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# Fairy-Tale Metamorphosis and Becoming–Animal: The Posthumanism of Italo Calvino’s *Fiabe Italiane*

Pablo a Marca

## Introduction

In “Hybriditales: Posthumanizing Calvino,” Serenella Iovino describes Italo Calvino’s literary production as one of “hybriditales,” which she defines as “stories in which reality itself is a continuous flow of crossings” (2014, 220). Both in its historical construction as well as in its materiality, in these texts the human is “permeable to other natures, other matters, and other cultural agents,” meaning that being human already involves surpassing the boundaries of human “nature” (ibid., 219). Such a conception of the human is now part of theoretical discussions that fall under the label of posthumanism. While a standard definition of posthumanism does not exist, it is possible to say that posthumanist theorists typically share a suspicion regarding the historical notion of the human, which placed “man” at the center and created a series of others—woman, non-white, queer, animal, inanimate and so on—that are inferior to him. In reaction to this notion, posthumanism moves past humanism and anthropocentrism (Ferrando 2019, 24). Taking discourses themselves to be shapers of subjectivity and adopting a renewed form of materialism, posthumanists try to rethink the human from an onto–epistemological perspective. In so doing, they demonstrate the arbitrariness of categorical boundaries and address instead the flows between humans and the non-human world. Iovino finds a similar trend in Calvino’s literary production, which can be seen as a hybridization of “human nature” and the non-human world because it depicts crossings among matter, forms and signs (2014, 220).

The aim of this article is to further investigate the role of Italo Calvino as a precocious posthumanist writer by looking at his *Fiabe italiane* (1956), a compilation of two hundred folk and fairy tales adapted mainly from nineteenth-century collections. Calvino’s study of folklore, which culminated in his selection and rewriting of traditional fairy tales for a modern audience was an important source for the depictions of hybridization prevalent in his other writings.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the relationship between humans and animals in the *Fiabe*, the present essay will first discuss how subjectivity can be viewed from a posthumanist point of view, introducing the notion of transversal subjectivity. Building on this notion, it will show how narrative can assume a post–anthropocentric perspective that centers on becoming rather than being. While being is typically associated with stable ontological categories such as “human” and “animal,” becoming considers the porousness of entities and allows one to see how they constitute each other, hence problematizing their boundary distinctions. My analysis will then focus on the relationship between humans and animals, proposing a reading of fairy-tale metamorphosis in line with what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call becoming–animal. Each theoretical point will be presented

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<sup>1</sup> Iovino concentrates on *Le Cosmicomiche* (*Cosmicomics*, 1965) and *Palomar* (*Mr. Palomar*, 1983), but she discusses similar tendencies in the trilogy *I nostri antenati* (*Our Ancestors*, 1952, 1957, 1959) and *T con zero* (*ti zero*, 1967). In this list, one can include *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*, 1972) and *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, 1979).

together with a tale from Calvino's collection, with the purpose of arguing that one can apply the term hybrid tales even to stories that are not authored, but only modified, by Calvino.

### **Transversal Subjectivity**

Fairy tales can be generally described as short stories that necessarily imply the use of magic and that have circulated broadly over time and across cultures, making them “a form of fiction that is collectively owned rather than individually authored” (Teverson 2019, 1). Given their ubiquity, it would be misleading to describe fairy tales in terms of their national characteristics. Although in the introduction to *Fiabe*, Calvino sometimes tries to differentiate Italian fairy tales from the Grimm collection, in his investigation he insists on the narrative force of the genre, emphasizing three features. First, he argues that these stories offer “il catalogo dei destini che possono darsi a un uomo e a una donna” (1993, 13; “the catalog of potential destinies of men and women” [Calvino 1980, xviii]), drawing a parallel between the complexities in fairy tales—among which he includes arbitrary divisions among humans and between humans and the rest of the material world—and the complexities that appear in a person's life. What is seminal in fairy tales for Calvino is the staging of the individual desire to find freedom and determine one's own destiny. Comparing stories that belong to the same tale type, he discovered that there cannot be a single path to liberation, rather, “la sostanza unitaria del tutto, uomini bestie piante cose, l'infinita possibilità di metamorfosi di ciò che esiste” (Calvino 1993, 13; “there must be present the infinite possibilities of mutation, the unifying element in everything: men, beasts, plants, things” [Calvino 1980, xix]. From this insight, he discovers two additional features that, according to him, unite all fairy tales: “infinita varietà ed infinita ripetizione” (Calvino 1993, 11; “infinite variety and infinite repetition” (Calvino 1980, xviii). The correlation between these features—“the unifying element in everything,” and the idea of infinite variety and repetition—allows for a consideration of the narrative potentialities of fairy tales vis-à-vis posthumanism: the first because it assumes a common trait, which can be regarded as a mix of discourse and matter, that links all entities, and the second and third by emphasizing the importance of difference and repetition in storytelling.

Calvino's understanding of fairy tales aligns well with posthumanism because, through the texts, he tries to move beyond the Cartesian subject as a closed entity that interacts with and is opposed to an object. Instead, he concentrates on the flows between the subject and object, leading toward the idea of the transversal subject that is found in posthumanist discourse. Posthumanism presents both a continuation as well as a detachment from humanism. Once the humanist construction of the human is shown to be incompatible with a twenty-first-century perspective, one cannot merely reject the historical category of “human,” because it could always reenter the new system under a different form. While a sharp rupture with humanism is not possible, some branches of posthumanism propose a transcendence from it, arguing that subjects constitute each other and are not the result of a binary opposition between humans and the other, hence the need to rethink subjectivity (Ferrando 2019, 66).

