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# Dialogues with Tortoises: D. H. Lawrence and Italo Calvino's Anthropomorphism

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► **To cite this version:**

Shirley Bricout. Dialogues with Tortoises: D. H. Lawrence and Italo Calvino's Anthropomorphism.  
Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies (J.D.H.L.S), 2021, 6 (1), pp.82-103. hal-04386966

**HAL Id: hal-04386966**

<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-04386966>

Submitted on 11 Jan 2024

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# J·D·H·L·S

Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies

## Citation details

Title: **DIALOGUES WITH TORTOISES: D. H. LAWRENCE  
AND ITALO CALVINO'S ANTHROPOMORPHISM**

Author: Shirley Bricout

Source: *Journal of the D. H. Lawrence Society*, vol. 6.1 (2021)

Pages: 82–103

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**A Publication of the  
D. H. Lawrence Society of Great Britain**

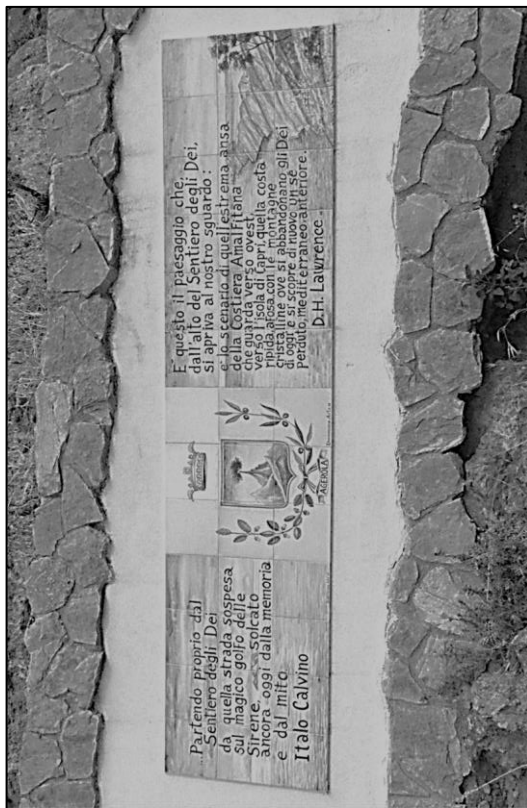


Figure 1: Monument in Agerola bearing quotes attributed to Lawrence and Calvino, written in Italian on ceramic tiles painted in 2009. Private photograph courtesy of Dan Rus.

**DIALOGUES WITH TORTOISES:  
D. H. LAWRENCE AND ITALO CALVINO'S  
ANTHROPOMORPHISM**

SHIRLEY BRICOUT

A monument on the picturesque path along Italy's Amalfi coast, known as the 'Path of the Gods' ('Sentiero delgi Dei'), bears side-by-side quotes by D. H. Lawrence and Italo Calvino celebrating the beauty of the site.<sup>1</sup> The tribute juxtaposes the names of two of the locality's most famous visitors who, on the surface, have little in common. They were born to different generations – Calvino (1923–1985) was six years old when Lawrence died in 1930 – and different social backgrounds – unlike Lawrence, Calvino grew up in a secular middle-class family. Points of contact emerge, however, from the way both writers stand out from their respective literary periods for their prolific output which breaks with previous literary norms. Indeed, Lawrence's specific brand of Modernism has been as much discussed as Calvino's neo-realistic narratives of his experiences in the Italian Resistance and his more experimental writings when he became acquainted with Oulipo ('Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle') in Paris in the late 1960s.

Calvino was born in a suburb of Havana, his parents, both renowned Italian botanists, having taken up positions at the Cuban Ministry of Agriculture. When he was two, the family left Cuba to settle in San Remo, Italy, where he was raised. The author of novels, short stories, essays and librettos, he was widely acclaimed as a prominent Italian writer by the time of his sudden death in 1985. According to Jhumpa Lahiri, who recently translated and anthologised Calvino's short story 'Dialogue with a Tortoise' ('Dialogo con una tartaruga'), "along with Umberto Eco, he [Calvino] remains the most widely read twentieth-century Italian

author in English whose body of works yokes together folklore, neoRealism and postmodern literature".<sup>2</sup>

Lawrence and Calvino's numerous depictions of animals reveal a common endeavour to decentre the human in order to challenge assumptions about cross-species interactions. Such posthumanist trends have been addressed in separate discussions of each writer but never together. For instance, Carrie Rohman, who champions animal theory, writes of Calvino that his vision "posits the simultaneous difference and sameness of the nonhuman animal and suggests that we need to find ways to acknowledge this complexity".<sup>3</sup> As will be shown, the same could be said of Lawrence's aesthetic project. Besides, in a chapter entitled 'Recuperating the Animal' devoted to Lawrence, Rohman asserts that "the tension between destroying and acknowledging the radical alterity of the animal other recurs in his writing".<sup>4</sup> Rohman also provides, however briefly, a unique instance of a parallel between the two writers when she comments upon the effect of reptile smells at the zoo that Calvino's character, Mr Palomar, is visiting:

