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“The scope of an epigram”: Quickness, Magic, and Marcovaldo’s Environmental Eye

Gioia Woods

“If a work is valid, it lends itself to considerations of its relevance not just to the period in which it was written, but also after that, when it is reality itself that will discover new meanings in the artist’s images.”

—Italo Calvino, letter to Armando Bozzoli, January 8, 1958.

Perhaps Italo Calvino’s most beloved short story among my students is “Funghi in città” (“Mushrooms in the City”), a tale about mushrooms found growing in an urban traffic median. Students tell me how the story offers them a “guilty pleasure” that confounds the expectation of critical detachment. They tell me how they are somehow drawn into the fabulist antics that characterize the narrative. In class when we pursue these feelings, they describe how the story connects ideological and material forces—humans and nonhumans, history and nostalgia, politics and change. They are most intrigued by the mushrooms themselves, whose spores arrive on the wind, having come from far away; “unusual gifts” noted only by “sensitive souls.” The mushrooms are mysterious in origin, messengers from “God knows where,” possessing a kind of magic that quickly enchants an unskilled laborer called Marcovaldo who waits at the tram stop. Like the mushrooms, Marcovaldo is an anomaly: he “possessed an eye ill-suited to city life,” never noticing things like billboards or traffic lights (Calvino 2001, 1). The mushrooms cast a spell over Marcovaldo in which the “gray and wretched world seemed suddenly generous with hidden riches” (Calvino 2001, 2). He is filled with hope beyond the expectations of his quotidian existence. At work he is absent-minded and distracted; at home he waxes poetic about the beauty of mushrooms and their transcendent flavor to his wife and six children. His heart in one moment is filled with loving anticipation of the mushrooms, and in the next is ridden with jealousy and suspicion of others who might know his secret. He becomes calculating and possessive as he furtively guards the mushrooms until the next rain. The morning after the rain he borrows a basket, gathers his children, and eagerly sets off to collect the other-worldly gifts. But upon approaching the median he notices his arch enemy, the street sweeper Amadigi, who has discovered a patch of even bigger mushrooms. “For a moment,” Calvino tells us, Marcovaldo was “frozen with anger, fury, then—as sometimes happens—the collapse of individual passion led to a generous impulse” (Calvino 2001, 4). The neighbors gleefully join in the harvest, each returning home with their share. But the mushrooms prove poisonous, and those who shared in their bounty wind up together the next day in hospital to have their stomachs pumped. However, “it was not serious because the number of mushrooms eaten by each person was quite small” (Calvino 2001, 4).

The mushrooms, from the time they arrive in the narrative as spores on the wind, exert a power on the disparate human and nonhuman actors, uniting them across fields of difference. The moment an object appears in a narrative, Calvino explains in “Rapidità” (“Quickness”), it is “charged with special force, becomes like the pole of a magnetic field or a node in an invisible network of relations” (Calvino 2016b, 39). Written in 1952, “Funghi in città” perfectly exemplifies

the elements of quickness described by Calvino in his *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (*Six Memos for the Next Millennium*).

The memo “Rapidità,” like the other memos, was originally intended to become part of a series of six lectures to be delivered at Harvard for the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures. The lecture series debuted in 1926 to provide a platform for a public intellectual to expand on the theme of “poetry in its broadest sense.” Calvino was to take the stage following a long line of creative luminaries, including T.S. Eliot (1932–1933), Igor Stravinsky (1939–1940), Meyer Shapiro (1966–1967), Jorge Luis Borges (1967–1968), and Czeslaw Milosz (1981–1982). Calvino was to deliver his six lectures in residence in 1985–1986, but in 1985 suffered the stroke that took his life.

Five of the lectures were finished; the sixth was only sketched out. Each lecture describes literary values for the upcoming millennium, an approaching event which by the mid-1980s was on the minds of billions of people. In 1988, *Lezioni americane* was published in Italy by Garzanti and in the United States by Harvard University Press under the title *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. The American title, according to his widow Esther Calvino, was chosen by Calvino himself (Calvino 2016b, viii).

Calvino described his overall intent and the specific purpose of the second lecture/essay “Quickness” as follows:

In each of these talks I’m choosing a particular quality dear to my heart to recommend to the next millennium, and today the quality I want to recommend is this: in an age dominated by other media that are much faster and more pervasive and that risk flattening all communications into a single, homogenous crust, the function of literature is to communicate among different things in terms of their difference, exalting rather than diminishing their differences, which is the proper role of language (Calvino 2016b, 54).

These are qualities of literary quickness that function differently than the quickness associated with rapid communication technologies; literary quickness, as Calvino suggests, insists on diversity instead of homogeneity, is expansive instead of reductive, is full instead of flat. It is *rapidità*, a quickness of mind, a mental agility that is fluid, animated, and mobile.

