyclic nature of time and to attain an a-temporal dimension.

I argue that Calvino's reflections on 'Il tempio di legno', within his Japanese travelogues, play a key role in his acknowledgment of multiple forms of time and, most of all, of their interplay, which can lead to the overcoming of canonical temporal structures altogether. The Japanese incipit in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, too, offers a valid interpretive key to speculate upon time as a 'weak structure', which at the same time sustains and is weakened by the narrative process, similarly to what happens in meditation. In light of this Japanese influence, *Palomar* ought to be read as the ultimate text where Calvino interrogates a set of issues regarding time: from the coexistence of antipodal forces to the veritable conflation of cycles and linearity into a continuous, single time, alongside the opening towards non-human forms of temporality.

4.3.1. 'Il tempio di legno': visualisation of temporal paradoxes

The chapter 'La forma del tempo' in *Collezione di sabbia* takes forward the project of crystallisation of time in objects and spaces that already informed *Le città invisibili*. Interviewed by Giulio Nascimbeni, Calvino locates the scope of that collection of texts precisely in the search of visual images of time (SNiA, 601). This search is thus inherently devoted to bringing together heterogeneous, if not completely opposite, elements, such as time and space, immateriality and materiality. In particular, the third text of the Japanese section, entitled 'Il tempio di legno', brings to the fore a further dialectical interaction from the outset, that is, the interaction of nature and art over time in different Japanese forms of material production: 'In Giappone ciò che è prodotto dell'arte non nasconde né corregge l'aspetto naturale degli elementi di cui è formato' (S, 580). Calvino identifies the interpenetration of nature and art in buildings, traditional objects, cuisine and gardens.

In the very first paragraph, where he focuses on the manifestation of these peculiar dynamics in Japanese food, while probably not unaware of Lévi-Strauss's so-called 'culinary triangle',[32] Calvino surely follows Barthes's chapter titled 'Food Decentered' in *Empire of Signs*. Barthes writes:

> Japanese rawness is essentially visual; it denotes a certain colored state of the flesh or vegetable substance [...].
> Entirely visual (conceived, concerted, manipulated for sight, and even for a painter's eye), food thereby says

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[32] Lévi-Strauss's semiotic triangle of preparing food (raw, baked, boiled) aims to symbolise a society's attitude to the nature/culture divide. See Lévi-Strauss (1969).

that it is not *deep*: the edible substance is without a precious heart, without a buried power, without a vital secret (Barthes 1982: 20-22).

Calvino, on the same line, notes:

> La cucina giapponese è una composizione d'elementi naturali intesa soprattutto a realizzare una forma visuale, e questi elementi giungono in tavola conservando in gran parte il loro aspetto d'origine, senz'aver subito le metamorfosi della cucina occidentale, per la quale un piatto è tanto più un'opera d'arte quanto più i suoi ingredienti sono irriconoscibili (S, 580).

In 'Il rovescio del sublime' gardens prompt the author's perception of art's self-concealment in pseudo-natural contexts (*ars est celare artem*), whereas here Calvino underlines the ability of Japanese cuisine to remain artistic while not concealing its own naturalness (something along the lines of *ars est ostendere naturam*). In both cases, visual constructions elicit his interest in their balanced fusion of opposite poles.

By the same token, gardens are appreciated for their construction on the basis of parameters that are both internal ('criteri d'armonia') and external ('criteri di significato'), similarly to what happens with poems ('come le parole in una poesia'). But a specific feature separates gardens from poems substantially:

> Con la differenza che queste parole vegetali cambiano di colore e di forma nel corso dell'anno e ancor più col passare degli anni: mutamenti in tutto o in parte calcolati nel progettare la poesia-giardino. Poi le piante muoiono e vengono sostituite con altre simili disposte negli stessi luoghi: il giardino nel passare dei secoli viene rifatto continuamente ma resta sempre lo stesso (S, 580).

Plants participate in two different kinds of time: a fleeting, contingent, and discrete time – when considered as individuals – and a stable, continuous time – in their being part of nature as a whole, and of gardens as complexes.

The coexistence and connectedness of discrete, cyclical time on the one hand, and continuous, linear time on the other, is clearly intrinsic to any natural phenomena. But it is in Buddhism that these two are expressly appreciated in their mutual definition, as in one organic body. In a 1984 interview Calvino ackowledges his interest in 'una natura grande organismo di cui facciamo anche noi parte. È l'integrazione dell'uomo nel cosmo attraverso un intimo legame che passa per il tempo' (SNiA 602).[33] As analysed above, this temporal entanglement constitutes the kernel of *haiku*, of many novels by Kawabata, Tanizaki and Mishima, as well as of Japanese experimental and traditional architecture. Calvino reflects upon Japanese architecture as follows:

> l'antichità in Giappone non ha la sua sostanza ideale nella pietra come in Occidente, dove un oggetto o un edificio solo se si conserva materialmente viene considerato antico. Qui siamo nell'universo del legno: l'antico è ciò che perpetua il suo disegno attraverso il continuo distruggersi e rinnovarsi degli elementi perituri (S, 580-581).

The author thus proves to be receptive to a key aesthetic feature of Japanese architecture, both sacred and secular, which has often been considered as the quintessential expression of Japan's cultural identity – bearing in mind the ideological problematic that this category represents. For instance, when the modernist German architect Bruno Taut arrived in Japan in 1933, he commented upon the wooden

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[33] Calvino is here commenting on Ilya Prigogine's philosophy of time, as exposed in the book *The New Alliance*, which he reviewed in *La Repubblica* on the 3rd of May 1980 (S, 2038-2044). Interestingly enough, he goes on in this interview by stating: 'è basilare di ogni tentativo di "saggezza" farsi più vicini possibile al senso del tempo nella sua incommensurabilità' (SNiA, 603).

sublimity of the Ise shrine and placed it on a pare with the stone beauty of the Parthenon (Taut 1937: 139).

The peculiar materialisation of time that wood symbolises is key to Calvino's evaluation, as well:

> Ciò che il tempio di legno ci può insegnare è questo: per entrare nella dimensione del tempo continuo, unico e infinito la sola via è passare attraverso il suo contrario, la perpetuità del vegetale, il tempo frammentato e plurimo di ciò che si avvicenda, si dissemina, germoglia, si dissecca o marcisce (S, 581).

This means that, even in one of the chief expressions of human culture, namely in architecture, Japan welcomes and assimilates the most elementary feature of nature, that is to say, its transience harmonised with a superior permanence. In this acquaintance with natural rhythms lay the roots of a positive acquaintance with death, too, as I am going to explore in the following chapter. And this very acquaintance with human and non-human mortality will also provide this analysis with a meaningful tool to interpret the otherwise puzzling death of the main character at the end of *Palomar*.

Further on in 'Il tempio di legno', Calvino addresses the issue of how architecture in Japan harmonises *pars denstruens* and *pars construens*, cyclical death and the persistent essence of things:

> Questo vale per i giardini come per i templi e i palazzi e le ville e i padiglioni, tutti in legno, tutti molte volte divorati dalle fiamme degli incendi, molte volte ammuffiti e imputriditi o mandati in polvere dai tarli, ma ricomposti ogni volta pezzo per pezzo: [...] la caducità delle parti dà risalto all'antichità dell'insieme [...]; ciò che perdura è la forma ideale dell'edificio, e non importa se ogni pezzo del suo supporto materiale è stato tolto e cambiato innumerevoli volte, e i più recenti odorano di legno appena piallato (S, 581).

Even if Calvino has not visited Ise, where these dynamics of destruction and reconstruction are traditionally regulated in the institution of *shikinenzōkan*,[34] his account perfectly fits many forms of Japanese architecture, and indeed art and literature. For instance, his reference to the 'ideal shape of the building', which lasts beyond any material support, is reminiscent of the notion of ideal beauty as it is exposed by Tanizaki or Mishima. In particular, the core of Mishima's novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, as seen above, lies in the contrast between the beauty of the temple, assured by its lifelessness and timelessness, and the impossibility of living things to reach the same degree of eternal beauty. Mishima reflects on the ambiguity represented by the materials out of which the temple is constructed: as Marmysz (2017: 186) points out, they 'provide a medium through which the eternal may speak, but they also hold back the infinite by binding it to something that is itself finite'. Mizoguchi, the main character of the novel, gradually resolves to liberate the immortal essence of the temple by burning down its physical manifestation. As this story was inspired by real historical events, it is important to remember that the temple was then reconstructed as similar as possible to its previous shape, which had itself undergone a number of collapses and fires over time.

It can thus be said that, in Japanese temples, harmonisation occurs precisely between the two symbols that Calvino discusses extensively, a few years later, in his memo on 'Esattezza': flame and crystal, which take the shape of more or less accidental destruction and patient and careful reconstruction. The wooden temple offers an iconic instance of the viable coexistence of cyclicity and linearity, made possible by the cooperation between two opposite forces that coalesce in a suspension of canonical temporality. When discussing *Lezioni americane* in the first section of this chapter, I underlined Calvino's increasing attention to the relevance of the flame in his system of values, which has otherwise been prone to attribute more relevance to the crystal. In light of what he writes after

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[34] This institution has been defined by Arata as the 'crux of the "Ise" problematic'. It involves dismantling the old shrine on one site and rebuilding the new one on an adjacent site, usually every twenty years (Arata 2006: 131).

visiting Japanese wooden temples, it is reasonable to locate the cause of his evolving sensibility in his acquired awareness of the mutual necessity of destruction and construction, fire and painstaking replacement, therefore contingency and aspiration to a superior – almost ideal – concept of time.[35] Through this awareness, Calvino objectifies his own approach to narrative constructions: from the outset, he has conceived them as spatial, ethical, existential, and cosmological orders, unavoidably contaminated by external elements (Almansi 1971).[36] In his mature production, these external elements progressively corrode the category of time *tout court*, and time as a narratological structure gets to be suspended, rather representing an 'absent structure'.

In 'Il tempio di legno', Calvino goes on by observing the cross-fertilisation of two complementary forms of existence, each corresponding to a different dimension of time:

> Il tempio di legno segna l'incrocio di due dimensioni del tempo: ma per arrivare a capirlo dobbiamo allontanare dalla mente parole come «l'essere e il divenire», perché se tutto si riduce al linguaggio della filosofia del mondo da cui siamo partiti, non valeva la pena fare tanta strada (S, 581).

The need not to reduce other cultures to Western ideas, such as 'being' and 'becoming', stands out as a positive response to the rising attentiveness to the flaws and dangers of Orientalism.[37] This has to be noticed despite Calvino's general preference for Kawabata's and Tanizaki's 'aestheticentism' (Cornyetz 2007: 14) and introjection of some tropes of their 'self-Orientalism', which emerge occasionally elsewhere.[38] At the same time, this statement anticipates the sense of bewilderment of the average Western reader, who would expect Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, or indeed Hegel, Heidegger and Bergson, to be on the table of a discussion about time and its idealisation.

Calvino rather pays specific attention to the link between Japanese architecture and abstract meditation, typical of Eastern lines of thought and religions:

> Più dei templi pieni di statue, dall'alta struttura a pagoda, mi attraggono le costruzioni basse e gli interni guerniti solo di stuoie, che corrispondono di solito a edifici profani, ville o padiglioni, ma anche in qualche caso a templi o santuari che invitano a una meditazione astratta, a una concentrazione scorporata (S, 582).

As discussed in the chapter about spatial void, the author proves to be aware of the role of emptiness to facilitate mental abstraction. Here, visiting the Silver Pavilion and the Manju-in Temple, he complicates this awareness by adding a comment on the materiality and the process of creation of this very void, which further illuminates his reflections about time:

> Il tempio di legno tocca la sua perfezione quanto più è spoglio e disadorno lo spazio in cui ti accoglie, perché bastano la materia in cui è costruito e la facilità con cui lo si può disfare e rifare uguale a prima a dimostrare che tutti i pezzi dell'universo possono cadere a uno a uno ma che c'è qualcosa che resta (S, 582).

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[35] It is important to reiterate that the Japanese hypothesis integrates our understanding of Calvino's multifaceted receptivity. As for the ambivalence of the image of fire, see also his reflections on Bakhtin: 'Bachtin [...] sottolinea per esempio l'ambivalenza dell'immagine del *fuoco* nelle feste carnevalesche: il fuoco che contemporaneamente distrugge e rinnova il mondo' (S, 260).

[36] See, in particular, 'Cibernetica e fantasmi' (S, 205-225).

[37] In 1963 Anouar Abdel-Malek analysed the debased position of the Orient as an object of study for Western Orientalists, a symptom of which is precisely the imposition of Western coordinates over a 'passive, non-participating, [...] non-autonomous, non-sovereign' Orient.

[38] In 'Il novantanovesimo albero' Calvino briefly refers to the disharmonic urbanisation on the outskirts of Kyoto. However, instead of engaging a critique of Japanese unheven socio-economic development *à la* Ōe, he rather focuses on the sense of myth that emerges even amidst the ugliness, thanks to the connection between past and present guaranteed by a specific point in the landscape (S, 596). Here, as elsewhere, he takes a quite firm non-ideological stand.

The final sentence starkly recalls the dialogue of *Le città invisibili* where the wooden *tessera* of a chessboard is first considered as epitome of the void, then analysed closer and described as full of details. Marco Polo reflects on the variety that even an apparent void entails, thus on the multiplicity of stories that a single story, and *the* single higher history, consists of. But whereas in *Le città invisibili* the direction of the discourse is from multiplicity to singularity, then to multiplicity again, the ending of 'Il tempio di legno' emphasises that 'there is something that remains'. That is to say, after encountering Japanese meditation, Calvino's penchant for keeping his thoughts constantly open to reconsideration seems willing to find a possible way out in a higher, suspended temporal dimension, where linearity and cycles merge.

To summarise, the Japanese wooden temple acquires prime importance in Calvino's thoughts about temporality. If time, especially in its linear form, is a human abstraction, as any other rational thought it presupposes a material mind producing it and a materiality out of which abstraction is produced. This is how I interpret Calvino's statement about the necessity to probe 'il tempo frammentato e plurimo di ciò che si avvicenda' 'per entrare nella dimensione del tempo continuo' (S, 581). As the mind needs material discontinuous experiences in order to reach a continuous disembodied concentration, so the temple offers concrete signs of the past life of the wood it is made out of, and of the processes of destruction and reconstruction that represent its very essence. Unavoidably confronting itself with these signs, which are the only possible objects of reflection in an overall emptiness, the mind of the practitioner can elevate itself to a superior dimension, where the distinction between impermanence and permanence is no longer relevant, with time rather representing the 'absent structure' of a 'weak' construction. This passage through the discontinuity of material time, in order to overcome it mentally, will engage at length the character that Calvino creates around the time of these Japanese reflections: Palomar.

4.3.2. *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggatore* towards a gradual suspension of temporality

The macrotextual structure of many mature works by Calvino plays with time by means of modularity and flexibility (Bonsaver 1994: 180). The traditional linearity of novels is upset, but at first within a highly rational – almost mathematical, geometric – approach to temporal structures. Gradually, temporality gets to be questioned in its very ontological status, within a broad relativisation of structural coordinates. A key role in this direction is played by *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, whose cumulative organisation brings to the limit the idea behind Kawabata's 'linked prose', that is, a prose made out of the juxtaposition of different segments of a weak temporality. In this book, stand-alone stories alternate and relativise the notion of temporal progression, which is replaced by temporal suspension.

In Calvino's 1979 book, the category of time opens to continuous changes, according to the succession of different stories, eventually losing its own ontological solidity.[39] Even when readers realise that the sequence of the titles of the ten incipits forms a further incipit, they do so in the awareness that

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[39] *Se una notte* originates from a cluster of questions that Calvino expresses at the end of his memo about 'Molteplicità': 'chi è ciascuno di noi se non una combinatoria d'esperienze, d'informazioni, di letture, d'immaginazioni? Ogni vita è un'enciclopedia, una biblioteca, un inventario d'oggetti, un campionario di stili, dove tutto può essere continuamente rimescolato e riordinato in tutti i modi possibili' (S, 733).

their order could be altered without significant consequences.[40] Above all, the temporal dimension of *Se una notte* cannot be canonical (structurally speaking) because the entire book rotates (thematically) around reading and writing as acts that lie beyond measurable time. Calvino, or rather the narrator who addresses his fictional Reader and indeed his external readers, often deals with the 'timelessness' connected to the acts of creating and enjoying literature:

> Hai già letto una trentina di pagine e ti stai appassionando alla vicenda. A un certo punto osservi: «Però questa frase non mi suona nuova. Tutto questo passaggio, anzi, mi sembra d'averlo già letto». È chiaro: sono motivi che ritornano, *il testo è intessuto di questi andirivieni, che servono a esprimere il fluttuare del tempo* (RR2, 634).

> *Quando leggi*, puoi fermarti o sorvolare sulle frasi: *il tempo sei tu che lo decidi* (RR2, 676).

> Silas Flannery guarda con un cannocchiale montato su un treppiede una giovane donna su una sedia a sdraio intenta a leggere un libro [...] – [...] Chissà cosa legge. [...] Non mi stanco di guardarla: sembra abitare in una *sfera sospesa in un altro tempo e in un altro spazio* (RR2, 734).

> Ogni volta che mi siedo qui leggo «Era una notte buia e tempestosa...» e l'impersonalità di quell'incipit sembra aprire il *passaggio da un mondo all'altro, dal tempo e spazio del qui e ora al tempo e spazio della pagina scritta* (RR2, 784 – all emphases above are mine).[41]

Metanarrative references to the time and rhythm of the stories are certainly not new either in the context of Italian literature (suffice it to remember Boccaccio's novella about Madonna Oretta and the pace of good storytelling – in *Decameron* 6.1), or in Calvino's production, which often features readers and allusions to the art of reading and writing. What characterises all the quoted passages from *Se una notte* is the insistence on the evaporation of time operated by the written world. The role that in Japan appertains to the wooden temple is here taken on by the act of reading, which guarantees continuity to the succession of incipits, and at the same time overcomes this continuity by envisaging a superior a-temporal dimension.