The priority of the human is undermined in a moment reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence's cosmology. Lawrence both understands animal being as preceding the human (in *Birds, Beast, and Flowers* [1923] for instance) and at times (in *Woman in Love* [1920]) instills his characters with a longing for a world devoid of people.<sup>5</sup>

While Lawrence and Calvino both accept the anthropomorphic nature of imagination, they also question the function of anthropomorphism as an epistemological device. In an interview, Calvino asserted that he decided upon "playing the old game of anthropomorphism" to describe a universe in which humanity has only a very marginal position.<sup>6</sup> The irony of the phrase encapsulates the inevitability of imbuing the world with human emotion and cognition and, at the same time, challenges the validity of anthropomorphism as a unique viewpoint. Such interrogations give

scope for an analysis of the resonances between pieces by each writer featuring the same animal other, namely tortoises which lived on the grounds of the writers' Tuscan homes.

In September 1920, in San Gervasio near Florence, Lawrence wrote a sequence of poems, known as the 'Tortoise poems', which was first published in the *English Review* in November 1922. Inspired by a colony of tortoises that he was watching in the garden of the Villa La Canovaia (2*Poems* 1034), he took the vantage point of these animals to discuss and to construct an understanding of man's relationship to other species. Calvino introduces similar epistemological aims in *Mr Palomar* (*Palomar* in Italian) published in 1983, a rewriting of twenty-seven previously published short fictions in which the title character pursues metaphysical thoughts about his environment. 'The Loves of the Tortoises' collected in *Mr Palomar* and an uncollected piece from the original series called 'Dialogue with a Tortoise' were written while Calvino, like Lawrence, observed tortoises on the lawn of his summer house in Tuscany, and both challenge Mr Palomar's Cartesian ordering of the world and reveal his gradual awareness of a nonhuman animal "I".

Though it is difficult to ascertain any sustained influence of Lawrence's poems on Calvino's fiction, bringing together these works about tortoises can shed light on the posthumanist trends they harbour. It is highly likely that Calvino knew about the poems and had maybe even read them either in English or in translation. Indeed, from the late 1940s onwards, his close collaboration with Italian editors and writers Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini spurred his interest in American and English Literature.<sup>7</sup> Pavese, an admirer of Lawrence's translations of Giovanni Verga into English, ranked him high among British writers.<sup>8</sup> Besides, Pavese's seminal *American Literature: Essays and Opinions* (*La letteratura americana e altri saggi*, published posthumously in 1951) is often compared to Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) for its un-academic features.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Vittorini contributed to Piero Nardi's undertaking to make the whole of Lawrence's oeuvre available to an Italian readership. He had translated *St. Mawr* (*Il purosangue*) in

1933 and *The Virgin and the Gipsy* (*La vergine e lo zingaro*) and *The Plumed Serpent* (*Il serpente piumato*), both in 1935.<sup>10</sup> A translation of a wide collection of Lawrence's poems curated by Nardi was published in 1959.<sup>11</sup>

Bearing in mind that the tortoise pieces belong to two different genres, an examination of the attention the poetic persona and Mr Palomar pay to the nonhuman animal will first highlight how the depictions decentre the human in order to challenge anthropocentrism. In this respect, the shell will then be shown to become a structure that either curbs the progress to a better understanding of nonhuman modalities, as in *Mr Palomar*, or, on the contrary, releases artistic creation that celebrates the nonhuman, as in Lawrence's poems. Finally, a comparison of the passages devoted to the tortoises mating will bring to light how anthropomorphic descriptions turn out to be a means for the narrators to reflect on human sexuality and gain an ontological vision of the world. The cross-genre resonances will show how the aesthetic projects overlap, but more importantly a look at the genres' difference and sameness will reveal a common underlying challenge to aesthetic norms. The resulting dissident and innovative forms allow for powerful depictions of cross-species encounters.