Calvino had been thinking about the values associated with quickness years before he was invited to participate in the Harvard lecture series. As he explains to middle school students at Santa Maria a Monte near Pisa in 1972 in reply to a letter asking him about the *Marcovaldo* stories, “one can use humor, irony, caricature, and maybe paradox to try to make people think about so many things that otherwise would escape their notice, make their minds work more quickly and reason more efficiently” (Calvino 2013, 587). Literary quickness is cultivated by attention to the time-honored literary elements that convey meaning (irony, paradox), which then result in mental agility.

Mental agility is about more than intelligence; it is an ability to connect what appears to be unlike, even opposed, in a way that maps new territory. Marcovaldo, the Chaplinesque hero of several short stories written and rewritten between 1952–1963, is ill-suited to urban life. Yet his observations of the natural world were acute: he “would never miss a leaf yellowing on a branch, a feather trapped by a roof-tile; there was no horsefly on a horse’s back, no worm-hole in a plank, or fig-peel squashed on a sidewalk that Marcovaldo didn’t remark and ponder over” (Calvino 2001, 1). Marcovaldo’s keen eye for the natural world and his inability to read the city leads to the near-fatal poisoning of himself and his neighbors. His anger and fury that transforms into

generosity saves the lives of himself and his neighbors. Calvino nimbly and swiftly draws these events into close proximity, establishing, as he says in “Rapidità,” “a logical relation of cause and effect among the various episodes” (Calvino 2016b, 38). Quickness is a habit of mind that literature, especially short stories, can cultivate. Calvino announces, “I’m here to wave a flag for the richness of short forms with all they presuppose in terms of style and density of content” (Calvino 2016b, 60).

In this essay, I argue for quickness as an essential value linking the old and new millennium. In doing so, I examine how quickness is deployed in Calvino’s celebrated *Marcovaldo* stories and suggest how quickness communicates impending cultural and environmental catastrophe. Ironically, quickness invokes its opposite: long histories of serfdom, resource extraction, economic migration, and the slow violence wrought by consumer capitalism. Positioned as he was during the “Great Acceleration”—the postwar period of rapid growth during which human action overtook other earth systems as the main governing factor in global processes—Calvino’s recommendation for quickness has special urgency for us as we move further into the Anthropocene.¹

I am not the first to note Calvino’s extraordinary environmental foresight. In her ecocritical survey of Calvino’s early works, Serenella Iovino argues that he “understood that something in the world’s embodied stories was changing” (Iovino 2018, 68). Calvino observes the vast environmental changes happening around him during the Great Acceleration and embeds them into his fiction. Iovino describes the *Marcovaldo* stories as tales of environmental justice, narratives that take up themes around “the right of people to share equally in the benefits of a healthy environment” (Adamson et al. 2002, 4). The postwar onset of rapid human growth and technological change gave rise to environmental injustice and what Rob Nixon calls “the environmentalism of the poor,” perpetuating violence that remains invisible because it plays out over temporal scales not easily accessed by typical narrative structures. Paradoxically, it is through the value of quickness that Calvino opens a space through which the reader can observe the effects of slow violence.

Quickness, Calvino explains in his memo, is realized through stylistic choices that “capture and link points that are far apart in space and time [...] giving narrative shape to abstract ideas of space and time” (Calvino 2016b, 58–59). As Calvino suggests in the letter I quote at the beginning of this essay, the validity of a work is determined by its contemporary relevance and its relevance to future generations. The *Lezioni americane* and the lecture “Rapidità” have in many ways predicted literature’s most critical twenty-first-century functions. On what would have been Italo Calvino’s one hundredth birthday, we confront the daily threats of climate breakdown, war, democratic collapse, and pandemic uncertainty. The Anthropogenic imagination is informed by the separation of nature and culture; throughout his memos Calvino recommends connection to the next millennium by repeatedly invoking the way literature can make connection possible. As he writes in “Molteplicità” (“Multiplicity”) literature establishes a “network of connections among events, people, among the things of this world” (Calvino 2016b, 129). In “Rapidità” he shows us how capturing links “far apart in space and time” renews our attachment to the world.

¹ See McNeill and Engelke, 2014. The Great Acceleration begins with the postwar detonation of atomic bombs and the rapid increase in fossil fuel consumption, when human action influenced “the carbon cycle, the sulfur cycle, and the nitrogen cycle,” accelerating the Anthropocene, an epoch characterized by humans’ outsized impact on global ecological systems (4–5).

Quickness: Re-Enchanting the World

Each of the memos, developed as they were in the old millennium, have significant value for the new. “Leggerezza” (“Lightness”) removes weight from language. “Esattezza” (“Exactitude”) precisely communicates the relationship between ideology and objects, while “Visibilità” (“Visibility”) renders the imagination seen. “Molteplicità” (“Multiplicity”) collects the knowledge of relationships among systems. What of “Rapidità?” And why is it so critical to the new millennium?