In particular, the Japanese incipit 'Sul tappeto di foglie illuminato dalla luna' deals with the concrete mechanism of extrapolation of atemporality out of the pages of the book. The text refers to the discrete temporality of novels as a convention that only partially covers, and rather suggests, the complexity of the real, where simultaneity prevails:

> Per portare la conversazione su un altro terreno, provai a fare il paragone con la lettura d'un romanzo, in cui un'andatura della narrazione molto calma, tutto sullo stesso tono smorzato, serve a far risaltare delle sensazioni sottili e precise su cui si vuole richiamare l'attenzione del lettore; ma nel caso del romanzo bisogna tener conto del fatto che nel succedersi delle frasi passa una sola sensazione per volta, sia essa singola o complessiva, mentre l'ampiezza del campo visivo e del campo auditivo permette di registrare simultaneamente un insieme molto più ricco e complesso (RR2, 812).

A few lines later, the text offers a potential interpretive key to understand how literature is based on an 'absent structure', also with reference to time: 'le cose che un romanzo non dice sono necessariamente di più di quelle che dice' (RR2, 812). In other words, the written world offers a convention of discrete temporality, whereas the unwritten world is made of multiple times which intersect. However, what is written and conventionally dissected is necessary in order to perceive what is not written and

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[40] The ten titles are: 'Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore', 'Fuori dell'abitato di Malbork', 'Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa', 'Senza temere il vento e la vertigine', 'Guarda in basso dove l'ombra s'addensa', 'In una rete di linee che s'allacciano', 'In una rete di linee che s'intersecano', 'Sul tappeto di foglie illuminato dalla luna', 'Intorno a una fossa vuota', 'Quale storia laggiù attende la fine?'.
[41] See also RR2, 732; 764; 785; 834.

simultaneous, as much as what is present at the same time stands for and is sustained by what is absent. Bonsaver writes that in the 1970s the 'Cartesian' intellectual that Calvino used to be seems to devote himself to the unknowable character of the outside world. This Japanese incipit proves that what is outside is rather assumed, almost evoked, in the awareness of its ungraspable multiple temporality which borders on timelessness. The sense of atemporality in the text is further substantiated by the aestheticised and erotic aura of the narrated episode, which distinctly echoes Kawabata's and Tanizaki's atmospheres.

The relevance of 'Sul tappeto di foglie illuminate dalla luna' lies also in its specific focus on perceptions. The main character is almost completely absorbed by his thoughts about his interaction with falling leaves – which are, as discussed previously, distinctive symbols of perishability in Japanese poetry: 'Dissi che avrei voluto separare la sensazione d'ogni singola foglia di ginkgo dalla sensazione di tutte le altre' (RR2, 808). As Shaner (1989: 171) highlights, this is a key element of the Japanese experience of nature, too: 'sensitivity toward temporality [...] enhances our experience of life. Being aware of our existence in time, our timeliness [...], makes life more intense and precious precisely because of our passing experiences'. This vision brings together the attention for sensorial perceptions and the environmental concern, possibly indicating the way for their balanced relationship in Calvino's mature production.

Not by chance, one of Calvino's last projects, following his travels to Japan, Mexico and Iran, is devoted to *I cinque sensi*, a collection of short stories each focusing on one of the five senses. However, I would not underestimate the fact that this project remained unfinished.[42] If, on the one hand, Calvino has cultivated until the end his penchant for the senses, on the other he has developed over time – and possibly thanks to the contact with Japan – a more profound conception of his senses: with time, the senses are no longer interesting in themselves, but rather as a means to overcome them and to reach a superior sense of life. In my view, while *Palomar* succeeds in this respect by bringing to a close the philosophical *operative-contemplative iter* discussed earlier, a narrative project such as *I cinque sensi* appears to be lacking in cognitive depth and was perhaps doomed to remain unfinished.

4.3.3. Cosmic time in *Palomar*

In *Palomar* Calvino applies aspects of temporality that he has previously reflected upon in the context of his Japanese experience. First of all, the dialectical structure of the book can be read as an implementation of the cyclical nature of thoughts regarding the surrounding world, which has been noted in Japanese philosophy and literature. One might object that already the short stories composing *Marcovaldo* represent a repetitive approach to what is outside, let alone the repetition compulsion that underlies *Se una notte* analysed above. Nevertheless, in both cases cyclical repetitions do not allow for any intellectual progressions, with their value rather falling under a sheer narrative experimentation. Conversely, the note that Calvino adds to *Palomar*'s table of contents highlights that the entire book should be read as a tireless progression from visual experiences (1) to anthropological reflections (2) to speculation and meditation (3), with each completed cycle followed by another cycle, that rests on the previous one and at the same time adds to that a *quantum* of new awareness of the world (1.1.1. is followed by 1.1.2., 1.1.3, 1.2.1, 1.2.2., 1.2.3., 1.3.1. and so on until 3.3.3.). Palomar's thinking thus

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[42] Calvino only wrote 'Il nome, il naso' (1972) about smell, 'Sapore sapere' (1982) about taste, and 'Un re in ascolto' (1984) about hearing.

follows the direction of a growing abstraction, which blurs traditional dialectics into an increasingly 'disembodied concentration' – to use Calvino's own words from 'Il tempio di legno'. His pure thought slowly allows for the possibility of becoming no-thought, intensely calling to mind some Eastern – mainly Buddhist – forms of meditation, which similarly rest on the materiality of visual experiences.

In this harmonisation of a dialectical method and a meditative practice the problem of *praxis* clearly emerges: that is, the relation between theory and action which lies at the core of Buddhism, as well as Marxism and psychoanalysis (Cazdyn 2015). In the structure and development of *Palomar*, Calvino delineates a perfect spectrum of dialectical materialism, which makes 'room for spirit without going disreputably dualist, since spirit, in the form of life or energy, is built into matter itself' (Eagleton 2016: 9). He also engages with contradictions and paradoxes, especially on a temporal level, which are inherent to the problem of *praxis*.[43] In Buddhist tradition, the negotiation of the dualism between daily practice and atemporal enlightenment, as well as between knowledge and ascesis (Scaligero 1964: 72), has been carried out by a number of masters. Dōgen, in particular, 'simultaneously held and disintegrated it', in what he called the 'oneness of practice and enlightenment' (Cazdyn 2015: 120).

Similarly, through the fragmented temporality of single thoughts, Palomar envisions the 'continuous, single, infinite time' that he has already contemplated in 'Il tempio di legno'. The hypothesis of a continuous time emerges starting from his first observations, progressively moving towards a cosmic scale. At first, in 'Lettura di un'onda', this hypothesis falls under the most canonical inductive process, whose main purpose is to infer all-encompassing laws and patterns by observing natural phenomena:

> un'onda è sempre diversa da un'altra onda; ma è anche vero che ogni onda è uguale a un'altra onda, anche se non immediatamente contigua o successiva; insomma ci sono delle forme e delle sequenze che si ripetono, sia pur distribuite irregolarmente nello spazio e nel tempo (RR2, 876).

Temporal continuity is then located in a universal dimension, in 'La contemplazione delle stelle':

> Se lui si obbligasse a contemplare le costellazioni notte per notte e anno per anno, e a seguirne i corsi e i ricorsi lungo i curvi binari della volta oscura, forse alla fine conquisterebbe anche lui la nozione d'un tempo continuo e immutabile, separato dal tempo labile e frammentario degli accadimenti terrestri (RR2, 912).

Already in 'Ti con zero' (1967), one of the most interesting short stories regarding time in Calvino's production, temporality is described in a cosmic and yet concrete form, as if it were space (SNiA, 597). This short story, which at first gave its title to a separate collection, later became part of *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove* (1984), where Calvino combined texts dating back to a rather wide range of time, whose content more than once refers to matters pertaining time (see, in particular, 'Sul far del giorno', 'Gli anni-luce').

As the author underlines (Calvino 1984: 3), the main difference that makes *Le cosmicomiche* and *Palomar* two almost complementary books, is to be found in their sources of inspiration, which in my opinion are also reflected in the different approaches to time of the two books. Both deconstruct a progressive temporal model, but *Le cosmicomiche* idiosyncratically combine science and imagination, whereas *Palomar* develops on a bedrock of direct, everyday, close experience of the surrounding world. This 'riflessione generale [...] fatta attraverso delle occasioni minime' (SNiA, 619) follows the same

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[43] '"Non c'è contraddizione tra le due posizioni. La soluzione di continuità tra le generazioni dipende dall'impossibilità di trasmettere l'esperienza [...]. La distanza tra due generazioni è data dagli elementi che esse hanno in comune e che obbligano alla ripetizione ciclica delle stesse esperienze [...]"' (RR2, 963).

mechanism that lies beneath many Buddhist daily meditation practices – especially in the Sōtō school of Zen (Cazdyn 2015: 120).

As Calvino states:

> Il progetto delle *Cosmicomiche* (e della sua continuazione, *Ti con zero*) s'ispirava contemporaneamente a Lucrezio e a Ovidio. O, se si preferisce, da un lato alla *Piccola cosmogonia portatile* di Queneau (il *De rerum natura* del nostro secolo), dall'altro a certi repertori etnografici di miti cosmogonici primitivi. Il procedimento di *Palomar* è diverso; manca il versante *Metamorfosi*, ossia mitico. Palomar interroga il mondo come un Lucrezio scettico e sprovvisto d'ogni sistema, partendo dai dati molto elementari della sua esperienza quotidiana (SNiA, 642-643).

In other words, in *Palomar* Calvino leaves behind his backgound of Western myths and literature, focusing on the immediate reality instead. He follows mental processes that, by being utterly idiosyncratic, even get to bear close affinities with distant (specifically Japanese) modes of experiencing and thinking reality. It is possibly thanks to this practical and non-dogmatic inquiry into the world that, unlike Qfwfq in *Le cosmicomiche*, 'il signor Palomar è quanto di più vicino si possa immaginare a un monaco, se vogliamo buddista, anche se è costruito tutto con procedimenti della nostra cultura e non con materiali orecchiati o presi in prestito' (SNiA, 560-561). If, according to another statement by Calvino, 'è basilare di ogni tentativo di "saggezza" farsi più vicini possibile al senso del tempo nella sua incommensurabilità' (SNiA, 603), the respective wisdom of Palomar and Buddhist monks are unavoidably destined to coincide.

Serra (1996: 110) identifies the mirror of Palomar's meditative solitude and silence in the simultaneity of the narrative present. Mara Mauri Jacobsen (1992: 494) maintains that the whole book can be interpreted as a pause, a stop on Calvino's narrative path, an exercise of reflection and meditation which seems to exclude storytelling, only to let it resurface occasionally. The description of the surface of things thus opens to the speculative and metaphysical problem that Calvino identifies already in Parmenides, all the way to Descartes, Kant and Leopardi, that is 'il rapporto tra l'idea d'infinito come spazio assoluto e tempo assoluto, e la nostra cognizione empirica dello spazio e del tempo' (S, 683). When shifting from philosophical to literary instances, Calvino distinguishes between three different treatments of the temporal dimension (SNiA, 598-599): time as thematic problem (as in Borges' *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, Wells' *The Time Machine*, and Queneau's *Les Fleurs bleues*), time as flux (as in Proust's *Recherche*), and time as shaping narrative forms (as in Joyce and Conrad).

While Calvino's experiments with time analysed in the first section are an expression of a predominant narratological creativity – and therefore ought to be ascribed to the third group in the distinction outlined above –, the later work of Calvino would fit more comfortably into the first group, that is, into a philosophical problematisation of time. In my view, the contact with Buddhism is essential in marking this turn. At the same time, I would suggest reading the ending of *Palomar* as a tentative way out of the borgesian problematic relation with temporality. If Borges theorises a multiplicitous time that, as seen above, descends from the conception of temporality as a broad category to the description of its infinite possible manifestations, Palomar on the other hand goes backwards from the specificity of the description of each instant to the (more or less mental) attainment of a superior or 'absent' dimension, that of death as inscribed into a temporal continuum.

Buddhist wisdom is nourished by an everyday mental acquaintance with death, and this is precisely what engages Palomar in the final section of the book. In 'Come imparare a essere morto', he reflects on the alleged continuity of pre- and post-life dimensions:

> Per prima cosa, non si deve confondere l'essere morto col non esserci, condizione che occupa anche la sterminata distesa di tempo precedente alla nascita, apparentemente simmetrica a quella altrettanto sconfinata che segue alla morte (RR2, 975).

All these diverse references to time lead to Palomar's final awareness that through the description of a finite time it is possible to eventually envision an infinite dimension (RR2, 979). With Calvino's open-mindedness impossible to be reduced to one single point of arrival,[44] this epilogue has to be carefully treated as just one among many possible approaches to time that he takes into account throughout his career. And yet, it is interesting – to the aim of my interpretation – to note a striking proximity to the Buddhist relativisation of temporality, where a meditative approach to everyday realities strives for a 'superior' state of mind in which transitoriness is no longer the central problem (Ackermann 1997: 51). Following Mauri Jacobsen's analysis of *Palomar* (1992: 493), we can thus recognise in this book the main features of metaphysical thought, be it Western or Eastern: presence (authenticity beyond emotions, desires, images and time), control (over the self as much as over single outside phenomena, by means of observation), and teleology (final goal being control over one's own destiny, therefore over one's own death).

In the envisioned continuity of time that originates from its discontinuity, and in the subsumption of death within atemporality, Calvino makes room for that particular model described in 'Palomar e i modelli cosmologici' (1976), where opposing forces coexist in an unlimited universe:

> Il tempo irreversibile comincia nel momento in cui un primo inizio d'ordine e un primo inizio di disordine si producono insieme nell'universo, e da quel momento non faranno che crescere entrambi. L'universo comincia nello stesso momento a costruirsi e a distruggersi, e così continua e continuerà: senza mai disfarsi completamente. [...] l'universo può essere infinito oppure finito, poco importa; quello che è certo è che è illimitato, cioè non chiuso, cioè aperto in ogni suo punto e in ogni direzione a tutto il resto di se stesso (S, 2010-2011).

In Buddhism, too, beginning and end of the universe are conceived as consubstatial, as discussed above. This radical vision of an open cosmos unavoidably bears as a consequence the decentralisation of the human dimension, which makes way for a non-anthropocentric conception of the world.

4.3.4. Palomar's acknowledgment of non-human forms of time

It is also owing to a new image of time that is beyond human experiences that Palomar gradually includes in his thoughts the perspective of all that is not human in the universe. In 'L'ordine degli squamati' he states as follows:

> In quale tempo [i coccodrilli] sono immersi? In quello della specie, sottratto alla corsa delle ore che precipitano dalla nascita alla morte dell'individuo? [...] Il pensiero d'un tempo fuori della nostra esperienza è insostenibile. Palomar s'affretta a uscire dal padiglione dei rettili, che si può frequentare solo di tanto in tanto e di sfuggita (RR2, 948).

Commenting on this passage, Fitzgerald (1994: 54) states: 'Mr Palomar attempts to imagine the possibilities of time as a reptilian experience. True to the comedy, he falls short of perceiving his own

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[44] 'Io non considero mai terminati i miei libri fatti di testi brevi. Ognuno rappresenta un cantiere di lavoro nel quale scavo. Magari un giorno farò un *Palomar 2*. Del resto, ho da parte alcune cartelle intestate "città invisibili". Quando ni viene un'idea ci lavoro sopra, e succede così che i miei testi continuino a vivere e a crescere anche dopo essere stati pubblicati' (SNiA, 643).

achievement and flees from the validity of his own ideas. But the subjective relativity of our ideas has been urged upon us'. Indeed if, in a text like 'Ipotesi di descrizione di un paesaggio' (S, 2693-2694) time is closely linked to the observing eye,[45] in *Palomar* the observing human eye is no longer (or not always) assumed as central, and the perspective of non-human forms of existence is strengthened by the likelihood of non-human forms of time.

Drawing on Levinas and Derrida, Rohman (2009: 75-76) emphasises the 'fundamental alterity or otherness of time', whose 'leveling effect' causes the condition according to which 'Mr Palomar's death is not appreciably different from the death of a crocodile'. In my opinion, what distinguishes the two is the degree of awareness of time itself. If the ability to remember the past and to project oneself in the future is among the capacities that the human has developed better, the choice to conceive of, and even briefly enter, a suspended temporality – where past, present and future coexist – speaks of a wilful self-decentralisation upon which it is reasonable to identify an Eastern influence. After all, *Palomar* is sustained by the same apparent contradiction that characterises Japanese gardens and wooden temples: it is built upon cycles (dialectical in the book, seasonal in gardens, constructional in temples) that aim at their own overcoming and at attaining abstraction. It is a human artifice conceived to be negated by its very constitutive elements, which point to a non-human dimension where measurable coordinates – time included – are no longer needed.

In conclusion, it can be said that from 'Il tempio di legno' in the Japanese section of *Collezione di sabbia* to the thoughts on time in *Palomar*, Calvino reconnects tropes of postmodern (a)temporality to the ancient tradition of Zen. As in meditation, in the author's mature works time progressively emerges as a structure that is undermined by its very deployment: it undergoes constant dialectical oscillations between cycles and linearity, dissection and continuity, transience and permanence, until it is confronted with its very negation, namely, the absence of time *tout court* – or at least as it is conceived by human minds. If Zen tradition connects the materiality of everyday experience to a superior immutability, similarly Calvino navigates multifarious perceptions of time and nature while admitting the existence of a broader and all-encompassing temporality, belonging to both human and non-human beings. Once again, Calvino's cross-cultural encounter with Japan dialogues with his post-humanism, at the core of which lies a conception of time that gradually absorbs and elaborates dialectical forces.