In her analysis of the convergence between the critique of humanism and post-anthropocentrism, Rosi Braidotti writes that posthuman subjects are works-in-progress that continue interrogating what being human means (2019, 41). Pivotal to the constitution of subjectivity is its relational capacity, which is driven by the subject's “ability to extend towards and in proximity with others” (ibid., 42). This understanding of subjectivity is modeled after

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "haecceity"<sup>2</sup> ("thisness" or particularity). For Deleuze and Guattari, a body is defined not by its form, but by the forces that permeate it and its relations of speed and slowness (1987, 260).<sup>3</sup> Haecceity is a mode of individuation that does not coincide with a stable person, thing, or substance; instead, haecceities "consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected" (ibid., 261). Therefore, the subject is not given. As a relational entity, it is constituted through its encounter with other haecceities, making it a transversal subject that constantly affects and is affected by others.

The unifying elements that Calvino identifies in fairy tales, particularly their attention to the arbitrary division among humans and non-humans, creates space for the emergence of this transversal subject. Significantly, *Fiabe* opens with "Giovannin senza paura" ("Dauntless Little John"), a story in which the protagonist visits a palace inhabited by a giant whose limbs fall down the chimney only to compose and recompose (Calvino 1980, 3–4; 1993, 59–61). If it were not for the fact that he is dauntless, Little John would have probably died of fear like all the others before him who visited the palace. This tale is more than a story about bravery, however; the weaving of magical and common elements has the effect of destabilizing, from the very beginning, the notion of a fixed subject in favor of a transversal one—the giant—that is permeated by forces that constitute it through its relation with John. The giant has a voice, yet his limbs are presented as accessories that only temporarily assemble to create a full, recognizable body, only to disassemble again after the spell is broken. The same spell affects the entire collection, commenting, from a metanarrative point of view, on the characteristics of fairy tales that compose and recompose themselves, letting voices speak without being ultimately attributable to a finite "essence" or "type." Within the texts of the *Fiabe*, one can thus see the emergence of a transversal subject that challenges a fixed categorization into, for example, a "human"; the same principle is then applied to the entire collection, in which each text attempts to catapult the fairy tale as a narrative form into the terrain of posthumanism.

### Fairy Tales as Post–Anthropocentric Narratives

The need to surpass the conception of an enclosed human subject for a more open notion of transversal subjectivity can only be met by assuming a post–anthropocentric perspective. Posthumanists generally agree that a strict binary division between nature and culture is no longer tenable and instead regard the world in a nature–culture continuum (Massumi 2002, 6) or as composed of naturecultures (Haraway 2003). The argument seeks to overcome the linguistic

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<sup>2</sup> John Duns Scotus (1266–1308) was the first to introduce the term "haecceity" and used it to define a non-qualitative property of a substance of thing. As reported in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "substances, on the sort of metaphysics defended by Scotus, are basically collections of tightly unified properties, all but one of them qualitative; the one non-qualitative property is the haecceity" (2014). Haecceity was used to explain individuality.

<sup>3</sup> In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write that "*a body is defined only by a longitude and a latitude*" (1987, 260). The two terms are not used with their present-day meaning. Deleuze provides a definition in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*: "We call longitude of a body the set of relations of speed and slowness, of motion and rest, between particles that compose it from this point of view, that is, between *unformed elements*. We call latitude the set of affects that occupy a body at each moment, that is, the intensive states of an *anonymous force* (force for existing, capacity for being affected). In this way we construct the map of a body. The longitudes and latitudes together constitute Nature, the plane of immanence or consistency, which is always variable and is constantly being altered, composed and recomposed, by individuals and collectivities" (1988, 127–28).

construction of subjectivity by reconsidering the role of matter, without however essentializing it. What is needed, therefore, is a reconsideration of human and non-human relations on an epistemological as well as an ontological level. To this purpose, Karen Barad proposes the notion of “agential realism,” which considers the emergence of humans from the intra-action between meaning and matter: “Intra-actions are not the result of human interventions; rather, ‘humans’ themselves emerge through specific intra-actions” (2007, 352). There are no humans prior to their intra-action with the world, as there is no world prior to the intra-action with humans: subject and object are already the result of a relation, and discursive codifications are strata that overlap with the material flows between the human and its others. This onto-epistemological view shakes the foundations of anthropocentrism, proposing to look at the world from a perspective that sees past the human.

An analogous discussion of the relation between humans and the world can be found in narrative as a cultural form, and particularly in the ways that reality and fiction are linked by their play of differences. Lucia Re argues that narrative makes the implicit claim to be a repetition of something that has happened in reality, establishing a connection between the real world and the world represented in a text (1990, 171). However, the mediation of language acts as a marker of the fact that reality and fiction cannot be equated because there is always a deviation between the two. Therefore, narrative is a repetition of reality that implies difference: it is not a re-presentation of real events but a transfiguration (ibid.). Such a conception of representation resonates with Deleuze’s discussion of the term in *Difference and Repetition*. Deleuze argues that representation does not capture difference: “It mediates everything, but mobilizes nothing” (1994, 55–56). If the world were representable, one would need to assume the existence of a stable world, already divided into categories, that can be then mediated by language, and difference would emerge from the interaction between these categories. Contrary to this position, Deleuze tries to think of difference-in-itself in the affirmative mode. He argues that the only possible ontological proposition is that “Being is univocal,” but that such a proposition does not rest on pre-constituted beings (ibid., 35–36). Instead, he discusses the process of individuation, maintaining that

We must show not only how individuating difference differs in kind from specific difference, but primarily and above all how individuation properly *precedes* matter and form, species and parts, and every other element of the constituted individual. Univocity of being, in so far as it is immediately related to difference, demands that we show how individuating difference precedes generic, specific and even individual differences within being. (ibid., 38)

Similar to Barad’s theory of agential realism, Deleuze sees difference as the principle which, through individuation, precedes a unified vision of reality. Repetition thus involves a repetition of difference, capturing not an individual as it is, but as what it is becoming. From this point of view, narrative is no longer the repetition of reality, but it is the textualization of the becoming of reality, with its specific actualizations but also the virtual potentialities it contains.