Calvino begins “Rapidità” by describing a short legend from 1315 in which Charlemagne becomes enchanted by a magic ring and is driven to obsessive attachment to people and places in possession of the ring. There is a tersely narrated series of events all connected by the magic ring, the “narrative element... which establishes a logical relation of cause and effect among the various episodes”; the ring is the “story’s true protagonist” (Calvino 2016b, 38–39). It is the magic object in this story and others which link the actors and the actions across time and space; the object defines the ways characters are related to one another, becoming the fulcrum in “an invisible network of relations” (Calvino 2016b, 39). The presence of this magic object enables a “quickness of events” and a “sense of inevitability” so critical to the story’s integrity and Calvino 2016b, 40).

Each of the stories eventually published in *Marcovaldo, ovvero le stagioni in città* (*Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City*) in 1963 make use of a magic object which quickly connects elements of space and time. City mushrooms, a park bench, a forest of billboards, a lab rabbit, a stunningly blue river, and a lunch box are among them; each functions to move the protagonist and the reader in a discursive way in and around the present, the past, and potential futures.

Calvino described these stories as comprising “a picture-album of strange little figures, of little stories full of movement and amusement even though sometimes they are a bit cinematographic or journalistic, in short a kind of *Thousand and One Nights* of postwar Italy” (Calvino 2013, 166). In *Thousand and One Nights*, Calvino observes, “time expands by means of a proliferation from one story to another [...] The art that allows Scheherazade to save her own life consists in knowing how to link one story to the other and also how to break off at just the right time—two operations on the continuity and discontinuity of time” (Calvino 2016b, 44–45). The *Marcovaldo* stories reveal continuity and discontinuity; they place the protagonist (and the reader) in a recognizable moment in the Great Acceleration, and they beg the question of potential discontinuity in time, too. If things persist as they are, will we be unable to forestall our own demise? And how does one learn to live in a time of uncertain futures?

As in several of the other *Marcovaldo* tales, time becomes a critical factor: the *funghi* will be ready to pick only at the right moment, and whoever discovers them in that moment will be in possession of their magical potential. Marcovaldo calculates the time they need to ripen, and after the rain, “he ran immediately to the patch” (Calvino 2001, 3). The magical object, Calvino explains in “Rapidità,” not only connects characters and events, it gathers and organizes narrative time: he writes, “events, regardless of their duration, become like points connected by straight-line segments in a zigzag fashion that suggests unceasing motion” (Calvino 2016b, 41). In this way, a story itself becomes “an enchantment that affects the flow of time” (Calvino 2016b, 41). In this compact story, time unfolds within the duration it takes for the mysterious mushrooms to ripen; they are the animate magic that dictate the story’s mobility, speed, and relationships among the human actors.

Calvino seemed to be thinking about relationships when he added to the cover of the 1963 publication a note describing his book like “a *Novellino* of contemporary Italy” (Calvino 2013, 559). This is a fitting comparison, as the *Novellino*’s short narratives, often about confusions resulting from changing social roles and relationships, “focus on the depiction of observable causes and effects, shunning complex elaboration and sustained length in favor of a more limited episodic structure” (Escher 2006, 14).² Like the *Marcovaldo* stories, the *Novellino* appeared at a time of dramatic economic boom as agrarian capitalism gave way to mercantile capitalism and a host of new wealthy elites began to assert their power. This development of a bourgeoisie, of new markets and new wealth, mirrors in many ways the economic boom in postwar Italy. The rapid development of consumer capitalism threatens Marcovaldo’s embeddedness in the natural world, where mushrooms can be foraged and where “[G]ifts from the earth [...] establish a particular relationship” (Kimmerer 2013, 25).

In “Funghi in città,” the mushroom is a mysterious gift which connects Marcovaldo to a more-than-human world and quickly transforms his “wretched world” into one filled with hope beyond what economic markers like the “stipulated salary, inflation index, family grant, and cost-of-living allowance” signify (Calvino 2001, 2). The mushroom is a messenger from another temporal space—perhaps a recent rural past, or an idealized Eden—that casts a spell over Marcovaldo. He transmits its powers to his children, the youngest of whom did not know what mushrooms were, by casting his own spell: “he explained ecstatically the beauty of numerous species, the delicacy of their flavor, the way they should be cooked”) until his children begged to know, “[W]here are these mushrooms? [...] Tell us where they grow!” (Calvino 2001, 2). The threat that the magic object could be stolen from him inspires in him a fit of suspicion and jealousy. The mushrooms have transformed his gray world, connected him to his family, and now seize his heart with apprehension. They further bring him into contact with the street-cleaner Amadigi, whom Marcovaldo had always disliked because Amadigi sought to eradicate any trace of nature with his broom.