### **Decentring the human**

In his Introduction to *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (1932), Aldous Huxley recalls that his friend "could get inside the skin of an animal and tell you in the most convincing detail how it felt and how, dimly, inhumanly, it thought".<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in his biography of Italo Calvino, Beno Weiss extols the writer's keen knowledge of fauna and flora, attributing it to his parents' botany careers and to his studies in natural sciences at the University of Turin where he enrolled before pursuing a literary vocation.<sup>13</sup>

Both Lawrence's poetic persona and Calvino's Mr Palomar are intrigued by the complexity of the world and man's place in it. Rigorous observation of the tortoises is, at first, central to making

sense of the cross-species encounter. What is particular in the pieces is that the tortoises are divested of the surrogate functions that Western literature attributes to them when they become symbols and allegories. Tortoises have often been pictured as embodying wisdom, the most famous example being Aesop's fable 'The Tortoise and the Hare', and chastity, an extension of "stay-at-home reticence" suggested by the shell.<sup>14</sup> In these poems and short stories, far from being allegories and symbols, the tortoises are acknowledged through their nonhuman alterity, a stance that challenges contemporary anthropocentric hierarchies which positioned animals as man's inferior antithesis. Indeed, the modernist poems subtly explore human interactions with other sentient life in the wake of, what Rohman describes as, "Darwin's catastrophic blow to human privilege vis-à-vis the species question" which forever unsettled epistemological certainties.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Calvino's short stories stage Palomar's growing awareness of nonhuman species' alternative visions of the world.

In Lawrence's poems, the narrator embarks on meticulous observations to capture instinctual experience. In 'Baby Tortoise', for instance, the narrator resorts to novel lexical associations to depict the animal's physical aspect, giving details about its "upper hawk-beak" also compared to "gaping pincers", its "skinny little neck" when it moves its head forward slowly extending it from its "wimple", its "four-pinned toes, / Rowing slowly forward" (*IPoems* 305–6). The comparisons which tap into heterogeneous, and somewhat random, sources (features of birds, crabs, headdress and rowing) all convey a sense of estrangement and create a significant distance with this animal other. Such salient heterogeneity disrupts an otherwise mannered depiction and secures the posthumanist stance of the poem. Indeed, this modernist break from aesthetic norms contributes to creating what Amit Chaudhuri calls "an alternative aesthetic" which no longer takes for granted the tortoise as a symbol but rather pays attention to its specificity as a nonhuman animal.<sup>16</sup>



Thus, the power of innovative poetic imagery conjures up a composite picture of the animals thanks to analogies which bridge the gap between the unfamiliar and the familiar. The variations in rhythm work in the same way to convey other modes of being. For instance, the short crisp syllables of “four-pinned toes” contrast with the stately line “Rowing slowly forward”, the deliberate leisurely pace being generated by the repetition of the voiced “w”. The rowing simile, which is repeated in the poem ‘Tortoise Family Connections’ (*IPoems* 310), is akin to Palomar’s rhythmic depiction of the “trudging claws that thrust his shell forward like the oars of a barge” (*DT* 375). The cross-genre rhythmic similarity displays a common aesthetic quest grounded in a sensitivity to the nonhuman other that anticipates current posthumanist trends.

In the short stories, the prominence of observation is further suggested by the fact that, according to the narrative, Palomar is named after an astronomical observatory located in California.<sup>17</sup> The origin of his name points to the meticulous but gigantic task the narrator has set himself: to provide a comprehensive understanding of the universe. As will be shown, Mr Palomar’s mistake is probably to want to find “the key to mastering the world’s complexity by reducing it to the simplest mechanism”,<sup>18</sup> the unexpected lesson Mr Palomar draws from his observations being that nonhuman animal modalities escape his ken. In this way, as Rohman points out, “Palomar’s narrative invokes the threshold or limit of human abilities to know, and it emphasizes various ahuman, creaturely modalities that decenter the Cartesian human and destabilize the human/animal barrier”.<sup>19</sup>

In ‘Dialogue with a Tortoise’, Palomar’s thoughts are interrupted by the presence of the tortoise on the lawn. As the tortoise’s own thoughts take shape in Palomar’s mind, a surrealist dialogue with the intruder develops in the form of an elaborate *mise en abyme*: “His thoughts contain a tortoise, a tortoise who is perhaps sharing those thoughts, thus putting those previous thoughts to an end” (*DT* 375). What is also of interest here is that the short story as genre encapsulates the brevity and intensity of the encounter while the *mise*

*en abyme* subtly condenses its complexity. Moreover, the pronoun “who” – the linguistic device of personification – resonates with the address “you”, in Lawrence’s poems, which acknowledges the animal as “other”. Soon, like Mr Palomar’s, the narrator’s thoughts turn to the tortoise’s own to conjure up the idea that a tortoise could have an “I” and thus stand apart in its radical alterity. For instance in ‘Baby Tortoise’, the modernist poetic voice asks rhetorical questions which convey his own sense of wonder but which, above all, allow for the tortoise to have its own animal thoughts:

Do you wonder at the world, as slowly you turn your head in its  
wimple  
And look with laconic, black eyes?  
Or is sleep coming over you again,  
The non-life? (*IPoems* 306)