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[45] 'Perciò una descrizione di paesaggio, essendo carica di temporalità, è sempre racconto: c'è un io in movimento che descrive un paesaggio in movimento' (S, 2694).

5. Deadly meaningful: representations of the unrepresentable

> Nothing like breathing your last to put new life in you
>
> – Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*

In the previous chapter I analysed time in its flows and in its suspension. The interplay between discontinuity and continuity, both in Calvino's works and in Japanese philosophies and literature, emerged as connected with the overcoming of a strictly linear chronological view. In particular, I interrogated Calvino's mature works with the purpose of highlighting a sense of time as no longer just a category influencing a single destiny in its progressive development, but rather as a dimension that expands its boundaries to comprehend the entire universe and transcend sheer practical experiences. This chapter will expand on the previous one, and it will offer a discussion of death as the particular moment in time when time itself stops – as far as daily experience is concerned – or rather reaches a metaphysical, and yet all-encompassing dimension.

I will first lay out the multifarious approaches to death that characterise Calvino's production up until the author's contact with Japan. Initially death, addressed variously in (neo)realistic, folkloric, or ecological terms, appears predominantly as a narrative event, lacking the philosophical depth which begins to emerge in *Le città invisibili*, i.e. precisely when an Eastern inspiration arises. In the 1972 book, however, the East still represents a rather vague constellation of images and ideas. Conversely, I would identify in Calvino's direct contact with Japan's specificities the potential opening towards a metaphysical approach to death. This contact certainly interacts with a number of other interests on Calvino's part, such as structuralism, Barthes' photographic reflections, Borges' oneiric prose, and Leopardi's philosophy.[1] Unlike these examples, though, Calvino's acquaintance with Zen meditation and Japanese modern literature has not been thoroughly explored so far.

Therefore, I will outline the aesthetics of death in Zen Buddhism, as well as in Japanese gardens and architecture, in order to highlight how it contributes to the creation of a 'mystical idea' where strong oppositions between existence and non-existence, subject and object, self and other are overcome. I will also explore the poetic expression of meditative detachment and discuss a number of reflections on death, suicide, time, memory and beauty in the Japanese books that Calvino read. While recognising that, in Japanese modernity, the aestheticisation of death has often played a paramount role within a broader project of essentialisation and conventional self-Orientalism, it is worth analysing the recurring dialectic between death and life, to illuminate peculiar traits of novels and short stories by Kawabata, Mishima, Akutagawa and Abe – to name but the most relevant case studies with respect to Calvino's literary explorations.

I argue that the penchant for a de-centralisation of the self, towards a dimension that encompasses different forms of life and death, is to a meaningful extent what Calvino retains from his Japanese readings. In the text from *Collezione di sabbia* describing his experience in a Japanese museum ('La spada e le foglie'), Calvino draws near the overcoming of immanence, and acknowledges

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[1] The relationship between Calvino and the structuralist movement has been explored by Bonsaver (1994), Gargiulo (2005), Donnarumma (2008) and Barsotti (2020). On Calvino and Barthes, see in particular Wallace (1998) and Musarra-Schrøder (2007). For comparative readings of Calvino and Borges, see Merrell (1997), Alfano (2001), Gracia et al. (2002) and Rinaldi (2014). On Calvino and Leopardi, see among others Polizzi (2010) and Pagani (2018).

how asceticism prompts a vital annihilation of one's material life. In *Palomar* this discourse is further elaborated, and the conclusive death of the main character assumes a specific relevance. Not only does this death point to a non-hierarchical human-world relationship, where single individuals' lives and deaths have equal weight in the overall balance of the universe, but it also illuminates a potential representation of what is usually considered as unrepresentable: that is, death as a void beneath life, as an 'absent structure' shaping the totality of things. Palomar's death thus represents a turning point that, although only affecting Calvino's last narrative work, reshapes our understanding of the author's entire trajectory towards the post-human hypothesis and his progressive departure from logocentrism. I shall interpret this turning point as an awakening with many traits in common with that form of materialistic synthesis that I locate in Zen *satori*.

5.1. Death in Calvino's works before 1976

The notion of death in Calvino's production is unexpectedly pervasive for an author who has often been associated with light and lightness. Even in the early books that critics tend to label as fantastic or targeting a young readership, death is neither banned nor censored. Conversely, the author experiments with different approaches to the end of human life: dry or detailed, realistic or poetic, disenchanted or pensive. In this section, I combine a diachronic analysis of Calvino's texts with a classification based on the lens through which death is depicted. I would classify Calvino's treatment of death into four main categories, according to the focus that is prevalent in each of them:

1. a historical and realistic description of death in the political context of the partisan struggle during the Resistance;
2. a cultural approach to death as a folkloric and fantastic agent;
3. a discussion of death in the context of an ecocritical concern, where it is mainly related to natural cycles, animal dynamics, and geological or cosmical ages;
4. a philosophical attitude towards the value of death in giving sense to life, but also in favouring the relevance of the macroscopic picture over single experiences.

If Calvino proves progressively involved in the meditative approach mentioned in the last point, it is precisely there that a proximity to Japanese lines of thought emerges as remarkable.

5.1.1. Death in historical and realistic accounts

The first (neo)realistic dimension characterises some short stories of the collection *Ultimo viene il corvo* and the novel *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*.[2] As Calvino wrote to his friend Eugenio Scalfari in 1945, he himself risked his life more than once during the Resistance, a period of violent political struggle that he later transfigured through narrative means. Refusing to swear allegiance to the Fascist Republic of Salò, he joined the Garibaldi brigade of partisans in spring 1944. As a result, his parents were taken

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[2] For the anomalous belonging of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* to the Neorealist framework, see McLaughlin (1998: 19).

hostage, and more than once threatened with death by the Fascists who were looking for Italo.[3] Calvino's earliest postwar stories, written immediately after Italy's liberation from Nazi-Fascism on the 25th of April 1945, draw on this experience of political commitment *vis-à-vis* death:

> La città si stendeva sotto di lui sul mare, la sua città ora a lui proibita, con odore di morte per lui nel giro dei suoi viali ('La stessa cosa del sangue': RR1, 226).

> Ogni giorno un certo numero di loro veniva smistato: alla vita o alla morte. [...] Anche per Diego e Michele l'alternativa era questa: libertà o morte. [...] Egli solo di tutti loro sapeva che quell'uomo per il corridoio camminava verso la morte ('Attesa della morte in un albergo': RR1, 230-233).

> Poi c'era il mistero di quella branda vuota e chiusa, agosto, aprile? dove stava certo nascosta qualcosa sperata o temuta, la pace, la morte [...] Era lo stesso calcolo che si riproponeva sempre. La fine della guerra e la morte. Ma sarebbe arrivata prima l'una o l'altra? ('Angoscia in caserma': RR1, 236-237).

While they were part of the first edition of *Ultimo viene il corvo* (1949), these stories were later removed from the collection of *Racconti* edited in 1958 and from the 1969 re-edition of *Ultimo viene il corvo*, as Calvino considered them to be 'stylistically incongrous' and 'too emotional in their evocation of the Resistance', risk of death included (McLaughlin 1998: 2).

As far as *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* is concerned, its plot is activated by Pin's improvised act of theft and concealment of an instrument of death, namely a P38 pistol. This element is telling of Calvino's ability to mix contrasting narrative codes such as those of neorealism and fairy tale (Re 1990). The transposition of death into a playful context is clearly expressed in the IX chapter:

> Invece ora Pelle è laggiù nella città proibita, con una grande testa di morto sul berretto nero, con armi nuove e bellissime, senza più paura di rastrellamenti, e sempre quella sua furia che gli fa sbattere gli occhietti arrossati dal raffreddore, umettarsi le labbra sbavate dall'arsura, furia contro di loro, i suoi compagni di ieri, furia senz'odio o rancore, così *come in un gioco tra compagni che ha per posta la morte* (RR1, 101 – emphasis mine).

But the novel does not lack a more profound awareness of the political value of death, too: still in chapter IX, the most political of the entire novel, Kim reflects on the need to choose one side, and to be ready to die for it:

> – [...] Gli uomini combattono tutti, c'è lo stesso furore in loro, cioè non lo stesso, ognuno ha il suo furore, ma ora combattono tutti insieme, tutti ugualmente, uniti. Poi c'è il Dritto, c'è Pelle... Tu non capisci quanto loro costi... Ebbene anche loro, lo stesso furore... Basta un nulla per salvarli o per perderli... Questo è il lavoro politico... Dare loro un senso... [...] Qui si combatte e si muore così, senza gridare evviva [...] Domani ci saranno dei morti, dei feriti. Loro lo sanno. Cosa li spinge a questa vita, cosa li spinge a combattere, dimmi? (RR1, 104).

As McLaughlin (1998: 19-20) points out, through similar reflections Calvino's account of the antifascist struggle avoids falling uncritically in the commonly-held division, sanctioned by the Communist Party, which represents the Resistance as a conflict between good and evil.

While recognising a neat distinction between right and wrong choices ('qui si è nel giusto, là nello sbagliato': RR1, 106), the author focuses on the common social and economic background of Fascists and partisans, and on their similar human condition when confronted with death. He thereby

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[3] In his letter to Scalfari (6.7.1945) Calvino writes: 'la mia vita in quest'ultimo anno è stato un susseguirsi di peripezie: sono stato partigiano per tutto questo tempo, sono passato attraverso una inenarrabile serie di pericoli e di disagi; ho conosciuto la galera e la fuga, sono stato più volte sull'orlo della morte. [...] Ne hanno passate parecchie anche loro [i genitori]: furono arrestati per un mese ciascuno come ostaggi; mio padre fu lì lì per essere fucilato sotto gli occhi di mia madre' (L, 150).

not only complicates the Manichean separation on which a book like Vittorini's *Uomini e no* is premised, but he foreshadows a sensible position that, in the different context of the Italian 'Years of Lead', Pier Paolo Pasolini will maintain in a polemical letter addressed, paradoxically, to Calvino – published on *Paese sera* on the 8th of July 1974:

> [I fascisti] non sono i fatali e predestinati rappresentanti del Male: *non sono nati per essere fascisti.* [...] È una atroce forma di disperazione e nevrosi che spinge un giovane a una simile scelta; e forse sarebbe bastata una sola piccola diversa esperienza nella sua vita, un solo semplice incontro, perché il suo destino fosse diverso (Pasolini 2000: 55).

It can thus be said that, in Calvino's idiosyncratic Neorealist narrative, reflections about death allow the author to build an original and particularly incisive portrait of the Italian political context, both of the present and of the years to come, and to understand the complexity of social mechanisms beyond existing generalising and apologetic schemes.

5.1.2. Death as a folkloric and fantastic agent

The fairy tale genre, indirectly already present in Calvino's first works, is fully embraced by the author in 1956, when he commits to the gigantic activity of collecting and rewriting Italian folktales. As per folkloric tradition (Lamers 1995), truculent and macabre aspects of death recur often in Calvino's *Fiabe italiane*, with death representing the triggering event of some storylines ('Il pappagallo', 'Il Principe canarino', 'Le tre casette'), the thematic kernel ('Re Crin', 'Il linguaggio degli animali', 'Il lupo e le tre ragazze'), or the tragic epilogue of some others ('Giovannin senza paura', 'Il paese dove non si muore mai'). Furthermore, it is also present in titles ('Il palazzo dell'Omo morto', 'Il braccio di morto', 'Giuanni Benforte che a cinquecento diede la morte') and traditional songs or nursery rhymes quoted in the folktales ('La barba del Conte', 'Il vaso di maggiorana').

Folklore's engagement with death is also epitomised by a dedicated card in every tarot tradition. It is thus present in the packs that Calvino plays with in *Il castello* and *La taverna dei destini incrociati* ('Difatti qui c'è l'*Asso di Spade*, c'è *Il Matto*, c'è *La Morte*': RR2, 594), even if the author makes his readers aware of the aura of superstition that surrounds, and almost conceals, a direct naming of death itself ('Arcano Numero Tredici (la dicitura *La Morte* non figura neppure nei mazzi di carte in cui tutti gli arcani maggiori portano scritto il loro nome)': RR2, 522). By introducing this card in his silent narratives, Calvino inevitably plays with several episodes of death, occurring in battlefields and cities, terrestrial or celestial kingdoms, but also in infernal dark contexts.

For instance, in the story of the knight who wins at cards the City of Death, Calvino symbolically addresses the difference between the death of single human beings and the incessant cycle of construction and destruction that governs the whole world. In the paradoxical atmosphere of the story, at first the City of Death is shut down, so that 'nessuno poteva più morire' (RR2, 541-542). But the abolition of its inhabitants' death unavoidably leads to a sterile, chaotic world. After a number of plot twists, it is the Goddess of Destruction who intervenes to advocate the uninterrupted, universal process of making and unmaking:

> – Fermatevi! La vostra contesa non ha senso. Sappiate che io sono la gioiosa Dea della Distruzione, che governa il disfarsi e il rifarsi ininterrotto del mondo. Nel massacro generale le carte si mescolano di continuo, e le anime non hanno sorte migliore dei corpi, i quali almeno godono il riposo della tomba. Una guerra senza fine agita l'universo fino alle stelle del firmamento e non risparmia gli spiriti né gli atomi. Nel pulviscolo

dorato sospeso nell'aria, quando il buio d'una stanza è penetrato da raggi di luce, Lucrezio contemplava battaglie di corpuscoli impalpabili, invasioni, assalti, giostre, vortici... (*Spade, Stella, Ori, Spade*) (RR2, 543)

As the wooden *tessera* in the symbolic chessboard of *Le città invisibili* seems to be void, but actually subsumes a number of forms of life, here Calvino addresses the phenomenon of the transmutation of life and death. In this phenomenon, it is possible to recognise a certain proximity to Borges (see in particular *Dreamtigers*), but Calvino's problematisation of the interconnection between life and death also bears witness to the common ground that he is destined to explore once in contact with Buddhist texts, where the overcoming of life-death dualism is central.

The two structuralist experiments taken into account show, beyond their rather cumbersome construction, that death has carried from the very origins of storytelling a narrative centrality and an inspirational power. A power that, for instance, Calvino implements often in his trilogy *I nostri antenati*, where he makes his young audience acquainted with death, by presenting it through very delicate and almost poetical images. Let it suffice to look at *Il barone rampante*. Here, Cosimo affectionately entertains his infirm mother by blowing soap bubbles around her deathbed. When one of these bubbles ends up on her face, immobile, Cosimo finally understands that she has exhaled her last breath. The funeral of Cosimo's father is also memorable, as the baron follows it from above, walking composedly from tree to tree. Other very incisive images capture other characters' deaths throughout the novel: Gian dei Brughi hanging from a branch, with Cosimo shooing away ravens from his corpse; Enea Silvio Carrega's severed head floating in the see and, most of all, Cosimo disappearing when a hot-air balloon flies over his trees. All these instances prove the prehensility of Calvino's storytelling, which cannot but consider death as a key part of that narration that is human life, as such in need of being recounted and adequately introduced to readers.

5.1.3. Death and natural cycles

In addition to the political, folkloric and imaginative relevance of death, Calvino addresses the theme against his ecocritical background, too. To describe the hardship of nature during the predatory development of industrialisation means, unavoidably, to face the lethal consequences of human behaviours on animals and plants. For instance, the number of dead animals that Marcovaldo encounters in his city adventures is sadly high: mice ('Villeggiatura in panchina', 'Dov'è più azzurro il fiume'), cats ('Un sabato di sole, sabbia e sonno', 'Il giardino dei gatti ostinati') and rabbits ('Il coniglio velenoso') are presented as the targeted victims of an unrelenting urbanisation. Proving his ability to give voice to non-human agents, Calvino even describes a rabbit's foreboding sense of death from the animal's point of view:

> La bestia s'era accorta di questi armeggii, di queste silenziose offerte di cibo. E sebbene avesse fame, diffidava. Sapeva che ogni volta che gli uomini cercavano d'attirarlo offrendogli cibo, capitava qualcosa d'oscuro e doloroso: o gli conficcavano una siringa nelle carni, o un bisturi, o lo cacciavano di forza in un giubbotto abbottonato, o lo trascinavano con un nastro al collo... E la memoria di queste disgrazie faceva una cosa sola col male che sentiva dentro di sé, col lento alterarsi d'organi che avvertiva, col presentimento della morte (RR1, 1120).

In *La formica argentina*, animal life is again jeopardised by human territoriality, and the paradoxical, but utterly realistic, situation is that of human beings feeling encircled by ants that are actually encircled by human urbanisation. Once more, Calvino addresses the question of animality in

order to denounce his own species' violent and deadly pervasiveness ('erano formiche morte, una soffice sabbia nerorossiccia di formiche morte tutte raggomitolate, ridotte a granelli in cui non si distingueva più né il capo né le zampe': RR1, 463). In *La speculazione edilizia*, the leaves and roots of plants are rather killed by a pressing real estate development ('Alle pareti dello scasso affioravano nodi di radici morte, chiocciole, lombrichi': RR1, 841). And, of course, human pollution cannot but backfire, with deadly clouds threatening human life, as in *La nuvola di smog* ('Così ogni giorno mi capitavano sott'occhio statistiche di malattie terribili, storie di pescatori raggiunti in mezzo all'oceano da nubi mortifere, cavie nate con due teste dopo esperimenti con l'uranio': RR1, 947).

In that peculiar scientific fiction that is *Le cosmicomiche*, death is investigated in both micro and macro contexts. The section 'Priscilla', that is sub-divided into 'Mitosi', 'Meiosi' and 'Morte', describes how asexual reproduction works, with death concerning nuclei and cells that have to disappear in order to give birth to new forms of life. Similarly, but on a wider scale, the short story 'I dinosauri', by recounting a species' extinction, addresses the continuity of life throughout the succession of different ages and destructions. Even if the focus is more scientific than philosophical here, Calvino progressively sees death as a moment of passage, rather than as an ending point, and consequently appears to be ready to identify this same view of the end of life in other cultural contexts, such as the Japanese.