The mushrooms also rewrite locations of agency. Marcovaldo recognizes them as what Jane Bennet calls *vibrant matter*, “thing-power,” a “not quite human capaciousness”; “vital players in the world” (3–4). Mushroom agency is perhaps best understood in the original Italian: “All’alba- era domenica-, coi bambini, con un cesto preso in prestito, corse subito all’aiola. I funghi c’erano, ritti sui loro gambi, coi cappucci alti sulla terra ancora zuppa d’acqua.-Evviva!” The mushrooms were there, erect on their stems.³ A close reading of “Funghi in città” reveals the way the *funghi* are the protagonists setting the chain of events in motion, controlling the tempo, gathering all forces into assembly: they blow in from a mysterious place, germinate, grow, captivate Marcovaldo, Amadigi, and their whole neighborhood, evoke a gift economy located in a rural past, lure them into a community harvest, and land them in hospital with food poisoning. The mushrooms are *ritti*, erect, suggesting *homo erectus*, the human ancestor who first stood upright

² Like *Thousand and One Nights*, the *Novellino* is a collection of stories that had been circulating in oral traditions for centuries before being collected in the late medieval period. The *Novellino* is considered the earliest collection of short stories in Italy. Dated to around 1300, the tales came from a variety of narrative traditions in Italy and, according to the anonymous anthologizer, are noted for their “fiori di parlare, di belle cortesie e di be’ risposi e di belle valentie e doni” (“beautiful speech, kind behavior, and acts or gifts of generosity” translation mine). The stories are what critic Franziska F. Meier calls “singular, peculiar moments” whose purpose was “to propose and enhance a courteous way of behaving” (Meier 2010, 4).

³ *Gambo*, a derivative of *gamba*, is the thinnest part of a stem supporting a mushroom cap, the continuous element connecting a mushroom to the earth. It is the “leg” (*gamba*) upon which the mushroom “stands up on its own feet,” suggesting a purposeful kind of agency.

and marking the evolutionary transition from ground-dweller to one who could walk and run long distances. Another clue to the mushrooms' agency lies in the translation of *evviva*. While *evviva* is often translated as "hurray," in this context it's worth recalling the root *vivere*, "to live." The mushrooms are alive, animate, and active, but not readily seen by the more seasoned city dweller. It takes the childlike, recently rural Marcovaldo to fall under their spell.

That "spell," according to political theorist Jane Bennett is "thing power" that adults are trained to suppress or ignore. Calvino agreed to market the Marcovaldo stories for children, giving the reader permission to encounter the mushrooms as beings with agency, intention, and consciousness. But the author's blurb on the overleaf of the 1963 Mondadori edition *Marcovaldo* reveal a more complicated objective, one that suggests Calvino staged the stories for a youth reader but meant also to appeal to a disenchanting adult public, to inspire in them a "quickness," an acuteness of feeling. *Marcovaldo* was published as part of the Libri per l'infanzia e la gioventù (Books for childhood and youth) series, and yet Calvino, who supplied the text of the anonymous blurb, wrote "Anche il lettore non più ragazzo vi troverà il divertimento pungente che è abituato a cercare nei libri di Calvino" (quoted in Jeannot 1991, 216; "Even the reader who is no longer young will find [in this book] the biting amusement that he is accustomed to searching for in Calvino's books").

In this context, adult actors in the story and adult readers have the "rhetorical advantage of calling to mind a childhood sense of the world filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not" (Bennett 2010, 20). The mushrooms, standing erect on their legs, meeting the human actors who stand on their own legs and stoop down to meet them, suggests relatedness, agency and animate power; a way of seeing non-human others that humans are encouraged to leave behind as they enter adulthood. The "life-matter binary," Bennett argues in *Vibrant Matter*, is "the dominant organizing principle of adult experience" (Ibid.). This organizing principle is rooted in the deep, pervasive bifurcation of the material and ideal worlds that has dominated Western thought for more than 2,000 years. Plato taught us that the world that appears to us is defective, a shadow of the perfect, eternal, unchanging ideal world beyond our senses; Christianity taught us that only man is animate, made in God's image; and Cartesian dualism taught us that mind and body are different substances, mind being privy to the faculties of thought and reason. Given this, how can we imagine a world in which mushrooms have agency, unless we relegate that proposition to the enchanted world of childhood? To imagine Marcovaldo's world and Calvino's critique, we must heed anthropologist Anna Tsing's injunction: if we only attend to narratives of progress, we will miss the ability to "look around rather than ahead." "[T]wentieth-century scholarship, advancing modern human concepts," she observes, "conspired against our ability to notice the divergent, layered, and conjoined projects that make up worlds" (Tsing 2015, 22).