In Calvino’s surrealist dialogue, Mr Palomar’s tortoise sums up the anthropocentric certainties of man in a brief statement featuring parallel linguistic constructions and inversions, “You think I don’t think”, in order to destabilise such certainties (*DT* 376). Anticipating posthumanist narratives, the tortoise asserts its subjectivity in the face of man by reformulating several times the concept of the animal “I”: “‘There is an I that is a tortoise’, or better still, ‘The I is also a tortoise’” (375).<sup>20</sup> Thus, by decentring the human, the tortoise resists Mr Palomar’s anthropocentric stance which fails to capture the essence of being. In this way, the animal character criticises what Calvino called “the impossibility of thinking about the world except in terms of human figures – or more precisely of human grimaces and human babblings”.<sup>21</sup>

The poet, also confronted with the issue of language, resorts to the rhythmic play of words to convey the awe-inspiring mystery of the animal other. Central to the sequence of poems, an acute sense of movement places the tortoise in the flux of life. The accumulation of verbs of action within fragmented sentences reproduces the jerky movements of the baby tortoise alternately proceeding forward and

pausing. As Keith Sagar rightly underlines in his study of the poem, “The baby tortoise both represents and re-enacts the fragile stirring of the first life, taking the first steps out of the non-life”.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, what Sagar calls “apostrophes” build up the progression of the baby animal as it ventures into the world: the “tiny, fragile, half-animate bean”, the “small insect, / Tiny bright-eye, / Slow one” (*IPoems* 305) turns into a “Challenger” (306), a “Little Ulysses, fore-runner”, a “little Titan”, “a pioneer”, and ends up an “Invincible fore-runner” (307).<sup>23</sup> The first apostrophes find an echo at the beginning of ‘Tortoise Family Connections’ in “Bud of existence” and “brisk egg” (*IPoems* 309) and, like the similes used in the description of the tortoise’s physical features, are drawn from heterogeneous sources to express the chaos from which the baby animal was born into the world. The images progressively coalesce around the themes of travel and discovery to reinforce an individual and nonhuman sense of purpose. Even if the baby tortoise “both represents and re-enacts” its forebears’ first steps, according to Sagar’s symbolic reading, the poetic persona has made allowance for its distinct alterity. As the poem itself develops from already existing words and phrases rearranged into images, the poetic persona’s understanding of the world gradually shifts from an anthropomorphised epistemology to an ontological vision that takes into account other modalities of sentient being. The shift is articulated thanks to the various images again drawn from heterogeneous sources in a narrative process akin to “bricolage”.<sup>24</sup>

The inevitability of anthropomorphism is therefore both acknowledged and questioned as a unique modality thanks to the tortoise’s radical alterity. In this respect, how Mr Palomar and the poetic persona evoke the tortoise shell – a distinctive feature of the animal – needs to be assessed.

### **The shell: Obstacle or source of creation?**

The line “All animate creation on your shoulder” – repeated at the end of ‘Baby Tortoise’ as “All life carried on your shoulder”

(*IPoems* 307) – re-echoes in the final exchanges between Mr Palomar and the tortoise. Calvino’s title character comes to the conclusion that “for you there’s no difference between the I and the shell, that is to say, between the I and the world”. To which the tortoise answers “The same applies to you, Man” (*DT* 378). The shift in point of view, from man to tortoise, subtly dramatises within the dialogue a critique of anthropocentrism. Indeed, although the piece ‘Dialogue with a Tortoise’ was not anthologised in *Mr Palomar*, because it deploys features of the fable tradition in which the cross-species encounter takes place through human language, its effects are similar; the dialogue stages a worthy attempt to unsettle anthropocentric hierarchies and acknowledge nonhuman modalities. The inevitability of anthropomorphism is thus aptly encapsulated in the zoomorphic metaphor of the “shell” that applies to man, but, because the metaphor is grounded in a *mise en abyme* – the anthropomorphised animal using in turn zoomorphism – the validity of a unique viewpoint is manifestly challenged. To a certain extent, this challenge exemplifies Rohman’s contention that “the animal who responds, who has a face, clearly moves us to a posthumanist framework in which the signifying human is no longer radically distinct nor morally superior”.<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, the “human shell” that the tortoise reveals to man in Calvino’s uncollected piece can be said to be embedded in the very structure of the anthology. Like Lawrence, Calvino published short stories and essays in magazines and newspapers before revising them, sometimes heavily, for further publication in collections. Semi-autobiographical short stories involving the character Palomar were published in the daily *Corriere della Sera* between 10 August 1975 and 28 August 1977 in a column titled ‘Mr Palomar’s Observatory’ (‘L’osservatorio del signor Palomar’) and occasionally in *La Repubblica* between 16 May 1980 and 25 August 1983.<sup>26</sup> The rewriting of only twenty-seven of the original 125 pieces for inclusion in the collection *Mr Palomar* entailed at times substituting the third person narrative for the first, altering titles and even harmonising the length of the stories.