In *Fiabe*, Calvino makes a similar move away from the thing that is directly represented, aiming at the differentiating principle that underlies it. Explaining his methodology in the introduction to the collection, he writes that he consulted all the variations of a tale type he could find, translated them and enriched the texts where he considered it necessary (Calvino 1980,

xix). Although he writes that he had the intent of restoring a text's "lost originality," what he learns from the publication of *Fiabe* is that "forse la funzione morale che il raccontar fiabe ha nell'intendimento popolare, va cercata non nella direzione dei contenuti ma nell'istituzione stessa della fiaba, nel fatto di raccontarle e d'udirle" (Calvino 1993, 50; "the moral function of the tale, in the popular conception, is to be sought not in the subject matter but in the very nature of the folktale, in the mere fact of telling and listening" [Calvino 1980, xxx]). To varying degrees, readers and listeners of a folk or fairy tale are made aware of the process of constructing narrative. If narrative textualizes the virtual potentialities contained within the real, then storytelling is the practice through which one can observe the becomings of transversal subjects. In "Il pappagallo" ("The Parrot"), Calvino takes further the re-membering of the giant in "Dauntless Little John" by staging the confrontation between the human and the animal (Calvino 1980, 45-48; 1993, 121-25). Albeit formally different, humans and animals both show how there is an element that unifies them, as argued by Calvino in the introduction of *Fiabe*.

"The Parrot" begins with a merchant who needs to go away on business and does not want to leave his daughter alone because there is a king courting her whom the father wishes to resist. Before departing, the merchant tells her not to open the door. That morning, the girl has a conversation with a parrot. Because she enjoys it, she asks her father to buy her one to entertain her while she stays locked in the house, and the merchant satisfies this request. Immediately upon the merchant's departure, the newly acquired parrot begins to tell the girl a story that is repeatedly interrupted by knocks at the door from emissaries of the suitor king who try to deliver letters to the merchant's daughter in order to seduce her. However, she does not want to open the door until the parrot's story is concluded. Recognizing what is happening, the parrot extends and defers the end of the story until the merchant is back, at which time the bird reveals its true identity as a second king who also seeks the daughter's hand in marriage. The protagonist of the parrot's story-within-the-story, a princess, twice refuses to marry, and the third time she accepts. The only reason the king/parrot concludes its story with this acceptance is because the merchant has returned home, and the king/parrot can confront him directly. At this point, the king/parrot removes his disguise and reveals that he cross-dressed as a bird in order to court the merchant's daughter. Knowing that he was in competition with another king who was trying to trick the girl, he explains, he had surmised that telling stories, for him, was a better way of courting. The merchant accepts this explanation and allows the king/parrot to marry his daughter.

Calvino writes in his annotations that the motif of the parrot that saves the chastity of a woman by narrating stories is found in the ancient Indian traditions, and that he discovered variants of the same type in different regions of Italy (Calvino 1980, 718; 1993, 1092). However, in his own version, Calvino decided to focus primarily on the function of storytelling. The king/parrot's story is centered on a princess whose father has been murdered. She visits different palaces, where she manages to save two princes from a trick and a spell, respectively, and both times the monarchs ask the princess to marry their sons. Given that outside of the story the merchant has not returned, the king/parrot builds into his tale the princess' refusal to marry. In the third part of the story-within-the-story, coinciding with the merchant's return, the parrot makes the princess agree to marry the king she has just helped. The three parts have the same structure, and as is typical of fairy tales, it is only with the third one that the story can end. However, Calvino writes in the introduction to *Fiabe* that there is something behind the act of storytelling: "[Il narratore] stesso crede forse di far solo delle variazioni su un tema; ma in realtà finisce per parlarci di quel che gli sta a cuore" (Calvino 1993, 50; "perhaps the narrator thinks

that he is producing only variations on a theme, whereas actually he ends up telling us what is in his heart” [Calvino 1980, xxxi]). The king/parrot’s narrations are then seen as access points to *his* own desires, which revolve around the confrontation of the human with a non-human other. For the king/parrot, however, the other is not an animal, but an inanimate entity, a doll that looks like a human and has the same capacities to affect other bodies.

In the story–within–the–story, because the princess has nobody with whom she can play, she is given a doll that looks exactly like her. “Dappertutto dove andava si portava dietro questa bambola e non si capiva chi era lei e chi era la bambola” (Calvino 1993, 121–22; “Everywhere she went the doll went too, and no one could tell them apart” [Calvino 1980, 45]). One day, the doll, the princess and her father are in a carriage when they are attacked by enemies who kill the father and kidnap the princess, leaving the doll behind. The doll reappears in the third part of the king/parrot’s story, where another king falls in love with it and remains in his room: “stava chiuso nella sua stanza a contemplarla e piangeva perché non era una donna viva” (Calvino 1993, 124; “admiring it and weeping because it was not a real live maiden” [Calvino 1980, 47]). When the princess sees the doll, there is a dual moment of recognition: the maiden recognizing the doll as hers, and the king recognizing the maiden as his bride. The inanimate doll acts as the princess’ double, the repetition of an animate entity that, being a repetition, carries with it a difference. However, it is no less real than the princess, because the doll is able to make the king fall in love with it, showing how inanimate objects are able to affect humans as well. Arguably, if one accepts what Calvino says about the narrator expressing what is in his heart, then one sees in the events around the doll a deeper connection between a human and a non-human entity. In other words, for the king/parrot, the doll is not considered hierarchically inferior to the real-life daughter, both having the ability to influence the life of other people. Particularly, the doll provides company to the princess and makes the king fall in love with it, placing on the same plane the human and the non-human.