The magical, "layered and conjoined" world evoked in the Marcovaldo stories are in contrast to a twentieth-century social reality largely characterized by scientific progress. The social theorist Max Weber's famous claim that all areas of human life can be mastered by calculation rendered modern life measurable, predictable, and without enchantment. In "The Vocation Lectures," delivered in 1917–1918, Weber recommended a new world in which "[S]cientific work is harnessed to the course of progress" whereas in art, "there is no such thing as progress" (Weber 2004, 11). Life is no longer ruled by "mysterious, unpredictable forces...on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*" (Ibid., 13). He goes on, "That in turn means the disenchantment of the world. Unlike the savage for whom such forces existed, we need no longer have recourse to magic in order to control the spirits or pray to them. Instead, technology

and calculation achieve our ends [...] Let us consider this process of disenchantment...has been at work in Western culture for thousands of years” (Ibid.). Wishing modern life to be “as it was in antiquity before the world had been divested of the magic of its gods and demons,” according to Weber, is a significant and debilitating cultural shortcoming which will forestall progress and the West’s global dominance (Ibid., 23). Everyday life has been stripped of magic, and the inability to “look the fate of the age full in the face” is a damning “weakness” (Ibid., 24). Weber believes our fate, that which characterizes the age, is “the disenchantment of the world” wherein the “most sublime values have withdrawn from public life” (Ibid., 30). While Weber might lament disenchantment, he sees it as an inevitable feature of the modern world.

As enchantment fell out of fashion, we humans detached ourselves from the material world, the wonders of nature, and the fate of the planet and, it turns out, from reading. The disenchantment of modern life not only shaped the academic practice of the sciences and social sciences, but it also profoundly affected the way scholars and readers approached the literary text. As literary critic Rita Felski explains, “literature’s awkward proximity to imagination, emotion, and other soft, fuzzy ideas” became tightly regulated by structuralism and deconstruction (Felski 2008, 59). In an age of disenchantment, literature is suspect because it transports us into another world and “confounds our deeply held beliefs about the rationality and autonomy of persons” (Ibid., 54). Felski’s recent work on literary enchantment, in which she discusses Weber’s pronouncement on the disenchantment of the modern world,⁴ is remarkably similar to “quickness,” a signal of Calvino’s prescience in recommending this quality to the next millennium. “To be modern,” Felski complains, “is to be ripped free of the bonds of tradition and superstition, to be borne along by shock waves of social upheaval and secular disenchantment” (Felski 2020, 9). But the mushrooms at his tram stop (re)attach Marcovaldo to the material world, quickly, like an epigram, dissolving the dichotomy between wild and domestic, thus challenging human illusions of exceptionalism, control, and autonomy. They grow in the poor soil of a sidewalk median, they are a companion species, surviving, like Marcovaldo, in the “unruly edges” of rapid urbanization and economic growth (Tsing 2012).

“Funghi in città” is precisely and triumphantly about enchantment. The mushroom is the magic object, the “narrative element [...] which establishes a logical relation of cause and effect among the various episodes,” the factor which challenges the life-matter binary, defies time, that which is alive and animate.

“Around the magic object there forms a kind of force field, which is the field of the story” [Calvino 2016b, 39]), Calvino explains in “Rapidità.” The story itself is a magical element that organizes time differently; we enter a world in which adult humans live in a childlike present where mushrooms are agential beings who collaborate with the wind, the rain, the soil, and the humans to bring about a conclusion. After the joyful mushroom harvest, “each took his own share and went home. They saw one another again soon, however; that very evening, in fact, in the same ward of the hospital. After the stomach-pump had saved them all from poisoning. It was not serious, because the number of mushrooms eaten by each person was quite small” [Calvino 2001, 4]). The mushrooms exercise their agency in and through the humans, interacting with their bodies in a way that reminds us that connectedness with the more-than-human-world is not a childhood fantasy, but a lived reality. The mushrooms land the humans in the hospital and remind human readers of how “[M]aking worlds is not limited to humans [...] world making projects can overlap, allowing room for more than one species” to be recognized for their agency and power (Tsing 2017, 22).

⁴ See *The Uses of Literature* (2008), *The Limits of Critique* (2015), and *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020).

“Thing power,” Bennett explains, is neither wholly material nor wholly autonomous: “it is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter [...] Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces [...] a *distributive agency*” (Bennett 2010, 20–21). Recognizing this kind of agency, how the mushroom acts with and through the hospitalized characters, establishes the kind of attachment that pulls human readers back into an enchanted world; the mushrooms stand in for the quickness that links us to life (Calvino 2016a, 38). Attachment is the aesthetic quality that, like quickness, aids us in “facing up to the ubiquity and inescapability of ties.” It encourages us to ask “[W]hat do we feel obligated to? What keeps us up at night?” (Felski 2020, 4).