The twenty-seven short fictions belonging to *Mr Palomar* are thematically arranged in three sections, the first dealing with visual experience, the second with anthropological and cultural considerations, and the final section with wider metaphysical issues such as the cosmos and infinity. Exemplifying Calvino's experiments with combinatory literature, the sections are themselves divided into three sub-sequences, each containing three stories. The hyper-Cartesian organisation at work here, the number "3" standing for an idea of perfection, displays the will to unify the world in claustrophobic anthropocentric categories rather than seek, in Lawrentian terms, "the living, incarnate cosmos" (A 149). Indeed, Mr Palomar is trapped inside the shell of his own scientific human perception epitomised by the rigorous structure of the book, an eventuality which prompts a human-centered epistemological stance over an ontological posthumanist one. As Jeff Wallace remarks in his study of Calvino's literary output, which he posits at the confluence of the natural sciences and semiotics inspired by structuralism, "the more Palomar wishes to merge himself into complete identity with the material world, the more he realises the inescapably conditioning influence of his own visual and intellectual faculties".<sup>27</sup>

Thus, in an ironic twist, the uncollected piece 'Dialogue with a Tortoise' sheds light on the anthology from which it has been excluded in that, at the end of the fable-like discussion, the tortoise, becoming again a symbol for wisdom, perceives how Palomar jeopardises his own attempts to alter his anthropocentric outlook on the world (DT 378). Such irony resurfaces in the unclear demarcation of genres resulting from how *Mr Palomar* is variously referred to. Indeed, the rigorous arrangement into sections is undermined by generic porosity since literary critics regard *Mr Palomar* either as a novel with twenty-seven chapters or as a collection of short fictions or short stories, or units or again of sequences. The mathematical structure is then as compromised as is the attempt to understand animal alterity thanks to anthropomorphism.

Numerical ordering is also embedded in Lawrence's poem 'Tortoise Shell' but to a different effect thanks to its significant network of esoteric connections. In rhythmic lines, the scales, or scutes, on the shell are divided into "Five, and five again, and five again, / And round the edges twenty-five little ones" (*IPoems* 308). What the poetic persona calls "sections of the baby tortoise shell" are then re-arranged numerically in groups of "Four, and a keystone" or again "Fives, and tens, / Threes and fours and twelves". The conspicuous play with the many re-arrangements ultimately underpins the esoteric attributes of numbers as the poet's explicit reference to "Pythagoras" reveals. Indeed, the Greek philosopher and mathematician is credited with creating a numerical arrangement known as "the tetractys of the decad" representing the number ten as a triangle with a base of four and an apex of one, whichever way one looks at the triangle. Besides learning about this in his school years, Lawrence certainly saw John Burnet's diagram of the tetractys in his *Early Greek Philosophy* (1892), which he read in the summer of 1915 (2L 364–7).<sup>28</sup>

Significantly, such mathematical observations place the esoteric properties attributed to numbers within a cosmic view of the world that allows for the specificity of the nonhuman animal. Symbols in 'Tortoise Shell' are consistently divested of their Judeo-Christian significance so as to retrieve the cosmic potency that Lawrence attributes to them and celebrate the mystery of the animal other. For instance, the shell is credited with bearing the trace of "Life establishing the first eternal mathematical tablet" (*IPoems* 308), a repudiation of the tablets of stone written by the "Judean Lord" according to the Book of Exodus (32:15). The cross mentioned in the opening lines of the poem also refers to life, not in relation to the Christian dogma of the crucifixion, but to the Egyptian hieroglyph for the idea of life called *ankh*, which is shaped like a cross but with an oval loop in place of the upper bar. Also, the tortoise carrying "All animate creation on [its] shoulder" (*IPoems* 307) alludes to Hindu cosmology according to which elephants upholding the world stand on a turtle swimming through chaos (see *2Poems* 1034).

Paradoxically though, the very accumulation of esoteric connections raises the question of how the animals are depicted aesthetically by the poet.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the accumulation, drawing again from heterogeneous sources, materialises within the lines of the poem the burden of anthropomorphism that threatens to ultimately impede posthumanist dialectics.