5.1.4. Value of death on a macroscopic scale

A socio-philosophical approach to life, and death accordingly, is developed already in *La giornata d'uno scrutatore*. By spending an entire day in a mental institution, Amerigo Ormea reflects upon the sense of a supposed 'normal' life, on the value of planning beyond the present time, and a sense of death looms over his thoughts and feelings, given its proximity to the malady that pervades that place. An interesting reference to death is also given when the main character observes some photographs ('l'impazienza che prefigura la morte nelle fotografie dei vivi': RR2, 34): this recalls the short story 'L'avventura di un fotografo' (1955), where the problematic relationship between fugacity and perpetuity that photography involves is long discussed (RR2, 1099).[4] As often happens in Calvino's trajectory, a longstanding question is approached time and again, with each reflection adding a different vantage point or a step forward. In these instances, death is repeatedly interrogated starting from the relativist view that the photographic medium sparks off.

Even literature, in *La giornata d'uno scrutatore*, is presented as a misleading promise of immortality:

> Da tempo cercava d'allontanare da sé la letteratura, quasi vergognandosi della vanità d'aver voluto essere, in gioventù, scrittore. Era stato svelto a capire l'errore che c'è sotto: la pretesa d'una sopravvivenza individuale, senz'aver fatto nient'altro per meritarla che mettere in salvo un'immagine – vera o falsa – di sé. La letteratura delle persone gli pareva una distesa di lapidi di cimitero: quella dei vivi e quella dei morti (RR2, 49).

Amerigo, therefore Calvino, progressively discusses the hypothesis of outliving material death, with life and death being not individual, singular matters ('la pretesa d'una sopravvivenza individuale'), but rather supra-individual ones.

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[4] Calvino seems to anticipate here some of the points later discussed by Barthes in *La chambre claire* (1980): further proof of these two authors' common interests, with Japanese culture among them.

The series 'Le città e i morti' in *Le città invisibili* indeed represents an attempt at configuring several different – and differently viable – forms of death. Even if the descriptions of Melania, Adelma, Eusapia, Argia and Laudomia focus on material details, and death is described *sub specie urbium*, it is nevertheless interesting to identify in this creative process also a meditative approach to death as leading to a non-univocal dimension where it is no longer the individual self that matters. As I am going to analyse below, the visualisation of death in different forms is key in some Buddhist methods of meditation that aim to overcome the relevance of single egos (Nishitani 1982: 20-21). And it is particularly noticeable that what Calvino stresses, in his oriental/invisible cities, is precisely an idea of continuity beyond contingent deaths ('La popolazione di Melania si rinnova: i dialoganti muoiono a uno a uno e intanto nascono quelli che prenderanno posto a loro volta nel dialogo, chi in una parte chi nell'altra': RR2, 426).

Given Calvino's own disposition to meditate on death's blurred contours, when addressed by philosophical means, I am now going to address the elements of Japanese tradition that he came in contact with. This investigation aims to add an element of clarification to his engagement with dialectics between life and death, fleetingness and permanence of being: these dialectics increasingly characterise his production over time and, as I argue, grow to maturity in the texts that Calvino composes after his Japanese travels.

5.2. Death in Japanese tradition

The seemingly-contradictory but highly-influential (non-)centrality of death in Japanese Buddhism, which is key in Zen, can be retraced in several branches of Japanese tradition. The theme is often described in light of a 'mystical idea', according to which life does not have a direct value but rather realises its value through death (Van Bragt 1982: xxxiii), and of a conception of the self as 'formless' and surviving in the universe, regardless of single individuals' demises (Shimizu 2009: 157). As Cornyetz (2007: 33) argues, this gesture towards universalism, which has often gone hand in hand with an aesthetic disinterest in society and politics, actually is to be read as a specific modern construction, 'indebted to a biological determinism that shares a certain naturalized structuration with fascist ethics'.

Watsuji (1988: 10) is among the most influential advocates of this construction: 'men die; their world changes; but through this unending death and change, man lives and his world continues. It continues incessantly through ending incessantly. In the individual's eyes, it is a case of an "existence for death", but from the standpoint of society it is an "existence for life"'. By transposing this concept from a social to a universal dimension, what emerges is an all-encompassing principle that underlies life and death, growth and decay, joy and sorrow, light and darkness (Ackermann 1997: 36-53), but also subject and object, self and other, inner and outer, existence and non-existence. Although ideologically constructed, it is worth analysing the 'boundless self' entailing 'disengagements from the shackling world of [all] dichotomies' (Lebra 1992: 114), in order to underscore a trait of Japanese tradition which could have been particularly apparent to Calvino, via his literary and physical 'walks in the Japanese woods'.

Indeed, if a unique Japanese conception of the world can ever be identified, this dwells in the process of overcoming oppositions that already *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihongi* (720) bear witness to,

according to Pelzel (1986).[5] A continuity that, while fusing life and death, also fuses gods and humans, nature and culture, thus lending some interesting coordinates to contemporary post-human discourses. A continuity that characterises both Shinto and Buddhism (Sueki 2018: 77; Maraini 2000: 100), that does not cease to influence Japanese modern literature, and that I shall identify in Calvino's production following his Japanese readings and travels.

5.2.1. Overcoming death in Zen Buddhism

In the modern philosophy of Japanese thinker Minakata Kumagusu (1867-1941), the human eye is said to see things beyond their outward appearance, since 'what might seem alive could be dead and what appears to be dead might in fact be alive' (Sueki 2018: 116). This blurred distinction between life and its opposite fruitfully calls forth the premises upon which post-humanism is based, as the chapter about perspective has already investigated (see § 1.3.1.). Suffice to say that Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* starts off with a similar consideration:

> Who can forget those moments when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive? As, for example, when an arabesque in the pattern of a carpet is revealed to be a dog's tail, which, if stepped upon, could lead to a nipped ankle? Or when we reach for an innocent looking vine and find it to be a worm or a snake? When a harmlessly drifting log turn out to be a crocodile? (Ghosh 2016: 3)

An opening of human perspectives is central to many philosophical and religious discourses in Japan, as seen in the first chapter (see § 1.2.). Moreover, integrated views of human and non-human beings, as well as of different forms and degrees of life, invite us to take into account the position of death in Japanese tradition.

The main step on this path is Zen. In his book on *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani describes two Zen methods of meditation revolving around death. One is concerned with death as an external, inescapable agent, which is known as the 'death's head contemplation': 'we can look at the living as they walk full of health down the Ginza and see, in double exposure, a picture of the dead' (Nishitani 1982: 50-51). A play of perspectives unveils broader and deeper awareness of death as essential to everybody's life. The other method involves a more direct and personal experience, where the person becomes 'completely like a dead man, unaware even of the presence of [one's] own person'. This second method aims at a 'Great Enlightenment', where 'having been completely dead, you had suddenly revived': Nishitani (1982: 20-21) singles out a passage from the eighteenth-century *Sermons* of Takusui, but this meditative exercise has often been referred to throughout time (see, for instance, Rosenberg 2001: 17). In both cases, 'absolute life-*sive*-death, death-*sive*-life becomes manifest from moment to moment in "human" life' (ivi: 75). With life acquiring value through death and death acquiring value through life, there is a 'mystical idea' arising, according to which all material and non-material things – 'flowers, stones, stellar nebulae, galactic systems, life and death – become present as bottomless realities' (ivi: 34).

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[5] John Pelzel (1986) identifies in those texts the 'lack of opposition between gods and humans, life and death, mortal and immortal, order and disorder, blessedness and misery, wild and tamed, nature and culture. Between these, there is no gulf, no confrontation, no dominance, no contradistinction; instead, one finds continuity, compromise, fusion, and duplication' (in Lebra and Lebra 1986: 4).

In a passage from *Zen in the Art of Archery* (English translation: 1953), which I shall quote at some length on account of its presence in Calvino's library,[6] Eugen Herrigel makes clear the extent to which this view of death is key in *bushidō*, the ethos of the *samurai* to which Calvino refers in 'La spada e le foglie', analysed below:

> Years of unceasing meditation have taught him [the *samurai*] that life and death are at the bottom the same and belong to the same stratum of fact. He no longer knows what fear of life and terror of death are. He lives – and this is thoroughly characteristic of Zen – happily enough in the world, but ready at any time to quit it without being in the least disturbed by the thought of death. It is not for nothing that the Samurai have chosen for their truest symbol the fragile cherry blossom. Like a petal dropping in the morning sunlight and floating serenely to earth, so must the fearless detach himself from life, silent and inwardly unmoved (Herrigel 1953: 103).

Other forms of Buddhism envisage a similar way out of the habitual alternation of life and death. But if, for instance in Amidism, this gives rise to the construction of 'good death rituals', Zen rather defuses any attribution of particular importance to the moment of death, that is seen, as stated previously, as a 'bottomless reality'.

Once being and non-being are supposed to be together at the same time, and no-self is conceived as the true self, as in Zen terminology (Pawle 2009: 47-48), the relevance of the death of the ego is utterly downplayed, in view of a conception of constant 're-birth' and 're-death' within a broader universe which always survives. This is why an environmental discourse is so easily connectable to Buddhist views and forms of expression. Maraini (1959: 282) underlines that this position, that 'Zen shares with most schools of Buddhism, and a large body of oriental philosophy', dovetails with 'the overcoming of all illusory dualism': not only self and non-self, life and death, but also good and evil, matter and spirit, form an indivisible whole. I posit that Palomar's meditations on death gradually draw near a conception that has much in common with this overcoming of fixed coordinates in Zen Buddhism.

5.2.2. Aesthetics of death in Japanese gardens and architecture

The attained awareness of the true essence of death, that Zen identifies with 'enlightenment' or *satori*, can beget different outcomes, as discussed in the chapter about time (see § 4.2.3.). Drawing on Maraini again:

> One of the best aids to the merging, the sublimation, of the self into the all is held to be a garden, which is far more important than treatises, syllogisms, or sacred books. Hence some of the best minds of Asia devoted themselves to garden design. During the Heian period [794-1185] gardens were conceived as places in which things were intended to happen, but those of the Kamakura [1192-1333] and Muromachi [1333-1603] centuries were designed to have symbolic value. Their size was reduced, the lake became a pool, or its place was taken by white sand as a symbol of water. The whole was arranged to be looked at from a few vantage points at which you stood and meditated (Maraini 1959: 282).

Zen gardens thus assume a specific importance when considered in light of the Zen view of life and death, and in respect of what Calvino makes of them in his travelogue. With their eternal spring, they are utopian places that at the same time conceal death and are made out of it: all their elements perish

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[6] Calvino owns the French translation of this book – Herrigel, Eugen. 1958. *Le Zen dans l'art chevalresque du tir à l'arc* (Lyon: Paul Derain) –, that was originally published in German in 1848. I am quoting from the English translation.

but single deaths do not change the whole (Raveri 2006: 56-59). They symbolise the cycle of never-ending life and never-ending death that Zen, but also Tendai and Shingon Buddhism, are premised on.[7]

If Zen gardens are supposed to suggest this teaching to a wide number of possible beneficiaries, it is because death, similarly to love, is one of those 'incomparable' but also banal experiences that happen to everybody (O'Meara 2012: 149). This is why a Zen master like Hakuin can exclaim that 'there is no birth-and-death from which one has to escape, nor is there any supreme knowledge after which one has to strive!' (Watts 1990: 145).[8] And yet, according to a widely-known cultural stereotype, *samurai* are traditionally considered as embodying this form of self-annulment, since 'those who do not know the power of rigorous and protracted meditation cannot judge of the self-conquest it makes possible' (Herrigel 1953: 106).

Zen is sustained by an apparent contradiction: an easy message can actually be attained solely by those disciples who closely follow their masters, who, on the other hand, do not refer to any canonical texts. Not only does this aspect cause a strong personalisation of teaching and doctrine – to which Calvino refers in 'La spada e le foglie' ('ricordo che il perfetto Samurai... che i maestri forgiatori di spade... [...] L'allievo d'un grande fabbro di spade...': S, 590) –, but it also entails an almost complete exclusion of words from the Zen practice – which brings us back to the centrality of silence analysed previously. Indeed, *satori* is not explicable by means of common language, which is subverted also in *zazen*, the typically Zen 'seated meditation' where practitioners focus on their consciousnesses by revolving around *kōan* – non-solvable questions or non-sense stories, dialogues or statements that are meant to provoke doubts on one's own rationality (Tollini 2018: 667-668). As Sueki (2018: 45) clearly illustrates, 'as long as we are using words, no matter how carefully we choose them, their meaning is limited. And once we transcend the limits of words, we have entered the realm of the experience of enlightenment that words do not cover. Put in Wittgensteinian terms, even if we tried to speak about what cannot be spoken of, it would be nonsense; it is something that can only be experienced, not expressed'.[9]

In Zen *kōan*, as well as in Zen architecture, what emerges is the centrality of *mu*, the 'negative', which destroys, nullifies, leads towards death, but only in order to reconstruct, to pave the way for a renaissance marked by totality and by a broad harmony among things. Everything moves within and towards *mu* at the same time (Filippucci 2006: 280): it represents the 'absent structure' I discussed in the chapter about void, and subsumes the material connotation of death within a metaphysical framework, where death is so pervasive as to become intangible. A contemporary interpretation of this overturning of coordinates has been proposed by Japanese architects Arakawa and Gins, whose art Calvino was acquainted with (see 'Per Arakawa': S, 2001-2005). As Weller (2003: 47) analyses, their

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[7] As Raveri (2006: 136) illustrates, life, death, re-birth and re-death are part of a relentless, therefore rather distressing process, that Indian Buddhism defines as *samsara*. Accepted by Taoism and Shintoism, that have always granted worldly life an intrinsic value, the doctrine of *samsara* is translated into the idea of a circular time and of impermanence of things *in this life*. This very existence bears within itself the absolute value of a higher truth since –as Zen, Tendai and Shingon masters teach – every element of the universe, in their very transience, is already enlightened. See also Tollini (2018: 639-644).

[8] O'Meara (2012: 162, n. 72) notes that Barthes mentions Hakuin's *satori* in *Le Neutre* (27 May).

[9] Calvino too refers to Wittgenstein with regards to a subversion of language. See, for instance, an interview published in 1982: 'Il discorso che facevo sul descrivere e sulla superifice si collega anche a tutta la problematica del dicibile e del non dicibile, a quella della crisi della parola che è stata esplorata dagli autori che vengono sempre citati quando si parla di queste cose, come Hofmannsthal e Wittgenstein' (SNiA, 510; see also SNiA, 624; 641).

texts, drawing, installations, and projects for houses, gardens, and cities have been gathered in a sizeable book titled, quite eloquently, *We Have Decided Not to Die* (Guggenheim Museum, 1997). All their works have pointed to the disorientation of users as a prerequisite to free them from conventional sensory experiences and common perceptions. Among the coordinates that they have variously destabilised, there are those of in and out, up and down, left and right, mind and body and, ultimately, life and death. In *Architectural Body* they state as follows:

> If we overflow with a sentient tentativeness then transcendence is here and now and can and should be constructively and crisis-ethically continually reworked – the spiritual and the critical become one (Gins and Arakawa 2002: 81-82)

Their path in the effortless effort 'to not to die' thus involves the construction of an all-over, immanent awareness of death (Bearn 2010: 44), which speaks of the potentiality of reinterpetations of traditional Zen features in modern and contemporary Japan, to which Calvino was not deaf.

5.2.3. Death's silence and void in Barthes and Borges

Alongside the relevance of silence in what Barthes (1982: 94) defines the 'exempion of Death's meaning, of Death as meaning', I shall briefly refer to the bond that links death to the void and to dreams, too. This twofold path allows us to single out the relationship with Buddhism of two Western authors who represent an utterly important mediation for Calvino's acquaintance with Buddhism and Japan: Roland Barthes himself and Jorge Luis Borges. Drawing on Jay Prosser's analysis, it is interesting to underline how Barthes' late interest in photography as 'a reality beyond words', 'a revelation of death', is strongly connected to the presence of Buddhist interests 'in the personal yet elliptical turn Barthes' work took in his last five years' (Prosser 2004: 212). When the author, in *La chambre claire* – a book that Barthes himself gave to Calvino with a signed dedication[10] –, looks at that void beneath form that only photography seems able to grasp,[11] and that is 'hooked into death' (ivi: 216), he does so in light of the void which Zen has long pointed to by means of its traditional awareness of death.

On the other hand Borges, with whom Calvino shares a wide range of interests and literary choices, investigates at length the negation of the self that many forms of Buddhist meditation entail. He does so in *Qué es el budismo* (1976), a pamphlet that he writes together with Alicia Jurado, probably prompted – in this research as in his creation of *haiku* and *tanka* – by the Japanese origins of his last partner Maria Kodama (Tentori Montalto 2006: 7-10). Borges and Jurado deal with a daily acquaintance with non-being in readiness for Nirvana (Borges 2006: 64), and with the need to conceive the universe as illusory, since to live is to dream (ivi: 69). This instance exemplifies the extent to which not only can religious reflections influence creativity, but also at times one's own artistic disposition leads to a particular approach towards religion. This is what happens with Borges' typical fascination with the dimension of dreams and death, by means of which he interprets Buddhist Nirvana.

Calvino appreciates Borges' vision of a cosmic, almost divine totality, which is often evoked by erotic images, as in Kawabata's and Tanizaki's works:

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[10] 1980. *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard – Cahiers du cinéma). The dedication reads as follows: 'à Italo Calvino | si prèsent dans | bien des passages'.
[11] We are reminded here of similar reflections in Calvino's own 'L'avventura di un fotografo'.