From his late twentieth-century vantage point, Calvino foresaw the consequences of disenchantment. Without magic, we lose our ethical attachment to the world and thus perpetrate ever more significant environmental and social crises. By deploying the magic object and unfolding experiences of enchantment, Calvino invites readers into a world where human and nonhuman actors clumsily pursue—with pathos and humor—reattachment and re-enchantment. This attachment is achieved through quickness, a stylistic choice in which the magic object becomes the fulcrum of narrative time. The object is both metaphor and epigram, as we shall see.

Quickness: Vast Cosmologies in the Scope of an Epigram

In “Rapidità,” Calvino describes narrative time as a stylistic choice that can ease or disrupt narrative communication. In folktales and legends, Calvino writes, (“the quickness of events creates a sense of inevitability”) more powerful than a long story richer in details and “moral commentary” [Calvino 2016b, 40]). “Funghi in città” benefits from such quickness as events—connected by the mushrooms and unfolding rapidly on mushroom time—leave little room for (or need of) prescriptive moralizing. The problem of the story—the recognition and acquisition of the magic object, one that bespeaks a real or imagined rural past and reveals a newcomer’s keen rural eye and near-tragic misunderstanding of the type of mushrooms that might grow in a city—is addressed through the interplay of human and nonhuman characters. Marcovaldo, his family, Amadigi, and their neighbors all respond to the events taking place in the plot, the logic of time dictated by the mushrooms, not by a notion of time imposed upon by the reader or “outside” world.

Time is likewise a major concern in the very short story “La villeggiatura in panchina” (“Park-bench Vacation”). Here Marcovaldo yearns for a night’s sleep away from the alarm clock and the crying, snoring, and yelling of his family in their cramped apartment. Although his time is dictated by his eight hours plus overtime as an unskilled laborer in a big city, he longs for a night on a park bench governed by different sounds and rhythms—the twitter of birds, the cover of horse-chestnuts trees, the stars and moon.

The park bench functions as a metaphor for what’s lost and what’s longed for; it is short-hand for a vast complex of feelings, experiences, and desires. For Paul Ricoeur, a metaphor is always defined in terms of movement, a “change with respect to location” (Ricoeur 1979, 17). The park bench moves the reader from urban to rural, from city to country, from culture to nature, blurring the boundaries between. Metaphors disrupt whole complexes of meaning by destroying an order “only to invent a new one [...] one must say that metaphor bears information because it redescribes reality” (Ibid., 22). The park bench transports Marcovaldo and the reader instantaneously through space, and also through time. While it provides an opportunity to pause the frenetic rhythms of urban life, Marcovaldo’s attempts to pass a quiet night are thwarted by the sights, sounds, and

smells of the city. As dawn approaches, “[H]is mouth and eyes sticky, bewildered, with his back stiff and one hip bruised, Marcovaldo rushed off to work” (Calvino 2001, 12).

As the story’s magic fulcrum, the park bench performs two functions, one political, and one poetic. The park bench quickly fills what Ricoeur describes as a “semantic lacuna” by neatly referring to what’s missing, in this case, an image of the impossible, direct, unmediated experience of the natural world resulting from a centuries-long political history of Italian serfdom, economic migration, and social instability. The story is a not-so-subtle critique of class and environmental injustice. Marcovaldo’s *villeggiatura* is not a vacation to the beach or mountains; it is a restless night on a park bench. Confined as he is to his low-wage job in the city, Marcovaldo can access none of the privileges of a real vacation. The park bench is poetic because it deals in resemblances. Reading Aristotle, Ricoeur notes that the poet is one who perceives similarity “by suddenly combining elements” (Ricoeur 1979, 20, 33).

That the Marcovaldo stories resemble folktales is no accident. Calvino acknowledges he is drawn to their style and structure...the economy, rhythm, and basic logic that govern their telling” (Calvino 2016b, 42). In a folktale, “there is always a battle against time, against obstacles that impede or delay the achievement of a desire or the recovery of a lost possession” (Calvino 2016b, 43). The mushrooms growing in the median represent a delicious family meal, the park bench a respite from domestic confinement, but they also stand in for an unreachable past, before Marcovaldo and millions of migrants moved from the farm or *mezzadria* to the city and the factory. That centuries-long history becomes quickly communicated through the mushroom, the park bench, and, as we shall see, a stunningly blue river.