Yet, contrary to the mathematical structure of Calvino's collection of short stories which attempts to rigorously categorise knowledge, Lawrence's syncretic writing is driven by a creative impulse to combine esoteric symbols and myths, constructing a sort of "bricolage", "mak[ing] do with what is available and us[ing] in a new structure the remains of previous constructions or destructions".<sup>30</sup> He may have arranged his own poems, as the anthology's title indicates, into birds, beast and flowers, with subcategories, but the syncretic impulse captures the underlying cosmic drive of life and artistic creation. In 'Tortoise Shell' such syncretic combinations are further epitomised in the "arch", which, according to the poetic voice, locks the scutes together (*IPoems* 308), forming a bridge that metaphorically connects various modes of thought. This is the novel language the modernist poet has found to express the cosmic urge common to human and nonhuman animal life.

'Dialogue with a Tortoise' and 'Tortoise Shell' proceed then from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic in a centrifugal thrust, as minute scientific observations of the tortoises lead to vast philosophical questions about the world. In Calvino's short story, the shell turns out to underline the limits of the anthropomorphic approach whereas, in Lawrence's poems, it is the source of inspiration for mythopoetic creation. Yet despite this fundamental opposition, the ambitious "bricolage" in the poems and the experimental structure of *Mr Palomar* challenge aesthetic norms in an attempt to express a new vision of the world that hinges on posthumanist dialectics. To do so both writers, each in their own way, address the linguistic aporia they meet with to convey their

ontological views. Lawrence evokes such aporia in ‘Art and the Individual’ (1908):

It is Art which opens to us the silences, the primordial silences which hold the secret of things, the great purposes, which are themselves silent; there are no words to speak of them with, and no thoughts to think of them in, so we struggle to touch them through art ... (STH 140)

As the poetic persona and Mr Palomar find out, anthropomorphism also leads them to reflect on human epistemologies. This self-reflexive aspect is particularly salient when dealing with sexuality as exemplified in Calvino’s short story ‘The Loves of the Tortoises’ and Lawrence’s poems ‘Lui et Elle’, ‘Tortoise Gallantry’ and ‘Tortoise Shout’.

### **Building an ontological vision**

Offering ample scope for speculation about Lawrence’s influence on Calvino, the short story ‘The Loves of the Tortoises’ bears many similarities with Lawrence’s ‘Tortoise poems’ in the way they depict courting tortoises. First, in all the pieces, the lexical fields of sound and movement combine to highlight the conflict of power between male and female tortoises during the mating season. Moreover, the extensive focus on the driving impulse of the male dramatises the epistemological explorations of the poetic persona and Mr Palomar, who both question the nature of instinct, desire and pleasure in animals and man in order to construct an ontological vision that goes beyond the human / nonhuman divide. As Soha El Samad interestingly remarks, the ‘Tortoise poems’ strive to pay tribute to “the inherent beauty and harmony of the creative mystery by giving vent to spontaneous emotions and instinctual physical reaction”.<sup>31</sup>

In Lawrence’s poems, the male’s stubborn resolve in his pursuit of the female returns as a *leitmotiv* when the tortoise’s “reptile determination” and “long obstinacy / Of horizontal persistence”, “a



bovine, grim, earth-dank persistence" described in 'Lui et Elle' (*IPoems* 312–13), resonate with "a reptile's awful persistency", "And the still more awful need to persist, to follow, follow, continue", in 'Tortoise Gallantry' (315). Fragmented lines together with internal rhymes and assonances ("Ache, and want of being, / Want, / Self-exposure, hard humiliation, need to add himself on to her") rhythmically convey the male's frustrated attempts. The repetitions posit the tortoise's persistence within the framework of a cross-species instinctive drive to belong in the flux of life, an overwhelming drive, compared to a "spear ... through the side of his isolation", that recurs persistently at each mating season (313). Again religious imagery of the crucifixion is divested of its Christian content and endowed with cosmic implications which "bring the human and the tortoise irrevocably into the same ontological space".<sup>32</sup> Thus, by evoking sexual drives common to different species, Lawrence's aesthetic project aims to rekindle primal instincts by recuperating the animal in the human since, as Rohman puts it, "animals partake of the mysterious and the unquantifiable".<sup>33</sup>

Addressing Lawrence's poem, Rohman rightly points out that "because poetry participates in the rhythmic, the musical, and the incantatory, the poetic representation of animal being is particularly salient to a discussion of cosmic and aesthetic forces".<sup>34</sup> While this is true, specific generic features of the short story can also be shown to address on their own terms cross-species difference and sameness.

In Calvino's 'The Loves of the Tortoises' the male's persistence is noted thanks to the elaborate lexical field of conflict: "attack", "strike", "resist", "opposes", "pursuits", "flights", "skirmishing" (*LT* 18). A sense of frustration emanates from the accumulation of descriptions of the male's repeated attempts and his constant nipping at the female's legs, the latter behaviour being also witnessed by the poet. In the prose narrative, short segments, including onomatopoeia – "Zlak! Zlak" (*LT* 17) – separated by commas and semi-colons promptly build up the rhythm of the sexual encounter whereas longer sentences provide the onlooker's explanation and emphatically

materialise within the narrative the distance between the human and the nonhuman species.