The doubling and the horizontalization of humans and non-humans are repeated with the king/parrot. Similar to the princess and the doll, there are two parrots in the story. The first one appears at the beginning of the tale: “Questa figlia aveva quel mattino visto su di un albero fuor della finestra un bel pappagallo. Era un pappagallo ben educato e la ragazza aveva preso a far con lui conversazione con gran divertimento” (Calvino 1993, 121; “the daughter had seen a handsome parrot in the tree outside her window. He was a well-bred parrot and the maiden had delighted in talking with him” [Calvino 1980, 45]). The merchant then buys a parrot who is actually a king in disguise. The king/parrot might have learned from the first parrot that the daughter was looking for an animal of the same species, already suggesting a confrontation of humans with animals not from a privileged position, but instead, as two species sharing the same world and exchanging information. He then proceeded to become a copy of the first handsome and well-bred parrot. Though the parrots are similar in appearance and both of them delight the princess in conversation, their differences become apparent when the king removes his disguise. If, through storytelling, the king/parrot is showing what is in his heart, namely, the coming together of two humans via the non-human doll, then one can project the same idea onto Calvino himself. From a metanarrative perspective, Calvino, by putting the parrot into the text, reveals his own desire. In this case, the desire is to overcome anthropocentrism by presenting two individuals, a parrot and a human, that are able to appear the same. As a result, the separation assumed by the ontology of being is replaced by one based on difference and becoming: the parrot is caught in the act of becoming a human while it speaks with the daughter; similarly, the

king is portrayed in the act of becoming a parrot. Calvino thus asks the reader what it means to become a parrot storyteller, indirectly questioning the arbitrary division of beings by staging entities in their process of becoming.

### **From Mimesis to Becoming**

Focusing on becoming instead of being opens a post–anthropocentric perspective that characterizes the relationship between humans and animals as one of coevolution. This point is demonstrated in Roberto Marchesini’s concept of animal epiphany. Observing the role that mimetic behavior plays across species, Marchesini argues that mimesis, “an aspect that characterizes the human being as hybrid, opens us to readings of anthropopoiesis (the human self-making shaped within the cultural sphere) that contest the idea of the emergence of identity as a self-referential process” (2014, ix). The evolution of the human species is closely linked to the imitation not just of members of the same species, but of other species as well. This suggests that nature and culture cannot be separated but also that, as Barad has it, their intra–action is essential to how each entity develops into something different. The imitation of other entities is so profound that, according to Marchesini, it “causes a new ontic plane to emerge and cannot be subsumed in the beings that determined it” (ibid., xviii). In fact, the encounter with the animal other is so impactful on the process of anthropopoiesis that it becomes a form of epiphany.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that through mimesis one cannot start from individual beings but instead must observe the becoming of such beings and look at how they intra–act in naturecultures.

A similar textualization of the mimetic process across species appears also in Calvino’s “Il linguaggio degli animali” (“Animal Speech”), where the protagonist, by learning the languages of the animals, sets up the basis for a world that does not center around the human (Calvino 1980, 68–71; 1993, 156–59). In this story, Bobo, the son of a rich merchant, is sent to study “all the languages.” When Bobo returns home, he tells his father that he did not learn human languages, but those of the animals. Angered by this news, the father tells two of his servants to take Bobo to the forest and kill him. Bobo understands what is happening by listening to the horses that pull the carriage. At this point, the merchant’s dog, who followed them, decides to give its life to save Bobo, and the servants agree to the substitution. Bobo is set free to wander in the forest, where he reaches two farmsteads, and thanks to his ability to understand animals, he helps the families prevent an enemy attack and heal a young girl. Walking on, he meets two travelers who are going to Rome for the election of the new pope. Bobo learns from a group of sparrows that one of these three individuals will become pope. They all go to Rome, where the reader learns that the election is made by having a dove fly over someone’s head. Bobo becomes pope, at which point his mortified father comes out of the crowd and asks for forgiveness. “Bobo gli perdonò, e fu uno dei migliori papi che ebbe mai la Chiesa” (Calvino 1993, 159; “Bobo

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<sup>4</sup> Marchesini uses the example of flying by imitating the act of a bird. He writes that “if it is true that the flight of a bird has the characteristics of a phenomenon—which can be admired or studied in its aerodynamic or divinatory characteristics—we can talk about mimesis in the full sense of the word (and not just an observation) when the observer does not see the flight of the bird as such but sees in that flight his own possible existential dimension. This is what I call the ‘epiphanic function of otherness’: when the flight of a bird transcends the phenomenal aspect and says something that goes beyond the extraneousness of the phenomenon, taking on an inspiritive role of ontopoietic order” (2014, xix).



forgave him and turned out to be one of the best popes the church has ever had” [Calvino 1980, 71]).