The Marcovaldo stories can be read in response to the relocation related to the long, slow collapse of the *mezzadria* system and the rapid growth of consumer capitalism prompted by the *miracolo economico*. The postwar period of economic boom transformed Italy from a war-damaged, impoverished, and mostly rural economy to an industrial power. Calvino was a vocal critic of the boom even after he left the Communist Party in 1957. His fiction remained alive to the seeming inevitability of social and environmental degradation and the slow violence that are its results.⁵

“Slow violence” is violence occurring “gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2011, 2). Coined as a term by Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, slow violence can include the invisible and creeping damage caused by events like “climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes [that] present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively” (Ibid.). Each of these planetary changes are hallmarks of the Anthropocene and especially of the Great Acceleration period. And here we confront a problem with narrative time and representation. How are we to represent, much less

⁵ Italian serfdom, known as the *mezzadria*, traces its origins to the ninth century. It was organized by a contract (*patto colonico*) in which a landowner and sharecropper were each entitled to half (*mezzo*) the farm product. The *mezzadro* and his family provided all the labor necessary for cultivating the land, which was, before the Fascist period, usually multi-purposed, growing cereals, olives, grapes, fruit, and vegetables. Typically, sharecroppers foraged for wild foods like mushrooms, kept an *orto*, or kitchen garden, chickens, and often a pig for their own use. The *mezzadria* system began to decline in the nineteenth century but became for Mussolini a convenient way to enact land reform during the inter-war period.

understand, forces outside our normal line of sight and our human life-span centered apprehension of time?

As a solution, Nixon calls for political, theoretical, and *imaginative* responses to slow violence. Decades before him, Calvino presciently advocated quickness to the next millennium as a means to “communicate among different things in terms of their differences” with “nimbleness, mobility, and ease” (Calvino 2016b, 54–55). It is through such quickness of style that Calvino is able to develop a highly effective critique of slow violence. Making narrative links between mushrooms and a rural past, a park bench and direct contact with nature, or, as we shall see, a billboard and a deforested city, Calvino creates an irony that “convert[s] into image and narrative” the slow-moving disasters that are “anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world” (Nixon 2011, 3). It is through quickness that Calvino captures meaning in an epigram. As he explains in “Rapidità,” he dreams of encompassing “vast cosmologies, sagas, and epics in the scope of an epigram” [Calvino 2016b, 61]. The cosmology of consumer culture, the saga of economic migrants, and the epic of post-war poverty come together in a billboard mistaken for a forest.

Quickness: Mercury

“Il bosco sull’autostrada” (“The Forest on the Superhighway”) recounts the effects of slow violence through a humorous and poignant misunderstanding. The story opens with Marcovaldo and his family suffering desperately from the winter cold, bundled in their overcoats, having “burned the last kindling” (Calvino 2001, 36). Little Michelino happens to be reading a fairy tale about a boy who goes to the forest with his hatchet to chop wood. Michelino, born and raised as he was in a city, “had never seen a forest, not even at a distance” (Calvino 2001, 37). Gathering his siblings, Michelino “went out in search of a forest” (Calvino 2001, 37). After walking through the city, they arrive at the start of the highway. There, “the children saw the forest: a thick growth of strange trees”) whose trunks “were very very slender, erect or slanting; and their crowns were flat and outspread, revealing the strangest shapes and the strangest colors” [Calvino 2001, 37]. Spellbound by the moon and ignorant of forests, the brothers chop down a billboard. Impressed by their haul, Marcovaldo returns to the “forest,” is mistaken by a patrolling officer as part of a billboard advertisement for a headache tablet, and proceeds to cut wood for fuel. The billboard as magic object deftly communicates a complex economic history in an instant: having replaced the natural forest for billboards ads for processed cheese, foot cream, and headache tablets, Calvino captures the scope of enormous change in an instant. He also succeeds in delivering a scathing critique of the Great Acceleration by invoking a reality that contradicts the values of the *miracolo economico*.

In a 1959 letter to Jewish Italian poet Franco Fortini, Calvino describes his critical approach to “bourgeoisie social structures” and the shortcomings of the contemporary literature of the left.

Instead of being consumed by a descriptive-analytical passion for things as they are, one must not accept reality and instead put up against it a reality that maybe does not exist but that solely because you are proposing it acquires a strength and influence of its own. This is the strength of utopia, which is very topical today, while the “scientific” revolution seems to have lost its way. Against this, one must put forward representations of even partial values but one that can enter into contradiction with things as they are (Calvino 2013, 175).

This idea gets further developed more than thirty years later in “Rapidità”; it is a critique that does not dwell in pessimism, but dialectically proposes new ways of reading and of being in the world. The contradiction between forests and billboards not only provokes humor, it offers a serious critique of the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. That Marcovaldo is mistaken as part of a billboard advertisement by a police officer who refuses to wear his eyeglasses because of vanity quickly and effectively draws our attention back upon ourselves. The “quickness of events creates a sense of inevitability” of slow violence resulting from the practices of consumer culture. We are at once Marcovaldo perched on a billboard sawing away plywood for fuel, and Officer Astolfo unable to clearly see the human being amidst the simulacrum of the advertisement. It is the hyperreal, where what is perceived as “real” exists without origin.⁶ The forest is not a forest, but a cluster of billboards; Michelino learns about a forest not from direct experience, but from a fable. The billboards in no way resemble or imitate a forest, but have totally replaced it, signifying not the forest, but the total absence of forest.