By contrast to the male, the female tortoise's lack of interest is described in the poems and the short story as being similarly "earthily apathetic" (*IPoems* 314) and "oppos[ing] a somewhat inert immobility" (*LT* 17). Of particular interest here, the poems' conspicuously anthropomorphic titles – 'Lui et Elle' and 'Tortoise Gallantry' – carry romantic connotations in direct contradiction to the contest of power between the male and the female that the pieces depict; thus, by conjuring up two distinct modes of being – human in the titles and nonhuman in the body of the poem – the ironic contradiction sets to work posthumanist dialectics while challenging how anthropomorphism depicts animals aesthetically. To a similar effect, Mr Palomar identifies in anthropomorphic terms the female's strategy as "play-acting", since "she wants to make others believe" she is not interested (*LT* 18). While dissemblance, both anthropomorphised and recognised as a possible nonhuman modality, certainly empowers the female over the male even in the nonhuman sphere, the plural "others", which seems to include Mr Palomar, fashions an ephemeral cross-species group comprised of the male animal and the human observer both confronted with the female's response.

Though anthropomorphic descriptions of the mating ritual, including the female simulacrum of indifference, bring the unfamiliar into the realm of the familiar, the distance that remains allows the human protagonists to gain insight into their own relation to sexuality. This is particularly salient in Calvino's short story where mechanical and robotic imagery reminiscent of the Futurists' is explicitly deployed to inscribe the tortoise's sexual drive in a law of nature to which man also succumbs: "Eros is a program that unfolds in the electronic clusters of the mind", says Palomar (*LT* 18). Like Lawrence's poems where sexuality pertains to the cosmic flux of life, the short story demonstrates that man and the tortoise share natural sexual drives although they are experienced differently. In this respect, the cry of the male tortoise "*in extremis*" (*IPoems* 316),

which surprises both the poet and Mr Palomar (*LT* 17), seems to bridge the gap between all the animal species, including the human, in a primal expression of pleasure and pain.

Yet during the sexual act, the shell – the tortoise's distinctive feature – perplexes the observers. In fact, the shells striking each other are still perceived through a human point of view which identifies them as mere obstacles to mating. Mr Palomar's onomatopoeic "Zlak! Zlak!" (*LT* 17) and the poet's comparisons which combine sound and movement ("Their two shells like boats bumping", "Driven against her with a bang, like a bird flying in the dark against a window, / All knowledgeable?", "the awful concussion", *IPoems* 314, 315) show that because the human observers understand the shell as an obstacle, they persistently dissociate the sound from the animal mating ritual known as ramming. Thus, the anthropomorphic view fails to acknowledge the existence of nonhuman sensations that the tortoises could seek and experience in this specific ritual.

At this point the short story differs substantially from the poems in that, because the shell is perceived as the tortoises' "insensitive casing" (*LT* 18), in a reflexive passage, Mr Palomar evokes the sensations conveyed by the human skin during the sexual act. Indeed, according to him, in addition to the mechanical drive seated in the mind, "skin touched, seen, remembered" provides man with sensorial information which – he believes – the tortoises are not granted. Since the tortoises' sensorial needs and perceptions escape Mr Palomar's ken, he is misled into expressing a syllogism by combining valid arguments that prompt a wrong conclusion; indeed, according to him, if the tortoises are deprived of skin contact, "the poverty of their sensorial stimuli perhaps drives them to a concentrated, intense mental life ... Perhaps the eros of tortoises obeys absolute spiritual laws, while we are prisoners of a machinery whose functioning remains unknown to us" (*LT* 18). Palomar's erroneous logic, grounded in an anthropocentric stance, produces a stark dichotomy between the mind and the senses which, in Lawrentian terms, is detrimental in that it disrupts the cosmic drives

of sexuality. Thus, by adding misleading anthropocentric conclusions to his visual observations, Palomar's understanding of animal alterity is somewhat frustrated. Such an outcome impedes his progression towards an ontological vision of the world. Ironically, in the reflexive passage fraught with misunderstanding, the narrative stance seems ultimately to observe Palomar, who becomes an object of study himself.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of these pieces, written in the modernist and post-modernist periods, is not to assert the superiority of man over the animal realm but to find man's place in his environment while acknowledging cross-species difference and sameness. Although anthropomorphic depictions are a means to bridge the gap between the unfamiliar and the familiar, they retain a sense of estrangement which underlines the limits of human knowledge. Moreover, by both dramatising the inevitability of anthropomorphism and interrogating the validity of a unique viewpoint, the pieces also identify a need to define aesthetic alternatives to depict cross-species interactions.