The story begins with an ironic misunderstanding, namely, the assumption that Bobo would learn human tongues when “Il padre lo affidò a un maestro assai dotto, perché gl’insegnasse tutte le lingue” (Calvino 1993, 156; “The father therefore put the boy in the charge of a learned teacher, who was to teach him all the languages” [Calvino 1980, 68]). But the play on the possibility of humans to understand animals poses problems for anthropocentrism. In the notes to the story, Calvino writes that the motif belongs to an old European superstition, but also remarks that the revelation of the merchant’s plan through the horses and the dog’s sacrifice are his own additions (1980, 720; 1993, 1095). That the discovery happens thanks to an animal suggests that Calvino is trying to stage two opposing positions towards animal language. On the one hand, there is the merchant who hates the sounds that animals make, stating that the sparrows “mi rompono i timpani ogni sera,” (“shatter my eardrums every evening”) and the frogs also “ci mancavano a tenermi allegro...” (Calvino 1993, 156; “get on my nerves” [Calvino 1980, 68]). Adding to this aversion, he believes that Bobo’s education was a waste of money. His resentment towards animals, however, is not merely a personal opinion, but it belongs to the sphere of the spiritual. When Bobo first offers to translate what the sparrows are saying, the merchant ironically asks if he is a soothsayer. Later on, thinking that this behavior has riskier implications, the merchant associates “questa sapienza del linguaggio animale [con] una mala arte” (Calvino 1993, 156–57; “this knowledge of animal speech with witchcraft” [Calvino 1980, 68]). In this way, the character of the merchant is constructed as a person who believes in a clear-cut separation between humans and animals with no possible communication between the two. Animals for him are there to bother him, like the sparrows and the frogs, or to serve him, like the horses and the dog. The acknowledgment that there is some porousness between the human and other species is felt as threatening and quickly associated with an evil power, an idea that is proven wrong when Bobo is elected pope.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are Bobo and the teacher. From what Bobo reports to his father, one learns that “Le lingue degli animali sono più difficili, e il maestro ha voluto cominciare da quelle” (Calvino 1993, 156; “The tongues of the animals are harder, so the teacher decided to start with them” [Calvino 1980, 68]). The statement implies that instead of positing humans and animals on two different planes, between which communication is not possible, the story offers instead a view of animal speech as a continuation of human speech. The fact that there are multiple animal languages and not just a generalized, non-human language indicates that the story acknowledges the diversity among animals instead of constructing a unified, othered category. One could then suppose that animal tongues are harder to learn because they are further away from other human tongues, just as an Italian native speaker might have more difficulties learning Japanese compared to French. However, Bobo’s ability to understand animals goes deeper. If learning a language comes from the repetition of the language, then one can start to see how Bobo is performing the type of mimesis that Marchesini describes. Contrary to the demonic connotation that the merchant finds, this mimetic practice has multiple advantages for the human, and it plays a seminal role in his development. In fact, Bobo’s ability to understand animals helps him save his own life, the life of a family from incoming criminals,

and that of a girl who was punished by God after throwing away a Host.<sup>5</sup> In order to accomplish these feats, he needs to be seen not simply as an enclosed subject, but rather as a transversal one in the constant process of becoming something else, getting closer to the animals with which he intra-acts.

This pattern culminates in the last event of the story, when Bobo, sitting with the travelers, learns from the sparrows that one of the three of them will become pope. The scene parodically equates Bobo with the Messiah: exiled by his father, after performing some miracles, he ultimately becomes one of the best popes the church has ever had. Outside of the religious dimension, the tale acquires an allegorical meaning that has to do with Bobo's intra-action with animals. Animals, the story suggests, are not portrayed as passive others, but each of them, diversified, plays an active role in shaping the world of humans. The merchant's dog offers its own life to save Bobo; another dog warns the farmers that criminals are attacking at midnight; a group of frogs explains why the girl is ill; the flock of sparrows tells Bobo that one of the three will become pope; and at the end, the pope is "elected" by an animal. "Animal Speech" thus takes a stance towards animal communication, depicting it not only as a useful skill, but as an essential one that can save the lives of many entities, from humans to animals. This implies that if humans were to listen to the non-human world—outside of the allegory, a form of listening that does not rest solely on linguistic communication—and acknowledge their intra-actions, this act of listening would provide the background for an ethical position that could ultimately lead to preventing the unnecessary suffering visited upon human and non-human entities.

### **Metamorphosis and Becoming-Animal**

One of the closest connections between humans and animals observable in fairy tales is the experience of metamorphosis. Metamorphosis is typically seen as the transformation from one fixed form of being into another. But if humans and animals constitute each other through their intra-actions, then one needs to conceive them not according to their being, but their becoming. One strategy for looking at metamorphosis from a posthumanist perspective is to understand it as becoming-animal.<sup>6</sup> In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that becoming-animal always involves a multiplicity that is contagious to other multiplicities, and by these relations they become assemblages (1987, 239).<sup>7</sup> The transversal subject discussed in this article comes

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<sup>5</sup> In the first instance, Bobo learns from a dog that a band of criminals is attacking the farmstead at midnight. He tells the farmers to be ready for the attack, and they are able to save their lives and their belongings. When Bobo is approaching the second farmstead, he hears a group of frogs that are playing with a Host that a girl had thrown in the ditch six years previously. Learning that the girl has been ill ever since, he tells the family to find the Host and have the girl receive communion. After this is done, the girl quickly recovers.

<sup>6</sup> The extension in time as well as the contamination of genres of folk and fairy tales make these texts difficult to reduce to a list of functions or narrative possibilities. The reasoning presented here simplifies how metamorphosis can happen in fairy tales, and how it can be interpreted. The scope of this statement is primarily to take one of the most common instances of metamorphosis and to address it from a different perspective, hoping to shift the current understanding of metamorphosis both in literature and in the world. Further, this does not mean that whenever there is metamorphosis in fairy tales, this is a clear challenge to the categorization of being. The theory, while it tries to abstract from a reality that cannot be subsumed, acknowledges the contradictions and problems that this whole operation entails. It must be regarded as an act of creative thinking.