> Jorge Luis Borges ha espresso il trasporto amoroso in racconti dove un'immagine di donna si collega a un simbolo di totalità cosmica (vedi *Lo Zahir* e *L'Aleph*) raggiungendo per via intellettuale una dimensione emotiva che per la solita via della mimesi decadentistica delle sensazioni non ci si sognerebbe neanche (SNiA, 88).

On his part, Calvino tends to blend Borges' metaphysical vision with a more concrete one. Even in a book like *Le cosmicomiche*, where a cosmic inspiration is at stake, science is not completely transcended in a religious fashion: if anything, it faces a fantastic and comic transfiguration. A metaphysical conclusion, and a reconnection of this dimension to the world of experience, is what characterises *Palomar*, as well, as I am going to argue later in this chapter.

The triangle connecting Calvino to his interpretation of Japanese tradition on the one hand, and to Borges on the other, is highlighted in an interview released in 1979. Here Francesca Salvemini perceptively reads a passage of Calvino's Japanese incipit in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* in light of Borges' *Funes el memorioso*:

> Salvemini: «*Funes il memore ricordava non solo ogni foglia di ogni albero di ogni montagna, ma ognuna delle volte che l'aveva percepita o immaginata*». Tu hai scritto nel tuo libro [*Se una notte*] *un intero racconto* ['Sul tappeto di foglie illuminato dalla luna'] *su una frase che assomiglia a questa di Borges. La tua frase però è questa:* «*Avrei voluto separare la sensazione di ogni singola foglia di ginkgo dalla sensazione di tutte le altre, ma mi domandavo se sarebbe stato possibile*». *Nel tempo della rappresentazione è possibile. E nel tempo?*

> Calvino: Una memoria che si fissa su ogni singolo fatto non può concettualizzare; l'intelligenza richiede la capacità di dimenticare i casi singoli per poter trarre qualche regola dall'esperienza. Questo è il senso del racconto di Borges *Funes, o della memoria*: un uomo dalla memoria troppo minuziosa è una specie di cretino perché è incapace di astrazione. Dall'altro lato ci sono tanti che non sanno parlare né vedere né vivere se non in termini astratti. [...] La letteratura dovrebbe essere questo: rendere l'unicità di ogni singola foglia per avvicinarsi a capire cos'è la foglia. Avvicinarsi: per questo la letteratura non ha fine ma è in questo che è indispensabile, per questa modesta indicazione di metodo (SNiA, 311-312).

Calvino advances here one of his most compelling definitions of literature, and he does so by merging Borges and Japanese meditation (indirectly evoked through his fictitious Japanese incipit): in both cases, a material, direct knowledge of things is the premiss on which abstraction should be, if not achieved, at least attempted.

5.2.4. Death and Japanese poetic expression

Zen meditative detachment does not result in nihilism, but rather 'leads to a higher affirmation, through an aesthetic and religious insight into facts in their emptiness in the positive sense of their concrete particular suchness' (Odin 2001: 148). Nature is enjoyed in a disinterested, nonattached way, that finds its best form of expression in the Zen (and previously Chàn) death poem, also known as 'parting-with-life' verse. In *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Suzuki (1988: 82) illustrates this close bond between death and poetic expression in Japan: 'the Japanese have been taught and trained to be able to find a moment's leisure to detach themselves from the intensest excitements in which they may happen to be placed. Death is the most serious affair absorbing all one's attention, but the cultured Japanese think they ought to be able to transcend it and view it objectively'. Similar generalisations bear witness to that penchant for self-essentialisation that had its climax in the 'symposium on modernity' analysed previously (see § 4.2.4.), but had its repercussions well beyond the 1940s. As such, they can indeed prove useful to illuminate some traits of the traditional, canonised poetic form of *haiku*.

Taking into account, as usual, the collection *Cento haiku*, death is there mentioned in more or less direct references:

> Mezzodì di piena estate;
> la morte ci spia,
> gli occhi socchiusi
> > (Iida Dakotsu, in Iarocci 2014: 88).

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

I mention the last *haiku* aware that to identify the end of the day with the end of life is a metaphorical – albeit simple – interpretation, which pertains more to a Western sensitivity than to the original character of the poem. An Italian reader, in particular, unavoidably recalls Salvatore Quasimodo's poem 'Ognuno sta solo sul cuor della terra | trafitto da un raggio di sole | ed è subito sera' (1930). I find important to mention this apparently similar poem in order to stress what actually is a substantial difference from the Japanese poetical disposition: Japanese poetry refers to nature in its own right, whereas for Quasimodo natural elements are a means through which he represents the human condition. In this different value of nature, either overriding the human centrality or being overshadowed by it, I shall posit Calvino's reflections in *Palomar* as belonging to the former hypothesis, in a further proof of his proximity to Japanese poetic constructions.

To support this view, it is instructive to remember that Calvino explicitly indicates Eastern poetry as one of his main reference points when writing *Palomar*: 'Forse il mio progetto si collega, anche se da lontano, a certe cose della poesia orientale: penso al rapporto con la natura della letteratura giapponese' (SNiA, 612). The very structure of his late prose draws near the poetic form significantly, as Calvino remarks:

> In fondo la struttura di questi pezzi potrebbe essere anche quella di una poesia. I poeti hanno sempre scritto in questa maniera: guardano un paesaggio, provano un sentimento, riflettono. *Palomar* è nato anche un po' dalla mia invidia per i poeti, dal rimpianto di non aver specializzato la mia sensibilità e le mie capacità espressive nella via della poesia lirica (SNiA, 619).

> Non sono mai stato uno scrittore «lungo». Forse sono un poeta mancato. Il mio modello è sempre stato la concisione della poesia, la densità di senso concentrata in poche righe (SNiA, 644).

Tadahiko Wada, Japanese translator of many of Calvino's works, with a poetical background himself, adds a further critical support to the hypothesis of a relevant influence of Japanese poetry on Calvino's mature production: interviewed about his translations, he indicates *Palomar* as the book where the author's exactitude and his careful lexical choices reach a poetical quintessence:

> Tutt'ora Calvino è l'autore più difficile nella traduzione. [...] l'esattezza', la cristallizzazione della scelta delle parole di Calvino... [...] Calvino è il più poeta di tutti. [...] Come si può capire da *Palomar*. L'ultimo suo 'romanzo', tra virgolette, con cui si è avvicinato di più alla poesia. Questo è il traguardo che aveva sempre in mente Calvino durante la sua vita, secondo me (Wada 2018).

5.2.5. Reflections about death in Japanese prose

Taking into account Calvino's selection of novels, I shall not focus on the many instances where death appears as a biographic or narrative event[12] – even if some of these instances introduce the reader to peculiarly Japanese details related to death, such as long-standing capital punishments[13] or Buddhist after-death rituals[14]. I shall rather highlight the frequency of direct reflections about death in contexts that are otherwise narrative, in order to understand how novels bear witness to the Buddhist approach to death that I analysed above (see § 5.2.1.). Considering that Calvino's acquaintance with Japanese culture was heavily mediated by literature, to map out the relevance of death in the books that he read is key to postulate a Japanese source of influence in Calvino's own treatment of death in his later books.

In Kawabata's Nobel speech, of which Calvino owned the English translation titled *Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself,* death serves the author's characteristic process of essentialisation of Japanese culture. Referring to a friend of his, an avant-garde painter who died young, Kawabata states:

> 'He seems to have said over and over that there is no art superior to death, that to die is to live'. I could see, however, that for him, born in a Buddhist temple and educated in a Buddhist school, *the concept of death was very different from that in the West.* 'Among those who give thoughts to things, is there one who does not think of suicide?' (Kawabata 1981: 61-62 – emphasis mine)

As Miyoshi (1974: 114) notes, in a book such as Kawabata's *The Sound of the Mountain* 'dissolution and death are everywhere', and the shadow of death characterises *Snow Country* as well, according to Akiyama Masayuki (1989: 198). Moreover, other books by Kawabata are not only informed by the presence of death or by more or less disguised death drives – as *The House of Sleeping Beauties,* according to Cornyetz (2007: 57) – but openly discuss it, through the voice of their narrators or the point of view of their characters.[15] Boardman (1971: 100-101) goes as far as to say that it would not be possible to appreciate the true poetry of Kawabata's prose without realising how his meditations on death, time and memory shape the whole context of allusive connections of images and phrases in his books.

In a passage of *Snow Country,* Shimamura, the male protagonist, reflects on the connection between the change of seasons and the death of insects, from a non-human perspective that recalls *Palomar*'s animalist digressions:

> He spent much of his time watching insects in their death agonies. Each day, as the autumn grew colder, insects died on the floor of his room. Stiff-winged insects fell on their backs and were unable to get to their

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[12] To refer to but two instances among many others, in Kawabata's *The House of the Sleeping Beauties,* one of the young virgins dies in her drug-induced sleep. In *Koto,* by the same author, the protagonists of the novel, two twins, are split after their natural parents' death.

[13] Mishima Yukio, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion:* '"How do you suppose they managed to keep peace and order during the war if it wasn't by staging public exhibitions of violent death? The reason that they stopped having public executions was, I gather, because they were afraid it would make people bloodthirsty [...]"' (Mishima 1959: 125).

[14] Mishima Yukio, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion:* 'It was the anniversary of Father's death. [...] Since it was difficult for me to go home because of my compulsory labor, [Mother] thought of coming to Kyoto herself, bringing along Father's mortuary tablet, so that Father Dosen might chant some sutras before it, if only for a few minutes, on the anniversary of his old friend's death' (Mishima 1959: 73-74). Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *Naomi:* 'When the seventh-day observances were over, I entrusted the other arrangements to my aunt and uncle' (Tanizaki 1985: 203).

[15] See, for instance, *Thousand Cranes:* '"She died because of herself. If you say it was you who made her die, then it was I even more. If I have to blame anyone, it should be myself. But it only makes her death seem dirty, when we start feeling responsible and having regrets. Regrets and second thoughts only make the burden heavier for the one who has died"' (Kawabata 1981: 75).

feet again. A bee walked a little and collapsed, walked a little and collapsed. It was a quiet death that came with the change of seasons. Looking closely, however, Shimamura could see that the legs and feelers were trembling in the struggle to live. For such a tiny death, the empty eight-mat room seemed enormous. [...] A moth on the screen was still for a very long time. It too was dead, and it fell to the earth like a dead leaf. Occasionally a moth fell from the wall. Taking it up in his hand, Shimamura would wonder how to account for such beauty (Kawabata 1960: 109).

The death of such small animals can be read as symbolising and prefiguring a number of human deaths that occur later on in the book. However, the microscopic interest that insects raise relativises human scales ('For such a tiny death, the empty eight-mat room seemed enormous': ibid.), and speaks of an interconnection among different living beings which chimes with, and potentially corroborates, Calvino's post-human mature research.

To go back to specifically human approaches to death, the idea and practice of suicide casts a shadow over many Japanese authors' works and biographies. It thus requires to be addressed in order to deepen a broad understanding of the centrality of death in the books that Calvino read, and of his own refunctionalisation of such theme. In the essay titled 'Eyes in their Last Extremity', Kawabata declares neither to admire nor to sympathise with the idea of suicide ('However alienated one may be from the world, suicide is not a form of enlightenment. However admirable he may be, the man who commits suicide is far from the realm of the saint', quoted in Kawabata 1981: 62). Nerverthless, on the 16th of April 1972 he was found dead in his apartment from gas inhalation, at the age of 73. The absence of any suicide note has led many – his widow included – to consider the writer's death as accidental. Van C. Gessel (1993: 192), in his biographical account, refers to Kawabata's death as 'less an act of volition than the ultimate separation from life that had been his lifelong literary theme'. But among the many theories that have been proposed as to his potential motivations for killing himself, Keene (2005: 26) advances the shock caused by the suicide of his friend and *sodale* Mishima Yukio in 1970.

In *Patriotism* (1960), Mishima specifically fashions a detailed (albeit fictional) account of the double-suicide of a young officer and his wife following the failed right-wing *coup* of 1936,[16] but a neo-fascist erotics of suicide appears in many of his works, as well as his own life – as Cornyetz (2007: 113) discusses. To name but the most significant example, *Runaway Horses*, the second volume of Mishima's tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility*, revolves around a group of students turning to terrorism to pursue their ideals of patriotism and loyalty to the spirit of the nation. The novel ends with the suicide of the main character, Isao, as an ultimate confession of faith to the emperor and extreme 'deed of purity', as Noguchi (1984: 442) defines it. The critic also points to the 'congruence between Isao's life and the five years leading to Mishima's death at Ichigaya in 1970', thus reading *Runaway Horses* as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (ibid.). Indeed, Mishima's neofascist ideals, calling to resurrect the emperor's figure in its original quasi-divine majesty, culminated in his own attempted *coup d'état* in 1970 and public suicide by *seppuku* (ritual disembowelment).

Mishima's blatantly anachronistic embodiment of one of the most characteristic features of *samurai* culture speaks of a deliberate aesthetic construction of modern Japaneseness, which builds up

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[16] The double suicide of a military figure and his wife is not uncommon throughout Japanese history. Even Barthes refers to it, in a rather idealising fashion, in his *Empire of Signs*: 'General Nogi, victor over the Russians at Port Arthur, has himself photographed with his wife; their emperor having just died, they have decided to commit suicide the following day. [...] General Nogi's wife has decided that Death was the meaning, that she and Death were to be dismissed at the same time, and that therefore, were it to be in her countenance itself, there was to be no "mention" of it' (Barthes 1982: 91-94).

in relation to premodern traits. Similar to Kawabata and Tanizaki, Mishima idealises specific Japanese traditions and engages in a sheer mechanism of conventional self-Orientalism – despite his concomitant interest in European literature and continental philosophy. He does so in his own writing, but also – as Cornyetz (2007: 118) points out – in his ruminations on classical texts. For instance, after reading *Hagakure* by Jōchō, a guide for *bushidō* (lit. 'the way of warriors', the *samurai* way of life), Mishima remarked as follows in his text *The Way of the Samurai*:[17]

> Absolute loyalty to the [*sic*] death must be worked at every day. One begins each day in quiet meditation, imagining one's final hour and various ways of dying – by bow and arrow, gun, spear, cut down by the sword, swallowed up by the sea, jumping into a fire, being struck by lightening, crushed in an earthquake, falling off a cliff, death from illness, sudden death – and begins the day by dying (Mishima 1977: 164).

In this book, Mishima offers practical advice on how to adapt *Hagakure in Modern Life*, as explained in the subtitle. Given that Calvino refers to *samurai* culture in 'La spada e le foglie' – analysed below – Mishima's work acquires a particular relevance in the context of Calvino's own understanding of conventional Japanese modernity, in programmatic dialogue with premodernity.

In general, Mishima's novels rest on a constant preoccupation with death, which is often interlaced with love and at times takes the form of a proper 'obsession', in parallel with the author's 'obsession with beauty', to refer to Mikolai Melanowicz's analysis (1992: 6-10). As Seidensticker (1970: 137-138) recalls, 'Mishima has said that the Japanese have taken the love suicide to heights no one else has reached, and that it is one of their principal claims to what their "image" abroad has so frequently denied them, originality'. Mishima took on this narrative concern himself, by adding many forms of originality to the dyad love-death. In *The Sound of Waves* the idea of a double love suicide is assuredly rejected by the protagonist, who is rather inclined to an uncomplicated and vital conception of love and life.[18] But this is more an exception that proves the rule of Mishima's recurring interest.

The protagonist of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* sets the titular temple on fire and later attempts suicide out of a sentiment of love, however insane, for the enchanting building. In this novel, death is more than once introduced as a theme discussed by the narrating 'I': it is put in relation with war,[19] with spiritual transformation,[20] madness,[21] the transience of youth and the immortality of beauty[22]

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[17] Calvino owned the 1983 Italian translation of this text: *La via del Samurai*, translated by Pier Francesco Paolini and introduced by Francesco Saba Sardi (Milan: Bompiani).

[18] Mishima Yukio, *The Sound of Waves*: 'Double suicide then? Even on this island there had been lovers who took that solution. But the boy's good sense repudiated the thought, and he told himself that those others had been selfish persons who thought only of themselves. Never once had he thought about such a thing as dying; and, above all, there was his family to support' (Mishima 1994: 131).

[19] Mishima Yukio, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*: 'I was conscious, under my ugly, stubborn forehead, that the world of death which my father ruled and the world of life occupied by young people were being brought together by the mediation of war' (Mishima 1959: 40). 'The path along which he was going to run in his half-length military boots revealed the precise quality of death in battle; it had a form of disorder that reminded me of the crimson glow at dawn' (ivi: 88).

[20] 'The death of the priest in a country temple is a peculiar business. It is peculiar because it is too pertinent. [...] It is as though he has acquitted himself too faithfully of his duty; as though the man who went about teaching others how to die has given a public demonstration of the act and by some sort of mistake has actually died himself. [...] This was the first time I had been confronted by a situation like this in which a spirit is transformed by death into mere physical substance' (Mishima 1959: 50-51).

[21] '"Don't you think there's some other way to bear life?" "No, I don't. Apart from that, there's only madness or death"' (Mishima 1959: 238).

[22] 'Since I had resolved to set fire to the Golden Temple, I had returned to the fresh, undefiled condition of my youth and I felt that it would now be all right for me to come across the people and the things that I had met at the beginning

– the final blaze being an attempt at bringing the building back to the realm of mortal things, while liberating its transcendent beauty. *Spring Snow* closes with its main character's death for love, and with the assertion that beauty matters more than death.[23] This prepares the ground for the development of the tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility* – of which *Spring Snow* is the first volume – that revolves around that very character's reincarnation in other lives and other stories.