In the hyperreal, the inability to tell the difference between fantasy and reality (or as Baudrillard would have, between the territory and the map), leads to a breakdown in cultural meanings. Nowhere is this more potently realized than in the opening page of “Dov’è più azzurro il fiume” (“Where the River is More Blue”). “It was a time when the simplest foods contained threats, traps, and frauds” the story begins. The sight of his wife’s shopping bag, which once filled Marcovaldo with joy, now “filled him with fear as if hostile presences had infiltrated the walls of his house” [Calvino 2001, 67]). Plastic cheeses, poisonous vegetables, and butter made of wax. It is a reality in which the food is fake but its consequences are real: “insecticides were concentrated in higher percentages than the vitamin content” (Calvino 2001, 67). In an effort to resist a hyperreality where food has lost its meaning, Marcovaldo vows to find a place where “water is really water, and fish is really fish. There I’ll drop my line” Indeed, he discovers a stunningly blue river, catches several fish, and subsequently learns that the blueness is not a sign of the water’s health, but of its toxicity. A paint factory upstream has poisoned the water and all its fish. Again we see the contradiction that quickly produces the critique: environmental crisis has disrupted Marcovaldo’s relationship with rivers, mushrooms, and forests. Can Calvino’s recommendation for the next millennium restore this relationship, attach us to our fellow creatures, and provide an avenue for re-enchantment?

Toward the end of “Rapidità,” Calvino presents Mercurio (Mercury), whom he calls the god of communication and mediation, as the “patron for his literary proposal” (Calvino 2016, 62). Mercurio “Establishes relations between one god and another as well as relations between god and men, between universal laws and individual cases, between natural forces and cultural forms, between all the world’s objects and all its thinking subjects” [Calvino 2016, 62]). Quickness enables us to foster connections. Quickness also requires us to pay attention to these connections. As Anna Tsing et al. recommend in the Introduction to *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, we must begin with noticing “landscapes of entanglements, bodies with other bodies, time with other times.” “Somehow, in the midst of ruins,” the editors write, “we must maintain enough curiosity to notice the strange and wonderful as well as the terrible and terrifying” (Tsing et al. 2017, M7). Quickness aids us in confronting ongoing results of the Anthropocene in which “living arrangements that took millions of years to put into place are being undone in the blink of an eye” (Ibid., G1). In her study of Calvino’s animals, Serenella Iovino comes to a similar conclusion: Calvino provides a “significant testimony of multispecies ethnography, namely an ‘account of a

⁶ See Jean Baudrillard, 1981, *Simulacra and Simulation*

way of life' which is no longer exclusively related to the human but heeds all the bonds that make life possible in a shared biocultural dimension" (Iovino 2021, 23).⁷

Italo Calvino was a contemporary critic of the Great Acceleration. The literary values he identified for a millennium that he did not live to see have taken root all around us. Writers and critics and scientists like Anna Tsing, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Rob Nixon, and Amitav Ghosh (and many countless others) have adopted and adapted the values of quickness. While it's not clear that these writers rely on Calvino's original identification of quickness as a literary value, their evocations of it demonstrate its durability as a value for the twenty-first century. These contemporary voices urge us to tell stories "beyond civilizational first principles" (Tsing 2015,1) to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016, 1) to observe "the heated activities of the Earth...from up close" (Latour 2017, 74), and to "engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence" (Nixon 2011, 2). Like Nixon, Ghosh acknowledges that new literary forms, new practices and assumptions in the arts and humanities, are necessary to shape the "narrative imagination," to help us imagine the currents "too wild to be navigated in the accustomed barques of narration" (Ghosh 2016, 7, 8).

I see the legacy of Calvino in these recommendations. Just as Mercury establishes relationships between natural forces and cultural forms," and Marcovaldo's keen eye discovers the "changes of the season, the yearnings of his heart, and the woes of his existence," we twenty-first-century readers must be quick to connect, enchant, and "communicate things in terms of their difference" (Calvino 2016b, 54).

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⁷ In *Italo Calvino's Animals*, Iovino argues that Calvino's work runs "parallel to the major phases of the Great Acceleration. Iovino observes that "Calvino was following, step by step, what we now recognize as the progression of this epoch" (2021, 2). His animals tend to represent "global displacement, alienation, alteration" and yet mark the mutual dependence and kinship characterizing life in the Anthropocene. Iovino's study can be applied to other "noncitizens" in Calvino's work—mushrooms, for example. For other ecocritical and environmental humanities work in and about Italy, see Anna Re and Patrick Barron, *Italian Environmental Literature: An Anthology* (2003), Iovino, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, Liberation* (2016), and Elena Past et al., *Italy and the Environmental Humanities: Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies* (2018).

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