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari discuss multiplicity as one of the principles that helps explain the rhizomatic structure of *A Thousand Plateaus*. A multiplicity "has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature (the laws of combination therefore

close to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of multiplicity. Becoming-animal then is the way through which a transversal subject, for example a human, intra-acts with another subject such as an animal. The two combine in a way that challenges the categorical differentiation of beings, creating in fact a hybrid structure. Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that becoming-animal is not becoming *like* an animal, it is not merely acting like an animal for the sake of playing, but entails hybridizing the subject. Calvino's "Body-without-Soul" ("Corpo-senza-l'anima") illustrates all of the theoretical arguments made thus far, focusing on a transversal subject that approaches the world through the way it intra-acts with him and by becoming hybrid with the various animal entities he encounters during his journey (Calvino 1980, 18-21; 1993, 81-85).

"Body-without-Soul" is the story of Giuanin,<sup>8</sup> a boy of thirteen who desires to explore the world. His mother will allow him to leave home only if he can first fell a tree with a single kick. After several attempts, Giuanin finally succeeds and departs from home. He reaches a city where he manages to ride Rondello, a horse that has never been tamed before. This triggers the jealousy of the king's servants, who trick the king into commanding Giuanin to rescue his daughter, kidnapped by the sorcerer Body-without-Soul. Forced into this new adventure, Giuanin is riding through a forest when he meets four animals: a lion, a dog, an eagle and an ant. Giuanin helps the animals and in return he receives magical tokens that allow him to transform into four animals at will. He uses these objects to communicate with the princess and defeat the animals that guard the sorcerer's soul. After that, the princess kills Body-without-Soul, and she returns home with Giuanin, whom she marries.

The fairy tale begins with the imposition of a particular identity on the protagonist. When he expresses the desire to start an adventure, his mother holds him back because of his age and sets an improbable task, telling him: "Cosa vuoi andare a fare per il mondo? Non vedi che sei ancora piccolo? Quando sarai capace di buttar giù quel pino che è dietro casa nostra con un colpo di piede, allora partirai" (Calvino 1993, 81; "What do you expect to do out in the world? Don't you know you're still a little boy? When you're able to fell that pine tree behind our house with one kick, then you can go" [Calvino 1980, 18]). The felling of the tree functions as a rite of passage to mark Giuanin's entrance into adulthood. Significantly, the trial involves an act of strength and violence against nature, promoting an ideal of masculinity based on prowess and superiority over other entities. Arguably, Giuanin assumes this identity when he manages to overcome the tree with one kick, and reconfirms it at the end of the story when he gets married. However, although the beginning and the end of the fairy tale seem to conform to the humanist principles that put men at the world's center, everything that happens in between problematizes this reading.

This problematization becomes apparent when analyzing Giuanin's non-conformity to the majoritarian mode of adulthood, which he resists throughout the tale. A first marker lies in the name of the protagonist, where the use of the diminutive emphasizes a character that has not yet become a fully adult subject. Even though he has passed his coming of age test, Giuanin remains in the liminal state between childhood and adulthood, leaning more towards the former. His tendency to live in the world in the position of a child allows him to intra-act with other entities

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increase in number as the multiplicity grows)." Multiplicity is developed as a way of countering the logic of the One, that is, the humanistic understanding of being as divided into fixed categories (1987, 8).

<sup>8</sup> The translator uses the name Jack—a diminutive of John—possibly to maintain a connection with the English-language tale "Jack and the Beanstalk." Calvino, instead, calls his character Giuanin, which maintains the prefix *-in*. Since part of the argument will depend on Giuanin not yet being an adult, the Italian name will be used here.

from what could be called a posthumanist perspective. This is shown when Giuanin meets the horse Rondello:

Giuanin stette un po' lì a vedere, e s'accorse che il cavallo si metteva paura della sua ombra. Allora s'offerse lui, di domare Rondello. Gli andò vicino nella stalla, lo chiamò, lo carezzò, poi tutt'a un tratto gli saltò in sella e lo portò fuori tenendogli il muso contro il sole. Il cavallo non vedeva l'ombra e non si spaventava: Giuanin lo strinse coi ginocchi, tirò la briglia e partì al galoppo. (Calvino 1993, 81)

Looking on, [Giuanin] soon realized that the horse was afraid of its own shadow, so he volunteered to break Rondello himself. He began by going up to the horse in the stable, talking to it and patting it; then he suddenly jumped into the saddle and rode the animal outside straight into the sun. That way it couldn't see any shadow to frighten it. [Giuanin] took a steady hold of the reins, pressed his knees to the horse, and galloped off. (Calvino 1980, 18)

All citizens failed in taming Rondello. Giuanin, instead, succeeds because he does not approach the horse as an inferior animal, but as an equal. He does not use any kind of violence to subjugate the horse; instead, he talks to Rondello, already rejecting, like Bobo in "Animal Speech," the idea that animals do not possess language. In this way, Giuanin realizes that he and Rondello share the same world, hence the attempt to find a common ground. In their conversation, Giuanin discovers that the horse is afraid of his own shadow, a fear that the protagonist might have experienced himself in the past. Poignantly, the horse is scared by the shadows that are projected in the stable, a human construction, and not by those that he and Giuanin cast when they are out in the sun. It takes them a quarter of an hour of riding, after which Rondello was "ubbidiente come un agnellino; ma non si lasciava montare da nessun altro che da Giuanin" (Calvino 1993, 81–82; "as docile as a lamb, but let no one ride him after that but [Giuanin]" [Calvino 1980, 18]). This tale can be read at least in two ways. On the one hand, one might see a hierarchical dynamic at play, in which the human subjugates the animal using a trick, and it is the human who rides the horse. However, on the other hand, the fact that the horse does not let anyone else ride him indicates that Giuanin and Rondello establish a symbiotic relationship which is not based on a hierarchical structure but on trust, accord, and gratitude. It is the shape of their bodies, with an influence from the historical practice of humans riding horses, that establishes who is riding whom. A posthumanist perspective in this case demands that the action of riding not be seen as instrumental, as in riding a horse to get from point A to point B. Rather, it focuses on the affects and desires of Rondello, who allows Giuanin to sit on his back as a favor for helping him overcome his fears.