The possibility of different forms of life after and beyond death, which Calvino acknowledges in the last text of *Palomar* ('Come imparare a essere morto'), characterises the theory of a 'pluralistic universe' advanced by Himiko in *A Personal Matter* by Ōe, as well as a number of short stories by Akutagawa. In 'After Death', for instance, Akutagawa describes an oneiric experience in which he dreams to live after death, whereas 'In a Grove' describes the murder of a man through different points of view. Drawing on the latter, Kurosawa directed his movie *Rashōmon*. Here the climax is reached when the *reibai* (the witch) is invaded by the spirit of the dead man, who provides his account of his own murder: a game of unfixed perspectives on the undecipherable condition of being dead. In general, as Colleoni (1968: 75) maintains, Akutagawa's dead are characterised by the same harrowing pains of living beings: a paradoxical status which Calvino takes into account, too, as I am going to argue below.

As Kawabata recalls in his Nobel lecture, Akutagawa commited suicide in 1927, aged thirty-five, and left a suicide note that discussed the mutual interaction between death and beauty, in which he proves well aware of the fundamental contradiction at the core of his potent temptation to kill himself:

> I am living in a world of morbid nerves, clear and cold as ice... I do not know when I will summon up the resolve to kill myself. But nature is for me more beautiful than it has ever been before. I have no doubt that you will laugh at the contradiction, for here I love nature even when I am contemplating suicide. But nature is beautiful because it comes to my eyes in their last extremity (quoted in Kawabata 1981: 62).

It is especially in 'Cogwheels', a short story that has been published posthumously, that Akutagawa represents his physical and psychic malady. The autobiographic narrating 'I' is resolutely determined to declare himself defeated by a number of invisible enemies populating his daily life. As Kurachi Tsuneo (1991: 266) points out, the text is woven with signs and symptoms of death, among which the fatal gear of a 'translucent cog' appears obsessively in the protagonist's visual field, representing an obscure Force which dominates life. If aesthetic creativity and natural beauty seem to offer promises of peace from time to time, similar to what Akutagawa describes in his suicide note, they unavoidably prove ephemeral and delusive, ultimately falling back into the character's death.

Dwelling on another conclusion intersecting the theme of suicide, Abe's *The Box Man* ends enigmatically with the protagonist contemplating jumping in the void ('I took another step, and suddenly right before me there was nothing, and I could see the roadbed twenty or twenty-five feet below. [...] If I tried taking another step further, what would happen? I was curious': Abe 2001: 177), and at the very last with the 'siren of an approaching ambulance' (ivi: 178). Andrew Hock Soon Ng (2009: 322) has advanced two possible interpretations of the box man's double confinement ('Instead of leaving the box, I shall enclose the world within it': Abe 2001: 176): either it can be read as 'emasculation and, by extension, a metaphorical suicide', or as a 'rejection of the present and the modern to embrace something deeper and more primordial'. Self-dissolution thus potentially encroaches on a broader socio-political dimension, where the trauma of modernisation is tackled by means of a symbolic return

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of my life. From now on I should be *living*. Yet, strangely enough, all sorts of ominous thoughts gathered force within me day by day and I felt that an any moment I might be visited by death' (Mishima 1959: 245).

[23] '"[...] To me, she's the essence of beauty. And it's only that which has brought me this far"' (Mishima 1975a: 360).

to a distant, almost primordial past. Premodernity seems to offer once again a valid key to rescue an allegedly authentic Japaneseness from Western erosion. But, as Hock Soon Ng (2009: 322-323) remarks, this nostalgic endeavour is actually debunked by Abe's narrative, where the escape to the past, represented by the protagonist's metaphorical retreat into a box, rather appears to offer no answer to the problem of the modern self.

Whether in a wilful 'staging' of self-fetishising Japanese peculiarities, as in Kawabata's and Mishima's writings, or in a deconstruction of the very fantasy of an 'authentic' Japaneseness – to refer to Marilyn Ivy's discourse (1995: 20) –, death's interconnection to aesthetics and to a constant dialectic with the value of life, both human and non-human,[24] recurs in many of the Japanese books that Calvino read. Beyond these instances, many linguistic theories have speculated upon an alleged absence of emphasis on the individual self in Japan, which should result in a relatively diffused and aproblematic self-negation.[25] This should be proved, in the first place, by the fact that subjects are often omitted in Japanese (Okada 1999: 11), and that personal pronouns in the strict sense do not exist: the Japanese lacks a direct equivalent for *ego*, with 'I' being expressed by a succession of terms (*watakushi, boku, ore*, …) which are topologically determined by the environment (Suzuki 1978). Moreover, as Berque (1986: 101) discusses, 'Japanese language does not need to distinguish the subject from its environment' in a form such as *samui* (meaning both 'I am cold' and 'it is cold'), 'nor the subject from the object' in a form like *suki* ('[I] love [you]' or '[I] like [it]').

Augustin Berque has long analysed how these linguistic traits can be paired with social behaviours, both of them manifesting a *relation* of the subject to the context that is more important than the subject's own substance. The frequent treatment of death and suicide in Japanese novels can thus be considered as the by-product of an alleged socio-anthropological tendency, which considers the subject in general as less important than the environment. Even if Calvino was not directly aware of the 'contextualism' (Hamaguchi 1977) that Japanese language expresses, he did come in contact with what can be considered as its landscape counterpart, that is the Zen garden. And, even more significantly, he got acquainted with recurring narrative references to death as the moment when self and non-self merge, contextually bringing together human and non-human perspectives, private and public concerns.

5.3. Death in Calvino's mature production

In this section, I bring together Calvino's trajectory, interrogated with specific regard to his treatment of death, and the traits of Japanese literature and culture that have potentially had an impact on his evolution. Focusing on the works that followed his Japanese travels, I aim to shed light on Calvino's

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[24] The ending of Natsume's *I Am a Cat* describes the titular cat's death as a fusion in the flow of a superior dimension: 'I am dying, Egypt, dying. Through death I'm drifting slowly into peace. Only by dying can this divine quiescence be attained' (Natsume 2002: 638). Mizukawa et al. (2007: 154), analysing the connections between Natsume's narrative and Shin Buddhism, maintain that the final death of the cat represents the author understanding of Shin Buddhism as to be fundamentally concerned with peace and tranquillity in the world after death, also known as Amida's Pure Land.

[25] Spender (in Okada 1999: 11) talks about a 'diffused culture', that is a culture without a clearly defined centre, and characterised by diffuseness and effacement of the self.

deepening philosophical attitude towards a dialectical synthesis of existence and non-existence. This synthesis, which I consider as prompted by Calvino's Japanese experience, results in the relativisation of materiality and commonly held human morality, and in a novel approach to the representation of the existence of the unrepresentable, and to language contextually.

This investigation does not deal directly with structural coordinates of Calvino's works, differently from the chapters on perspective, language and time. Similar to the analysis of Calvino's conceptualisation of void, it rather takes into account a theme that gradually acquires a structural relevance, interrogating the very roots and potentialities of representation. If *Palomar* can be considered as the embodiment of a *praxis* – a unification of theory and practice – it comes as a consequence that, at the end of this book, the protagonist's reflections on the decentralisation of a single death in view of a broader understanding of life result in the representation of the character's own death. I propose reading this final twist in light of Calvino's contact with Buddhism and Japanese literature, traditionally acquainted with the subversion of human-world relationships and life-death dichotomies.

5.3.1. 'La spada e le foglie': a path towards the overcoming of immanence

The article 'La spada e le foglie', in the Japanese section of *Collezione di sabbia*, does not name death explicitly, and yet it clarifies what Calvino makes of the synthesis of existence and its negation, a distinguishing feature of several forms of Buddhist thought. In this text, the author addresses some delicate concepts such as the negation of the self, the religious ascesis, and the contrast between being and non-being. Even if he is unsure about his own understanding of such delicate notions, as they appear in Japanese tradition, he nevertheless tries to connect them in an inclusive discourse which enriches his longstanding concern for death. It is no longer a purely material death that he ponders, and this opening towards a broader, higher and all-encompassing philosophical attitude is what I consider to be the main result of Calvino's contact with Japan.

The article starts with a dry statement about where Calvino is and what he is there for ('Al Museo Nazionale di Tokyo c'è un'esposizione d'armi e armature dell'antico Giappone': S, 589). In this opening, the author recovers the approach that characterises the first section of *Collezione di sabbia*, entitled 'Esposizioni-Esplorazioni' and dedicated to diverse exhibitions that he had the opportunity to visit during his stay in Paris during the 1970s. He starts from objects (or paintings, prints, maps, books or other documents) that he sees, and then reflects on what these suggest to his cultural and intellectual receptivity: 'La prima impressione è che gli elmi, le corazze, gli scudi, gli spadoni avessero come primo intento non quello di difendere o di colpire ma il fare spavento, l'imporre un'immagine terrorizzante agli avversari' (S, 589). This aesthetically-oriented view of weapons bears witness to the commonplace Western approach to the East as an exotic object, which is addressed more for the artistic inspiration that it can grant than for its independent social, political, economical and (in this case) military status.[26]

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[26] It is inevitable to recall here the incipit of Said's introduction to *Orientalism* where, referring to a French journalist's visit to Beirut in 1975-1976 – coincidentally, the same period as Calvino's travels to Japan –, he states that 'the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences' (Said 2003: 1). Calvino proves aware of his own problematic position elsewhere in his travelogue, but sometimes, as in the passage at stake, he cannot help addressing Japan '*as representation*' (ivi: 21), probably influenced by Barthes's reading of that country as an *Empire of Signs*.

Calvino carefully specifies that this is a first impression, and stresses that he is not guided, in this exploration, by the knowledge of the functioning of the weapons, which conversely he would have in a Western armoury, given his long acquaintance with epic poems. Aware of the partiality of his point of view, he mocks his own (cultural) vulnerability:

> [...] qui per la prima volta pens[o] a questi oggetti non come a fantasiosi giocattoli ma in vista del messaggio che volevano trasmettere *in situazione*, cioè come oggi si guarderebbe un carro armato su un campo di battaglia. La mia reazione è immediata: mi metto a scappare (S, 589 – emphasis in the original text).

He then refers to a long series of curved swords, which he cannot distinguish from one another, not helped in his observations by long captions written only in Japanese. Almost in a perverse mechanism of compensation, Calvino then abandons himself to a few comments of sheer 'positional superiority' (Said 2003: 7), when he describes – almost mockingly – the opposite, attentive and admiring reaction of Japanese visitors to the sight of swords, and dismisses the Japanese women visiting the museum by calling them 'donnette':

> Lame e lame e lame che a me paiono tutte uguali, eppure sono accompagnate ognuna da etichette con lunghe didascalie. Capannelli di gente sostano davanti a ogni vetrina, osservano spada per spada con occhi attenti e ammirati. I più sono uomini; ma è domenica, il museo è affollato di famiglie; a contemplare le spade ci sono anche donnette, bambini. Cosa ci vedono in quei coltellacci sguainati? Cosa li affascina? (S, 589-590) [27]

However, Calvino's intermittently disparaging attitude does not prevent him from embellishing his polemical account with a synaesthetic note ('il luccicare dell'acciaio trasmette una sensazione più auditiva che visiva, come rapidi sibili taglienti nell'aria': S, 590). He also directly calls into question his literary background, in the attempt to contextualise the puzzling objects in front of him ('Eppure so bene che l'arte della spada è in Giappone un'antica disciplina spirituale; ho letto i libri sul buddismo zen del Dr. Suzuki': S, 590). Retrospectively, one could even hypothesise that he has exacerbated the description of his sceptical response to his visit at Tokyo National Museum, in order to underline the need of a cultural mediation, to better understand instances of otherness that are not easy to approach naively.

The declared cultural guide here is Daisetz Teitaru Suzuki (1870-1966), to whom the West credits large part of its knowledge of Zen.[28] It is owing to his mediation that Zen is still considered as the epitome of Japanese Buddhism, and that it keeps seducing Western minds. Among his works, there are *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (first series: 1927), *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934), *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind* (1949), *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1959), and *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (1960), co-authored with Erich Fromm and Richard De Martino. Surprisingly enough, none of these books appear in Calvino's Japanese literature shelf, nor in the section dedicated to Eastern religions. Given the widespread distribution of Suzuki's books over the 1950s and 1960s, it is possible that Calvino came in contact with them in some international milieux, of which no evidence is available today. Echoing Suzuki, Calvino states:

> ricordo che il perfetto Samurai non deve mai fermare la sua attenzione sulla spada dell'avversario, né sulla propria, né sul colpire, né sul difendersi, ma deve solo annullare il proprio io; che non è con la spada ma con la non-spada che si vince; che i maestri forgiatori di spade raggiungono l'eccellenza della loro arte attraverso l'ascesi religiosa (S, 590).

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[27] Similar vaguely dismissive comments on Japanese internal tourism can be found in the section of 'L'aiola di sabbia' that has been cut in the passage from *L'Approdo* to *Collezione di sabbia* (RR2, 1431-1432).
[28] For a detailed introduction to the intellectual figure of D. T. Suzuki, see Jaffe (2010).

At a later time, Calvino most probably delved further into a deeper exploration of *samurai* ethics (*bushidō*), use of swords and approach to death, as proved by some books which he owned and which were published in Italy after his travels to Japan, such as Mishima's *The Way of Samurai* and Morris' *The Nobility of Failure*.[29]

In the following sub-sections, I will discuss how *Palomar* expands upon the obliteration of the self, the relationship between being and non-being, and the ascetic practice: themes of which Calvino proves to be aware already in 'La spada e le foglie', where he declares to be yet in the process of understanding ('So bene tutto: ma altro è leggere una cosa nei libri, altro è capirla nella vita': S, 590). If he gradually overcomes rational understanding *tout court*, rather giving voice in his own narrative to some conceptual paradoxes, and connecting his reflections to the ascetic practice, it is thanks to his acknowledgment of the dialectical interconnection of discontinuity and continuity, which already characterises 'La spada e le foglie'.

A sense of time beyond the sheer materiality of human life is furthermore typical of many texts of *Le cosmicomiche*. Just to refer to a few instances mentioned above, 'Tutto in un punto' refers to the big bang, 'Priscilla' to the transformation of matter, 'I dinosauri' to the irrevocable demise of a particular form of life. However, what connects all these texts is a dimension of temporal progression, or indeed of cycles ('Un segno nello spazio'), which falls within a scientific, immanent horizontality. In the Japanese context, on the other hand, the dimension is somehow vertical: it is the idiosyncratic verticality of asceticism, towards a superior dimension of non-being that, once attained, falls down again over daily reality, illuminating the non-being which is recognised to be intrinsic in every living being. The annihilation of material life is therefore anything but nihilistic, but rather vital: by 'trialling' death in any form of life, a superior quality of existence can be assumed, thus tranfiguring the death drive that, according to Rushing (2006: 56), characterises Qfwfq in *Le cosmicomiche*. As stated above, I argue that a maturation of this assumption occurs later in Calvino's production, in particular in the conclusion of *Palomar*.

Already the final section of 'La spada e le foglie' is a step further in Calvino's acquaintance with Japanese transcendence in daily life. If the first six paragraphs deal with the first part of the title – 'la spada' – the last three rather focus on the second segment – 'le foglie', with the ending motivating their link. The setting shifts to Kyoto, and gardens are again in the foreground, described in their details, which abruptly call to mind the weapons and the war masks observed in Tokyo:

> Pochi giorni dopo eccomi a Kyoto: passeggio per i giardini che furono percorsi da poeti squisiti, da imperatori filosofi, da monaci eremiti. Tra i ponticelli ricurvi sui ruscelli, i salici piangenti che si specchiano sugli stagni, i prati di muschio, gli aceri dalle foglie rosse a forma di stella, ecco che mi tornano alla mente le maschere guerriere dalle smorfie spaventevoli, l'incombere di quei guerrieri giganteschi, il filo tagliente di quelle lame (S, 590).

While looking at some autumn leaves, what Calvino struggled to understand in Tokyo possibly finds a means of access – and it is worth underlining that here the 'unwritten', natural world prompts a better comprehension of the 'written', cultural world, rather than the other way around:

> Guardando le foglie gialle che cadono nell'acqua mi ricordo d'un apologo zen che solo ora forse mi sembra di capire. L'allievo d'un grande fabbro di spade pretendeva d'aver superato il maestro. Per provare quanto le

[29] Mishima, Yukio. 1983. *La via del Samurai*, trans. by Pier Francesco Paolini (Milan: Bompiani – Nuovo Portico 34). Morris, Ivan. 1983. *La nobiltà della sconfitta*, trans. by Francesca Wagner (Milan: Guanda – Testi e documenti della Fenice 1).

> sue lame erano affilate, immerse una spada in un ruscello. Le foglie morte portate dalla corrente passando sul filo della spada venivano tagliate in due di netto. Il maestro immerse nel ruscello una spada forgiata da lui. Le foglie correvano via evitando la lama (S, 590).

The disciple's sword, although unusually sharp, cannot but cut the dead lives it comes in contact with, thus not ceasing to act in an immanent dimension. On the other hand, a Zen master, whose meditative training rotates around the overcoming of the dichotomy of life and death (Herrigel 1953: 103-104), attains a superior spiritual ability that is symbolically expressed by the sword that he creates, which does not need to prove its sharpness materially. In other words, only by meditating constantly is it possible to surmount death in its immanent dimension, rather attaining a superior awareness of the inherent interconnection of life and death. I suggest keeping this model in mind when reading the conclusion of *Palomar*, on which the last part of this chapter aims to shed new light.

5.3.2. Death prompting narration in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*

Death inhabits several incipits of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. Apart from a metaphorical reference to the traditional dichotomy of body and soul (RR2, 673), Calvino adds an element of innovation by providing death and dead creatures with agencies of their own: similarly to what happens in Akutagawa's short stories, the dead tend to have defined personalities and are prone to unpleasant behaviours (RR2, 674; 697; 711; 718). The pervasive sense of death characterising the book can be possibly explained by taking into account one of the main literary 'ancestors' of *Se una notte*, that is, *The Thousand and One Nights*, which is not by chance often evoked in the book (RR2, 724; 785; 867; 868). This collection of Middle Eastern and Indian stories develops as a never-ending tale, which Shahrazad tells every evening to King Shahryar, promising to finish it the following night and thus escaping death (the King, after discovering his wife's unfaithfulness, decided to assassinate her, her lovers, and all the women which he would have married afterwards, only to kill a new wife each day until no more candidates could be found).

If Calvino considers *The Thousand and One Nights* as the epitome of the perfect tale (SNiA, 441), it comes as a consequence that, at this stage, he still conceives of death in opposition to life and its narrative expression. *Se una notte* closes with a note on the centrality of such a dichotomy in narrative tradition:

> Anticamente un racconto aveva solo due modi per finire: passate tutte le prove, l'eroe e l'eroina si sposavano oppure morivano. Il senso ultimo a cui rimandano tutti i racconti ha due facce: la continuità della vita, l'inevitabilità della morte. Ti fermi un momento a riflettere su queste parole. Poi fulmineamente decidi che vuoi sposare Ludmilla (RR2, 869).

Almost to compensate for the utterly untraditional development of the book that he is about to conclude, Calvino opts unapologetically for a vitalistic choice, for the continuity of life in the most traditional sense: namely, marriage. In an interview released in 1979, the author motivates this choice:[30] with the marriage of Lettrice and Lettore, a positive and active principle (embodied by the female character) blends with a more submissive and passive one (the male pole of the opposition), and the happy ending is all on the surface, as in a postmodern fairy tale.

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[30] 'Dati i tempi, credo che anche questa volta si possa salvare uno spiraglio di ottimismo. Alla fine del libro si dice che una volta tutte le storie finivano o con la morte o col matrimonio: l'ineluttabilità della fine individuale e, nello stesso tempo, la continuità della vita. Il mio romanzo ha un lieto fine: i protagonisti si sposano' (SNiA, 305).

However, if the dialectical opposition seems to be solved by such a conclusion, it should not go unnoticed that death is here defined as inevitable ('l'inevitabilità della morte': RR2, 869). Even in a supposedly happy ending, it is thus possible to recognise a vision of death that is all-encompassing, and fecund nonetheless (or rather all the more). Not only, as happens in *The Thousand and One Nights*, does the fear of death prompt the narrative progression itself, but death operates as the 'absent structure' of the book: that is, as a structure whose very absence defines the construction which is based on it ontologically, epistemologically or, in this particular case, narratively. As discussed in the chapter on the evolution of the concept of void in Calvino's narrative, I suggest reading the author's progressive penchant for 'absent structures' as a consequence of his fascination for, and elaboration of, Buddhist meditation.

5.3.3. *Palomar* and the interconnection of different forms of life and death

From its very first section, *Palomar* asks to call into question a philosophical multi-faceted depth. In the short story 'La spada del sole', Palomar queries the existence of the world before and after his own life:[31]

> Il signor Palomar pensa al mondo senza di lui: quello sterminato di prima della sua nascita, e quello ben più oscuro di dopo la sua morte; cerca d'immaginare il mondo prima degli occhi, di qualsiasi occhio; e un mondo che domani per catastrofe o lenta corrosione resti cieco. Che cosa avviene (avvenne, avverrà) mai in quel mondo? Puntuale un dardo di luce parte dal sole, si riflette sul mare calmo, scintilla nel tremolio dell'acqua, ed ecco la materia diventa ricettiva alla luce, si differenzia in tessuti viventi, e a un tratto un occhio, una moltitudine d'occhi fiorisce, o rifiorisce... [...] Si è convinto che la spada [del sole] esisterà anche senza di lui (RR2, 887).

It is only when realising that the world exists regardless of his own presence that Palomar seems to appease his anxieties. His (partial) tranquillity thus originates from a 'Panic' awareness, in the sense of a recognition of the non-hierarchical interdependence of any natural – not necessarily human – forms of life.[32]

Not too far from Kawabata's acknowledgment of the perspective of an insect analysed above, this is the framework according to which Palomar gets to investigate and then describe the particular points of view of a gecko, a gorilla, a flock of birds, or a group of reptiles. Further on in the book, he tries to merge his own standpoint on life with the viewpoints of other beings, precisely in order to visualise how the world was, and probably will be, after his own personal death (see also § 1.3.4.). If such non-human viewpoints were already considered in a book like *Marcovaldo*, it is in *Palomar* that they prompt a more complex philosophical reflection: Hume (1992) also connects *Palomar*'s 'atypical concern with death' (ivi: 21) with what is commonly defined as 'post-human'. 'Predictably', she states, 'facing the cosmos is risky. Dissolution into the flux is one – perhaps *the* – logical outcome, and it constitutes both a terror and a temptation' (ivi: 16).

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[31] Here Calvino is possibly mindful of his own reflections on Pliny the Elder's ideas on the period that precedes one's birth (S, 923-924), as addressed in the article 'Il cielo, l'uomo, l'elefante' (1982), written precisely while completing *Palomar*.

[32] I am here using the adjective 'Panic' in the original sense of 'associated with the ancient Greek god Pan', the rustic god of nature (*OED Online* www.oed.com, accessed 8.10.2019).

In several interviews – discussing *Palomar* and his view of the world in general – Calvino underlines his programmatic identification with animals and other beings, in the attempt to admit the presence of a 'soul' in what is usally supposed to be non-human or 'inanimate' (SNiA 611; 630). However, if this timely post-human view is the kernel of Calvino's last book, the reader is also confronted with the author's pensive doubts. For instance, in the Mexican short story 'Serpenti e teschi', death and life are again presented as interconnected, but human thinking is defined as unavoidable, therefore still central and in a preferential position:

> «Cosa voleva dire morte, vita, continuità, passaggio, per gli antichi Toltechi? E cosa può voler dire per questi ragazzi? E per me?» Eppure sa che non potrebbe mai soffocare in sé il bisogno di tradurre, di passare da un linguaggio all'altro, da figure concrete a parole astratte, da simboli astratti a esperienze concrete, di tessere e ritessere una rete d'analogie. Non interpretare è impossibile, come è impossibile trattenersi dal pensare (RR2, 956).

It is thus possible to read *Palomar* as a quest for a balanced relationship between the barely escapable central position of the human standpoint and the relevance of surrounding forms of life: Calvino endorses a particular emphasis on the latter when approaching Japanese 'contextualism'.

5.3.4. Beyond materiality and tragic morality

A passage of the Norton Lecture (otherwise known as *Lezioni americane*) dedicated to 'Leggerezza' addresses Calvino's awareness of the different aspects of the above-mentioned intellectual endeavour: it is instructive to read it in order to shed light on what I am about to discuss with respect to the ending of *Palomar*. Calvino cites a novella of Boccaccio's *Decameron* where Guido Cavalcanti gets rid of a group of provocateurs by addressing them with a witty quip, which allows him to escape the unconfortable situation. Calvino's comment on the novella reads as follows:

> Ciò che qui ci interessa non è tanto la battuta attribuita a Cavalcanti (che si può interpretare considerando che il preteso «epicureismo» del poeta era in realtà averroismo, per cui l'anima individuale fa parte dell'intelletto universale: le tombe sono casa vostra e non mia in quanto la morte corporea è vinta da chi s'innalza alla contemplazione universale attraverso la speculazione dell'intelletto). Ciò che ci colpisce è l'immagine visuale che Boccaccio evoca: Cavalcanti che si libera d'un salto «sì come colui che leggerissimo era» (S, 639).

Calvino is acquainted with Averroè's conception of 'unicità dell'intelletto' (S, 1989), to which he refers more than once in aesthetic contexts – one of which, interestingly enough, is Japanese (see 'La squadratura (per Giulio Paolini)': S, 1981-1990; 'Per Arakawa': S, 2001-2005). But Calvino also highlights that the topic that interests him the most is not a parallel between the human mind and a universal mind. Rather, he stresses the relevance of Cavalcanti's remark for two main reasons that tend to undermine human centrality.

Firstly, the gag has to do with Cavalcanti's view of the world in which 'il peso della materia si dissolve per il fatto che i materiali del simulacro umano possono essere tanti, intercambiabili' (S, 640). The Italian poet, as Lucretius and Ovid did in the context of Latin literature, contends that everything that exists is on the same level. This very 'parificazione dei reali' (S, 641) is what Calvino notices also in his exploration of Japanese gardens (see § 1.2.1.), and deploys in *Palomar*: it is therefore relevant to find it underscored in his *Lezioni americane*, which are often considered as a literary and philosophical testament by Calvino. Secondly, Cavalcanti is able to overcome his troublesome situation by subverting

the hierarchy of commonplace values: his intelligence seems to be heavy but is actually lighter than the deceptively dynamic arrogance of his fellow peers.[33] A similar subversion is what allows Palomar's death to take on a positive nuance, in accordance with the idiosyncratic set of priorities that any form of meditation entails: what matters is no longer life in its sheer physical form, but a superior dimension of life that escapes materiality.

The twofold relevance of Boccaccio's novella acquires a signficance in light of Calvino's progressive penchant for non-hierarchical human-world relationships. The importance of similar changes of perspective occurring over time is underlined in the last short story of *Palomar*, 'Come imparare a essere morto':

> La vita d'una persona consiste in un insieme d'avvenimenti di cui l'ultimo potrebbe anche cambiare il senso di tutto l'insieme, non perché conti di più dei precedenti ma perché una volta inclusi in una vita gli avvenimenti si dispongono in un ordine che non è cronologico ma risponde a un'architettura interna (RR2, 977-978).

It is suggestive to read this statement as a self-commentary of Calvino's own literary trajectory, which has long been devoted to provide nature with a voice of its own and – possibly influenced by Japanese meditative tradition – has gradually turned towards an over-arching universe that overcomes single individuals' lives and deaths. He thereby seems to take literally Walter Benjamin's statement regarding the role of death in narrative, as a means to reveal the meaning of a man's life, beyond its material boundaries: 'Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell' (Benjamin 1969: 94).

In this last short story, Palomar is determined to do as if he was dead, in order to understand not only his own, but also the world's reaction to this loss ('Il signor Palomar decide che d'ora in poi farà come se fosse morto, per vedere come va il mondo senza di lui': RR2, 975). Already this premiss hinges upon a certain agency that Calvino grants to the world around himself ('il signor Palomar [...] dovrebbe anche avvertire il sollievo del mondo, che non ha più da preoccuparsi di lui': RR2, 975). The author then resumes some thoughts that he has already presented in 'La spada del sole', such as the opportunity for human beings to become part of the surrounding environment ('Forse essere morto è passare nell'oceano delle onde che restano onde per sempre, dunque è inutile aspettare che il mare si calmi': RR2, 976). An interesting remark locates in the absence of morality a further element of similarity between the condition of being dead and the natural environment:

> Ai morti non dovrebbe importare più niente di niente perché non tocca più a loro pensarci; e anche se ciò può sembrare immorale, è in questa irresponsabilità che i morti trovano la loro allegria. Più lo stato d'animo del signor Palomar s'avvicina a quello qui descritto, e più l'idea d'essere morto gli si presenta come naturale (RR2, 977).

This passage deserves particular attention, given its idiosyncratic position in an ecocritical discourse.

As Iovino (2007: 107) explains, literary ecology and ecocriticism draw on the recognition of natural non-human subjects as potential moral subjects, with the intention of making human interactions with the environment and with non-human beings as sustainable as possible. Calvino's position in the passage at stake is perhaps even more subtle: he does not attribute a moral stance to the condition of being dead and of re-entering a natural state, since these are actually a-moral (if not immoral) conditions. This means that a communion between humanity and nature does not have to be

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[33] '[L]'agile salto del poeta-filosofo che si solleva sulla pesantezza del mondo, dimostrando che la sua gravità contiene il segreto della leggerezza, mentre quella che molti credono essere la vitalità dei tempi, rumorosa, aggressiva, scalpitante e rombante, appartiene al regno della morte' (S, 639).

found in an extension of human values to the surrounding environment, but, on the contrary, in a suspension of those very moral values.

I locate an important step towards this awareness in Calvino's exploration of Zen gardens: here the hierarchy between different beings is similarly suspended and the landscape embodies Zen subversion of the value of death and life. Once again, Calvino undermines a typically Western coordinate, premised on Greek and Hebrew sources, as discussed by Joseph W. Meeker (1997: 26): 'corollary to the belief in human supremacy is the assumption of a metaphysical moral order that also transcends nature'. Meeker connects this concept of 'unnatural morality' to the development of classical tragedy; if anything, Palomar acknowledges the all-but-tragic cheerfulness of the dead, again proving to be drawn, at times, towards a different tradition than the Western.

5.3.5. Subversion of life-death dichotomy

For a 'strong' subject in a *separative* paradigm, to die is tantamount to losing centrality in the landscape of the tangible world, therefore to seeing one's own strength defeated. But once anthropocentrism is left behind, as Palomar recurringly does by means of his shifting points of view, then human life no longer assumes to be central. As Fromm (1978: 125-127) states, life must cease to be experienced as a commodity at one's disposal, and accordingly death must take on a less negative, if not positive, value. In the context of Western philosophy, this subversion can be found as early as Plato's dialogues describing Socrates' acceptance of death, on the basis of the primacy of a disembodied life that the soul only attains by means of material death (I refer mainly to *Apology of Socrates*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*). Or, to identify a precedent that is closer to Calvino's literary and philosophical background, one might like to remember the conclusion of Giacomo Leopardi's 'Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese', in *Operette morali*, where the Icelander is overcome by Nature physically, but elevates himself morally, by asking an essential question on the potentially non-existent benefit of the unhappy life of the universe shortly before succumbing to death.[34]

While the connection between Calvino and Leopardi has been thoroughly scrutinised, I suggest adding the underrated role of Zen Buddhism to the array of potential influences over Calvino's mature treatment of death. In this respect, it is appropriate to follow the parallel that Pasqualotto (1996) has drawn between Platonism and Buddhism as 'philosophies of the Awakening'. According to Plato's allegory of the cave and to the experience of *Bodhi*, awakening occurs abruptedly and unexpectedly, despite its being prepared long and progressively. In other terms, awakening is sudden but not improvised, and its occurrence – which dismisses intellectual means – has to be prepared by intellectual discussions (Plato's *dialeghein* and Buddhist *mondō*). My thesis is that Palomar's death is inherently close to this form of awakening. It is prepared by a discursive, *separative* path in which *logos* is still used, and in which a triadic, traditionally dialectical structure is deployed; then, the protagonist dies and represents by embodiment his own fusion with the surrounding world in its entirety. Similarly, in Terry Eagleton's view of dialectical materialism, 'the world is a dynamic complex of interlocking forces in

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[34] 'Ma poiché quel che è distrutto, patisce; e quel che distrugge, non gode, e a poco andare è distrutto medesimamente; dimmi quello che nessun filosofo mi sa dire: a chi piace o a chi giova cotesta vita infelicissima dell'universo, conservata con danno e con morte di tutte le cose che lo compongono?' (Leopardi 2010: 288).

which all phenomena are interrelated, nothing stays still, [...] no absolute standpoints are available, everything is perpetually on the point of turning into its opposite' (2016: 7).

Palomar's existence thus ends harmoniously, in an ultimate composition of intellectual endeavour and personal destiny. Once Zen is introduced to illuminate this final dialectical harmony, even a further line of enquiry opens, which I shall only briefly suggest here as it lies beyond the scope of the present work. I am referring to the potential reading of the conclusion of the book in light of self psychology. Following John Suler's analysis (1995: 414), 'death may be understood as a metaphor for the *disintegrating* processes that break apart the self – processes that necessarily interact with, embody, and balance the *integrative* processes'. While Zen focuses on self loss, and self psychology on self unification, they both speak of a close apposition of integration and disintegration, which is precisely what Palomar experiences by dying in the process of scrutinising each moment of his life.

If, at the opening of the book, Calvino distances himself and his character from the practice of contemplation[35] – maybe having in mind some structured forms of interior trips, guided introspections, or visualisations of inner spirits – he progressively finds himself appreciating Zen forms of meditation and consideration towards beings (as in 'L'aiola di sabbia'), therefore preparing the final awakening that is represented by Palomar's death. Even if Calvino never embraced Zen fully and openly, he definitely proved to be in step with it, both when visiting and describing Japan and later on. I locate such an aptitude in his sensitivity to the surrounding world in all its forms, deeply rooted in his environmentalist upbringing and in his interest in culturally different forms of dialectical materialism, and further developed over the years, through his readings and his travels around the world.

5.3.6. Representation of the existence of the unrepresentable

In 'Dal terrazzo' Palomar lays out a veritable method statement, which helps to understand his approach towards death, as well as language: '«Solo dopo aver conosciuto la superificie delle cose, – conclude, – ci si può spingere a cercare quel che c'è sotto. Ma la superficie delle cose è inesauribile»' (RR2, 920). According to this view, whose Barthesian ascendancy has been discussed in the chapter on void (see § 3.3.5.), things exist in a dimension which, while insinuating the presence of an underlying truth ('quel che c'è sotto'), at the same time characterises this truth as unattainable. I have defined this unattainable underlying truth as 'absent structure'. Common language, in its self-referentiality, can merely evoke it ('la nomenclatura ne è solo un aspetto esteriore, strumentale': RR2, 935). Experience, too, can only continuously defer the possibility of grasping it. But *Palomar* implements an idiosyncratic conflation of language and experience, intellectual search and biological life, which potentially points to a novel approach to the 'absent structure' of things. This novel approach emerges, in the book, in a fusion of theory and practice, that is, in a peculiar form of *praxis*, which can be compared to the workings of Zen meditation.[36] In particular, such deployment of *praxis* is best epitomised by the conclusion, where the disappearance of the subject activates the disappearance of the work *tout court*.