A similar sense of intra-action and friendship between humans and animals becomes clearer when observing Giuanin's encounter with the four animal helpers in the story. Forced into an adventure to rescue the king's daughter, the protagonist rides through a forest. Here, he meets a lion, a dog, an eagle and ant who ask for his help. They have found a dead donkey on the road, and since Giuanin is carrying a sword, they ask him if he can divide the donkey for them. The animals' request could be interpreted as an admission of inferiority on their part, but this interpretation would be too simplistic. First, one needs to take into consideration the shape of

their bodies, again, to realize that Giuanin is the only one who, being able to handle a sword, can divide the dead donkey with precise cuts. Second, it might be the case that the animals wanted to test Giuanin's generosity and willingness to cooperate before helping him in his quest; perhaps, they already knew that he would need their tokens to continue the adventure. In order to fully understand the character of the gifts, a consideration of the donkey's treatment is necessary. Giuanin helps the animals by dividing the dead body into parts that are proportionate to their needs. Thus, the parceling of the donkey discloses the idea that bodies, once dead, continue to live in other forms: the head will provide the ant with a home and nourishment; the hoofs will be gnawed on by the dog; the entrails will be the eagle's food; and the rest of the body will be consumed by the lion, as it is the largest animal (Calvino 1980, 19; 1993, 82). Therefore, there is the implicit idea that bodies are not enclosed beings but assemblages that, once dismantled, let matter join other assemblages. This principle becomes explicit with the gifts: the animals give Giuanin a part of their own bodies, furthering the idea that bodies can be membered and re-membered just like the dead donkey that will be food for the animals and transform into something else. Therefore, bodies are always caught in their becoming something else and cannot be fixed into stable states.

The animal parts that Giuanin receives manifest the most explicit instance in the tale of what can be defined as a becoming-animal. The lion is the first to speak, telling Giuanin: "Sei stato un buon giudice e hai servito bene. Cosa possiamo darti in segno di riconoscenza? Ecco una delle mie grinfie; quando te la metterai diventerai il leone più feroce che ci sia al mondo" (Calvino 1993, 82-83; "You did us a big favor and you were very fair. As one good deed deserves another, I'm giving you one of my claws which will turn you into the fiercest lion in the world when you wear it" [Calvino 1980, 19]). Subsequently, the dog gives Giuanin one of his whiskers that will allow the boy to transform into the fastest dog on earth; the eagle provides a feather from its wings to change into the biggest and strongest eagle in the sky; and the ant gives Giuanin a tiny leg, stating: "E io, io ti do una delle mie gambine, e quando tu te la metterai diventerai una formichina, ma così piccina, così piccina che non si potrà vederla neanche con la lente" (Calvino 1993, 82-83; "I'm giving you one my tiny legs. Put it on and you will become an ant so small that no one can see you, *even with a magnifying glass*" [Calvino 1980, 19; emphasis added]). The quality of these animal parts resonates with Donna Haraway's discussion, in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, of the three "leaky distinctions" that occurred towards the end of the twentieth century: the boundary between human and animal, the one between human-animal (organism) and machine, and the one between physical and non-physical (1991, 151-53). First, the one between human and animal: when Giuanin transforms into a lion, for instance, he is neither a boy nor a lion. Instead, he is seen as a becoming-lion, a hybrid that acquires characteristics of both, combining Giuanin's thoughts and desires with the physical appearance and abilities of a lion. Second, the one between organic and inorganic: the moment the animals remove their body parts, these become inanimate objects that can no longer be conceived of as "living organisms." On the contrary, they can be seen as prostheses that Giuanin can apply on his own body, turning him into something else. Third, the one between physical and non-physical: when Giuanin turns into an ant, he cannot be seen by anyone, not even by using a technological tool such as a magnifying glass, confusing the confines of the physical.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Haraway writes that "Modem machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible" (1991, 153). Becoming an ant, Giuanin is able to mimic a contemporary machine that, like code, can

The metamorphoses in “Body–without–Soul” can be viewed as transversal becomings because the fairy tale emphasizes the porousness and interconnectedness of bodies rather than their stable identities. On the one hand, there is Giuanin who, unlike the other humans in the story, decides to approach the animals not from a privileged position but as if they were his equals. This ultimately allows him to explore becoming–animal, countering the majoritarian behavior of his mother, the king and the servants. On the other hand, the animals themselves make use of language as a way of communicating with Giuanin. These are not anthropomorphized animals, however, because there is an emphasis on their “animality,” most of all their bodies, rather than on their supposedly human traits. From this different starting point, the story then highlights the similarities among different entities: Rondello shares Giuanin’s fear of shadows, and the four animals live together in the same forest, dividing the resources they find without being antagonistic toward each other—unlike the king’s servants, who hoped Giuanin would perish in trying to rescue the princess. The basis for the relationship between Giuanin and the animals seems to be a common agreement that they all live in the same culture, where “one good deed deserves another,” which can perhaps be seen as the moral of the story, if there is one. Although these individuals may differ from each other in terms of their shape, it is still possible to promote a world in which they can face together the threats posed by the next sorcerer or king, in which humans and non-humans can profit from each other’s help. In brief, Giuanin, Rondello and the four animals intra–act, they transform one another, showing the possibilities of an alternative, posthumanist existence.