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[35] 'Non sta contemplando, perché per la contemplazione ci vuole un temperamento adatto, uno stato d'animo adatto e un concorso di circostanze esterne adatto: e per quanto il signor Palomar non abbia nulla contro la contemplazione in linea di principio, tuttavia nessuna di quelle tre condizioni si verifica per lui' (RR2, 875).
[36] I am referring to the concept of *praxis* as elaborated by Cazdyn (2015: 106).

In the last text of the collection, Palomar starts off by reflecting on his own death, and progressively contemplates the death of others, until reaching in his mind the end of time:

> Palomar pensando alla propria morte pensa già a quella degli ultimi sopravvissuti della specie umana o dei suoi derivati o eredi [...]. E così di rinvio in rinvio si arriva al momento in cui sarà il tempo a logorarsi e ad estinguersi in un cielo vuoto, quando l'ultimo supporto materiale della memoria del vivere si sarà degradato in una vampa di calore, o avrà cristallizzato i suoi atomi nel gelo d'un ordine immobile.
> «Se il tempo deve finire, lo si può descrivere, istante per istante, – pensa Palomar, – e ogni istante, a descriverlo, si dilata tanto che non se ne vede più la fine». Decide che si metterà a descrivere ogni istante della sua vita, e finché non li avrà descritti tutti non penserà più d'essere morto. In quel momento muore (RR2, 979).

As Franchi (1997: 763) explains, death 'as a border impossible to cross, is tranformed, *à la* Kant, into a horizon which renders all that lies within it fully attainable'. In a process which is premised upon the same paradoxical feature of Buddhist meditation, Palomar embodies and points to the existence of the unrepresentable, which I have otherwise referred to as the 'absent structure' of things.

At the climax of his reflections, when hypothesising two different guises that the end of time could take on, Palomar summons again the symbols on which he had reflected when visiting a temple in Japan: the flame ('quando l'ultimo supporto materiale della memoria del vivere si sarà degradato in una vampa di calore') and the crystal ('o avrà cristallizzato i suoi atomi nel gelo di un ordine immobile'). As discussed in the chapter on time (see § 4.3.1.), in 'Il tempio di legno' Calvino envisages a harmonisation of these two modes of *existence*. Here, the two hypotheses are not only equally admitted, but they are deemed apt to represent two modes of *non-existence*. The existence of the unrepresentable is thus totally given in its representation, which relies on images rather than words. Indeed, as I am going to discuss in the next paragraph, logocentrism is finally overcome by Palomar, who anticipates that 'thinking in images' that much post-human literature has subsequently advocated for.[37] If the 'structure' can be understood as a void of life beneath life itself, and if it is 'absent', thus anattainable, its very absence is nevertheless conveyable – as both Palomar and Zen architects prove. Franchi (1997: 763) maintains as follows: 'The representation of the irrepresentable, or rather the representation of the existence of the irrepresentable, can be reached and mastered in its wholeness'. Moreover, 'the *representation* of the irrepresentable implicitly recovers the totality that it pretends to reject as a deception'.

The recovery of totality can be appreciated as a unique trait of *Palomar*: possibly due to its metaphysical propensity of Eastern descent, it distinguishes the 1983 book from Calvino's previous works. For instance, commenting on *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, Calvino rejected the concept of 'totality', over which he favoured the idea of a catalogue, or of an encyclopaedia of narrative possibilities (SNiA, 430). But the dialectical dynamics upon which *Palomar* is based allow for an indirect rescue of totality itself. If the 'absent structure' of things is simultaneously present within things, through which the unrepresentable gets to be represented, then what is left to Palomar is to die while describing things painstakingly, and to describe things while dying.

Therefore, once this awareness is attained, the book can potentially start again, as per its dialectical essence. Franchi (1997: 763-764) defines this possibility as the discovery of 'the world as a closed, self-referential, combinatorial system: as a *game*'. In light of the Buddhist and Shinto declension of a similar harmonisation of linear and cyclic dynanics, as embodied in those temples that are

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[37] I am thinking in particular about Eduardo Kohn's *How Forest Think* (2013), whose 'processes of thought' are also discussed by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* (2016: 82-83).

constantly destroyed and reconstructed to point to a superior dimension, I would rather interpret *Palomar*'s conclusion as open, as referring to something that is beyond what is merely written. In other words, I would identify in this conclusion a state of openness, which subsumes any opposition between life and death, presence and absence, representation and its opposite, precisely as happens in Buddhist meditation.

5.3.7. Overcoming logocentrism

In my opinion, it is appropriate to highlight that Palomar initially tries to *read* the surrounding environment ('Lettura di un'onda'), whereas he ends up dying while *writing* it ('Come imparare a essere morto'). The shift is significant and telling of the process of subversion that such an ending suggests. When reading, the subject unavoidably keeps the read object at a distance and set apart: to recall the paradigms employed in the first chapter, this constitutes a *separative* approach to the world. In the act of writing, on the other hand, the border between subject and object blurs significantly, for a *distinctive* deliberation of the subject: 'scriviamo per rendere possibile al mondo non scritto di esprimersi attraverso di noi' (S, 1875). This increased, wilful proximity – if not fusion – recalls the condition of the human being exploring a Zen garden and feeling part of an all-embracing and non-hierarchical reality.

Palomar's death represents the icastic symbol of such a fusion, which seems to respond to Zen 'ungrasping', more than to traditionally Western forms of logic – or at least seems to establish a connection between Eastern meditative experience and Western analytic rationality. His 'thinking in images' first undermines the power of words as opposed to the things that they evoke, then determines a silencing of the subject altogether, as analysed in the chapter on language and silence (see § 2.3.7.). After all, this is what Calvino states in an interview in 1985: 'il mio sogno sarebbe raggiungere una conoscenza delle cose minuziosa al punto che la loro stessa sostanza si dissolve nel momento in cui è afferrata' (SNiA, 637). *Palomar*'s project thus hangs in the balance between the continual, rational, logocentric desire to reproduce the world on the page and the awareness that, in order to truly seize the substance of the world, human means should withdraw.

Logos, in this ending, is brought to its extreme consequences, and its absurd presumption of control on the entirety of reality is unveiled. Where the 'will to control' aims to reach its peak, it actually faces its own defeat, and an excess of sense can only result in non-sense, as Palomar's death and Zen *kōan* both show. The condition that Palomar experiences – and that he suggests but cannot describe, since keeping the ability to describe would be tantamount to keeping the control that has to be lost – is not far from the meditative method that I introduced above under the name of 'death's head contemplation'. Death is precisely where one would expect to find life to its maximum degree, as life is not just the human, rational, logocentric version of it, but rather a universal force that relativises single forms of existence. In this passage from will to grasp to surrender, from logocentrism to absence of *logos*, I identify the influence of Zen on Palomar's – and Calvino's – standpoint on life and death. This disposition also interacts with Calvino's interest, in the 1970s, in Barthes's discourse and in French structuralism, as the movement which takes forward the conflation of the role of the writer within the universe of writing (Bonsaver 1994: 163-167).

To summarise, written words are overcome by the awareness they lead to, that is the impossibility to grasp, to control, to possess everything, and the opportunity, on the other hand, to feel part of a broader all-possessing universe of images. If, in the sand garden, Calvino advocates the need

for 'la distanza necessaria per la contemplazione' – which is the same distance that he keeps while reading the wave – thanks to that very contemplation he eventually does without any distance and, by dying, blends into the world that he started describing. In so doing, he develops the tenet of dialectical materialism according to which 'everything is related to everything else' (Eagleton 2016: 7).

Palomar's death encompasses many of the discourses discussed above regarding the Japanese turn of Calvino's trajectory. By taking it into account, the perspective changes from a human to a more-than-human dimension; language stops after giving voice to several forms of life, and after pointing to a superior universal life, which can do without human words; moreover, the void assumes a non-nihilistic value. In other words, the synthesis of existence and non-existence epitomises the dialectical materialism that informs the entire book, where metaphysical dimension and everyday experiences are closely intertwined, and which I read in comparison to Buddhist meditation. In the conclusion of *Palomar* thus lies the strongest affinity between Calvino's mature production and Zen. On that note, I shall head towards the conclusions of this study.

Conclusions

'Cross-contaminations', 'trans-cultural encounters', 'suspension of temporality', 'void'. Before 2020, these concepts, which I have addressed in my research, mostly represented abstract ideas. They were themes among others, coordinates to approach literary texts, sometimes keys to understand the inside of these texts in light of what lie outside them. In 2020, all of a sudden, they have materialised. As discussed in this thesis, Amitav Ghosh (2016: 3) asks himself and his readers at the beginning of *The Great Derangement*: 'Who can forget those moments when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive?' It is fair to say that it will be very difficult to forget the moment when cross-species contaminations became real, spreading Covid-19 across national borders, forcing people to void social spaces and retreat into a vanishing sense of time. In such context, where the 'background noise' has become loud and impossible to ignore – to refer to the epigraph above –, Calvino's works emerge more forcefully than ever as 'classics', given their ability to dialogue even with the least expected present.

This study was sparked by the feeling that Calvino's mature works, and *Palomar* in particular, carry a reflexive overtone that it would be simplistic, and methodologically inappropriate, to explain retrospectively in light of the author's premature and unexpected death. The themes that I explored (perspective, language and silence, void, time and death) made a case for the timeliness of a novel consideration of Calvino's contact with Japanese culture, thus for the investigation of an event that came before, rather than after, the author's last works. What I have sought to show is that this encounter – in its literary, philosophical and concrete traits – emerges as an essential turning point as far as two interrelated directions are concerned. These are the direction of Calvino's age-long interest in *other cultures*, and that of his ever-changing attunement to *other forms of life*. The analysis of the Japanese books that the author was acquainted with, and of his reflections prompted by his Japanese travels, points at an idiosyncratic interest in a *trans-cultural* and *inter-species* dialogue on Calvino's part, which the author then elaborated in his own production.

Far from embracing a hermeneuticist approach, which would have assumed the existence of a 'true' meaning of texts behind what is written and what has been analysed by previous critics, my study has rather adopted a semiotic lens through which to address the dialogue between Calvino's life, the (written or unwritten) texts that he read in relation to Japan, and his own works. Semiology itself, as Barthes (1981: 96) maintains, 'never posits the existence of a definitive signified': 'in any cultural or even psychological complex, we find ourselves confronted with infinite chains of metaphors whose signified is always recessive or itself becoming a signifier'. The purpose of this study was to approach Calvino's Japanese experience as a moment in his life and career that not merely *signified* his gradual non-Eurocentric and non-anthropocentric humanism, but properly *embodied* such relativisation.

The synthesis of theory and practice, as well as the subsumption of abstract ideas in their actual expression, are characteristic of *Palomar* – the main case study of this thesis – which I put in connection with Calvino's acquaintance with Buddhist thought. Following Eco's semiotic terminology (1998: xi), this book can be defined as an *operative-contemplative* project: that is, a work that not only reflects on the outward appearance of the real in order to understand it (*contemplative*), but that itself is transformed by the thoughts that sustain this process of understanding (*operative*). I identify the acme of this process in its ending, where Palomar dies while describing his surrounding environment, and the book ends contextually. In this way, the subject operates his own dethronement, undermines his own centrality, at the same time acknowledging the ungraspable objectivity of the world and proposing a way of representing such inaccessibility.

While a semiotic terminology lends itself well to the illustration of such a distinctive feature of Calvino's last work, in my study I demonstrated that this characteristic emerges even more clearly if read in light of a number of concepts borrowed from Eastern forms of meditation, which Calvino came into contact with when visiting Japan. Namely, that specific form of dialectical materialism that is entailed in *praxis*, as a constant negotiation of theory and practice, atemporal enlightenment and daily practice, and in *yoga*, as a state of wilful intimacy with the immanent totality of the universe. Moreover, if many forms of meditation rest upon the acceptance and conflation of apparent contradictions and paradoxes, Calvino's interest in Zen illuminates with a novel light the manifold dialectical syntheses that often recur in *Palomar*: between subject and object, consciousness and cosmos, word and silence, existence and void, to name but the most relevant.

Therefore, the aim of this study has been to take into account Calvino's exploration of Japanese literature and Buddhist thought, in order to give due consideration to their role in Calvino's mature works. In particular, I analysed their relevance to Calvino's gradual deconstruction of human centrality, of an anthropocentric form of humanism, of the supremacy of human language and morality, of a linear temporality, and even of the primacy of individual lives and deaths, as opposed to universal ones. I argued that the forms of Japanese poetry and prose that Calvino read, the material spaces that he visited, and the philosophical background sustaining them, each in their peculiar degree, contributed to Calvino's gradual penchant for self-decentralisation and subversion of fixed, hyper-rational coordinates.

Indeed, the analysis of Calvino's encounter with Japan, and of the forms of *praxis* and deconstruction thus originated, introduced a novel perspective to reconfigure the author's entire trajectory of thought: I investigated the latter through a close reading of Calvino's most prominent books, as well as of a wide range of short stories, essays and letters that he wrote throughout his career. As I maintained, the meditative experience in an environment that acknowledges the interdependence of any human, animal, and even vegetal being – in both literary (novels and *haiku*) and concrete (gardens and temples) constructions – prompted the author to overcome a rationalist *impasse*, descending from his former Illuminist inclination. Calvino appreciated the inter-subjectivity at the core of many artistic expressions of Japanese nature-culture, consequently elaborating his own rational deconstruction of hyper-rationality. For this purpose, he developed philosophical and poetical tools that gradually enriched his narrative production, and that bore the mark of his acquaintance with Japanese philosophy and poetry, as represented in his Roman library.

Ostensible contradictions, diverse potentialities and dialectical processes have characterised the content of Calvino's works from the beginning of his career. However, previous analyses of his books have only rarely proposed critical tools to evaluate inclusively the narrative and cognitive relevance of

the interaction of such opposing forces. My study has been motivated by the specific intent to underline how similar dialectical processes characterise many expressions of Japanese culture, as well. Contextually, I proposed establishing a dialogue between such a distant, and at the same time comparable culture, and Calvino's own multifaceted trajectory. By recomposing, but not neutralising, the dialectical and contradictory forces that intersect Calvino's oeuvre, and that have not so often been analysed in their dialogic relation, I also aimed to relativise strict categorisations of Calvino's position in Italian literary landscape.

Francese (1997: 7-8) defines Calvino as a 'late modernist' – as opposed to other critics labelling him as a 'postmodernist' (Cannon 1991; Musarra-Schrøder 1996; Merrell 1997; Panigrahi 2017) – on the grounds that he still uses the 'writing subject as the organising center of consciousness'. When considering Calvino's trajectory in its entirety, especially in light of his exploration of Japanese forms of dialectical materialism, similar rigid definitions inevitably lose efficacy. Indeed, at the end of *Palomar*, and already from the late 1970s onwards, an alleged 'center of consciousness' deliberately subverts itself, thus activating a dialectical oscillation between self and no-self, which the contact with Japanese natural and cultural alterity contributes to engender.

In 'Cominciare e finire', the last, incomplete lecture of the so-called *Lezioni americane*, Calvino defines the literary work as 'una di queste minime porzioni in cui l'universo si cristallizza in una forma, in cui acquista un senso, non fisso, non definitivo, non irrigidito in un'immobilità mortale, ma vivente come un organismo' (S, 751). It can be said that Calvino's mature production, and *Palomar* in particular, represents a temporary crystal where anthropocentrism and logocentrism are gradually unsettled, potentially under the influence of Zen culture. But as the Japanese incipit in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* is only one narrative potentiality among many others, in a framework that determines and is determined by multifarious possibilities, similarly Calvino's experience in Japan constitutes one of many other lines of trans-cultural enquiries that the author's work has already generated, and can continue to stimulate. After all, Calvino himself once stated, talking about his ultimate fictional alter-ego, that Palomar is 'un italiano che ha molti piedi tra molti paralleli e meridiani' (Marabini 1976: 188). In this research, I analysed specifically those 'parallels and meridians' that define Japanese culture, as explored by Calvino, which have proved to be key coordinates to define, in turn, the depth of Calvino's multifaceted intellect.

Appendix

Fig. 1: Calvino at the Nihon-Itaria Kyoto-kaikan (Nov. 1976)
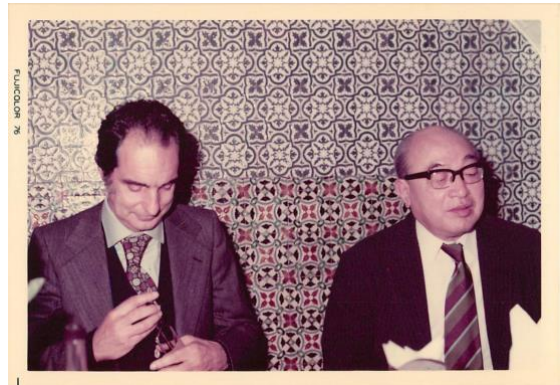

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8
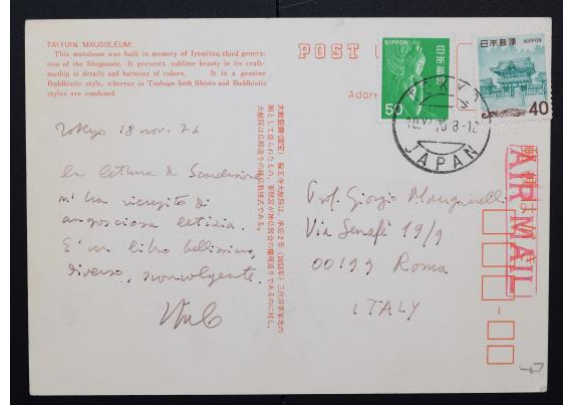
Fig. 9: Calvino's postcard to Manganelli, from Nikko

Fig. 10

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