### **The Posthumanist Storyteller**

Both as a writer and as a theorist, Calvino articulated ideas that are well-suited to a posthumanist understanding of the world. A manifestation of this inclination can be found in the lecture “Cibernetica e fantasmi,” where he mentions one of Elio Vittorini’s notes. Calvino writes: “Secondo Vittorini la letteratura finora è stata per troppo larga parte ‘complice della natura,’ cioè dell’errato concetto d’una natura immutabile, d’una natura–mamma, mentre il suo vero valore è nei momenti in cui si fa critica del mondo e del nostro modo di vedere il mondo” (Calvino 1995a, 222–23; “According to Elio Vittorini, literature until now has been too much the ‘accomplice of nature,’ that is, of the mistaken notion of an immutable nature, a Mother Nature, whereas its true value emerges only when it becomes a critic of the world and our way of looking at the world” [Calvino 1986, 22]). He then adds that literature can be viewed as a set of combinatorial games, making it the medium through which critical spirit can be transmitted to collective thought and culture (ibid., 21–22). Hence, literature, by combining and recombining its elements, has the ability to affect cultural constructions. Moreover, the idea of literature as a combinatorial game resonates with Calvino’s involvement, from the late 1960s, in Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle), where he was able to couple literature with mathematics through the production of variants, the result of which is testified in books such as *Le città invisibili* (1972) and *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (1979). On the one hand, the experimentation that resulted from Calvino’s participation in Oulipo partly illuminates his intention to push literature into unknown terrains, as a way of moving beyond common

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be everywhere yet invisible to the human eye. A similar comparison would be a bug used for eavesdropping, which is what Giuanin does when he takes the shape of an ant.

interpretations and narrative structures. This view aligns with Iovino's suggestion that Calvino sought to disfavor the "human" for a more posthumanist sensitivity. On the other hand, one could argue, along with Stephen Benson, that the posthumanist tendencies displayed in Calvino's texts can be seen as the correlation between two events: the publication of *Fiabe italiane* and the Oulipo experience, which sought to combine theory and fiction (2003, 67–68).<sup>10</sup>

To corroborate this idea, one needs first to remember that Calvino believed that the moral of fairy tales lies in the act of telling and listening. Further, as he recalls in *Lezioni americane (Six Memos for the Next Millennium)*, he remained attracted to fairy tales because they spoke to his "interesse stilistico e strutturale, per l'economia, il ritmo, la logica essenziale con cui sono raccontate" (Calvino 1995b, 660; "interest in style and structure, in the economy, rhythm, and hard logic with which [folk and fairy tales] are told" [Calvino 1992, 35–36]). He continues by stating that his desired effect was a combination of the conciseness of the texts he found with "the greatest possible narrative force" (ibid.). Benson finds a link between the mathematical experimentations conducted by Oulipo and the engagement with texts belonging to the popular tradition (2003, 79). In fact, both imply starting from a constraint, constructed arbitrarily or provided by a source, and creating something new. If the two events are comparable, this implies both that Calvino can be enumerated among the other storytellers before him who all created new variants, and that *Fiabe*, too, is the realization of new experimentations with literature.

In the preface to *Fiabe italiane*, Calvino comes to the conclusion that "folktales are real" because in the storytelling itself one finds the ability to instruct people and to question the separation between reality and fiction, projecting the non-situated past onto a virtual future of possibilities. Similar to what happens in his subsequent books, already in *Fiabe italiane* one is presented with a form of hybridtales: it is not just the fact that fairy tales themselves contain hybrids; it is also the extent of Calvino's interventions in them that moves the fairy tale close to discussions that are relevant for posthumanism. My discussion in these pages has followed this thread, starting from Calvino's desire to surpass the human, reaching the point where human–animal metamorphosis can be considered as a form of becoming. If Calvino is a posthumanist writer, part of this characterization can be attributed to his work on fairy tales, though this should not be seen as his sole source of inspiration. In some cases, fairy tales already textualize forms of becoming and picture a world in which humans and non-humans intra–act in a way that would enlarge the imaginary of posthumanists, temporally pushing back the traces of a human–created desire to surpass the human and to conceive of naturecultures. Arguably, this is one of the main traits that Calvino discovered in folk and fairy tales. He understood that storytelling is the means by which the human can learn from the non-human world. While in *Fiabe italiane* he did not mention in his annotations all the changes that he introduced in the original collections—collections which, it needs to be remembered, are already the result of the categorization and scrutiny of different compilers—one can notice that Calvino tried to emphasize aspects of the fairy tale that are closer to what today may be seen as posthumanist thought. Identifying with the parrot storyteller, Calvino showed his readers what fairy tales, in his own elaboration, can do:

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<sup>10</sup> Variation, which Calvino identified as one of the core features of folk and fairy tales, plays a relevant role in his later writings such as *Le cosmicomiche* and *Le città invisibili*. In the first, each story begins with an objective, scientific statement, around which the protagonist Qfwfq has a subjective reflection that is sometimes colored with surrealist undertones. In a similar way, *Le città invisibili* is divided into nine chapters; the fifty-five cities are in their turn divided into eleven categories, creating a second structure within the novel. The narration is thus driven by a mathematical model that sparks the literary variation around the theme of the city.

they are real in bringing to the fore the virtual possibilities of reality. They are also a way of addressing some of the problems that the world is facing, whether these problems materialize as a sorcerer, an evil witch, climate change, or advanced capitalism and the exploitation of human and non-human resources. If this is the case, then reading Calvino's collection not only illuminates his literary production, it also casts a new light on how his fairy tales, as fairy tales, can be read.

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