Calvino's fictions, which are both self-sufficient and interrelated, subtly stage the crisis of knowledge that the limits of anthropomorphism can lead to. Yet, like the sequences of poems, Palomar's fragmented viewpoint is both reflexive and tainted with awe at the intimation of cross-species encounters. Also adopting an anthropomorphic stance in the poems, Lawrence offers, however, an alternative to frustration in that he turns difference and sameness into an aesthetic experience that celebrates all beings as part of the cosmic flow of life.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Dan Rus, in Ravello, for his help in locating this monument. Lawrence's text translates back into English as "This is the view that from on high along the Path of the Gods opens to our sight: it is the picture of the great loop of the Amalfi coastline that looks towards the west,

towards the Island of Capri, that precipitous coast, steamy, hot, with the crystalline mountains where the gods of today are forsaken and you find a lost self again, Mediterranean, before you" (my translation). The last lines paraphrase those written to Lady Cynthia Asquith on 25 January 1920, on the eve of Lawrence's visit to the mainland: "To look down the Salernian Gulf, South-east, on a blue day, and see the dim, sheer rocky coast, the clean rock mountains, is so beautiful, so like Ulysses, that one sheds one's avatars, and recovers a lost self, Mediterranean, anterior to us" (3L 462). Part of the 2008 summer Festival in Ravello was devoted to 'D. H. Lawrence: a Trespasser in Ravello'. Thirteen of Lawrence's letters written in the area, held in Nottingham archives, were exhibited with a translation into Italian. The quote on the ceramic plaque is presumably from one of those. Calvino's quote, probably from an interview, translates as "The Path of the Gods, that road suspended above the magic bay of the Sirens, furrowed again today by memory and myth".

<sup>2</sup> Jhumpa Lahiri, ed., *The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 2019), 373. 'Dialogue with a Tortoise', included in Lahiri's collection, is subsequently referred to as *DT*. 'Dialogo con una tartaruga' was written in 1977 and posthumously included in the collection of Calvino's works titled *Romanzi e racconti, vol. 3*, ed. Jean Starobinski (Milan: Mondadori, 1991), 1155–8.

<sup>3</sup> Carrie Rohman, 'On Singularity and the Symbolic: The Threshold of the Human in Calvino's *Mr Palomar*', *Criticism*, 51 (2009), 63–78, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Carrie Rohman, 'Becoming-Artistic and the Creaturely Refrain in D. H. Lawrence's "Tortoise Shout"', *Experiencing Animal Minds: An Anthology of Animal-Human Encounters*, eds Julie A. Smith and Robert W. Mitchell (New York: Columbia UP, 2012), 100. Jeff Wallace also offers compelling insights on Lawrence's "unhesitating willingness to anthropomorphize the animal" and asks how "anthropomorphism might be placed within the broader problematic of how we treat animals *aesthetically*": *D. H. Lawrence, Science and the Posthuman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 130, italics in the original.

<sup>5</sup> Rohman, 'On Singularity and the Symbolic', 74.

<sup>6</sup> My translation. The original reads "giocare il vecchio gioco dell'antropomorfismo": Italo Calvino, *Saggi: 1945–1985*, vol. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 233.

<sup>7</sup> Calvino refers to Lawrence as a pervasive influence on Pavese in his letters, see *Italo Calvino: Letters, 1941–1985*, ed. Michael Wood, trans.

Martin McLaughlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2014), 285. Just after the publication of Calvino's experimental novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979), the critic Cesare Segre wrote an article in which he identified literary influences in the novel, including *The Plumed Serpent*: see 'Se una notte d'inverno uno scrittore sognasse un aleph di dieci colori', *Strumenti critici* 39–40 (1979), 207–14. Calvino wrote to the critic to thank him for his insightful study and discuss other aspects of his novel: *Letters, 1941–1985*, 507–8, 595.

<sup>8</sup> Cesare Pavese, *The Burning Brand: Diaries 1935–1950*, trans. A. E. Murch (New York: Walker & Company, 1961), 304, 348. Pavese also recalls being impressed with *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer which he read in 1933 (296). In 1937, Vittorini translated into Italian Lawrence's first version of 'Introduction to *Mastro-don Gesualdo*' (Appendix II 'Introduction [version 1] to *Mastro-don Gesualdo*' [IR 371–8]). The translation, which at times deletes paragraphs of the original, was published in *Omnibus*, 9 October 1937, and more recently in a new edition of Verga's work: *Mastro-don Gesualdo*, pref. D. H. Lawrence, ed. Enzo Di Mauro (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995, reprinted 2003), 5–14.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin Fussell writes in his Introduction to his translation of Pavese's work: "Like D. H. Lawrence, the other great foreign writer who was also a distinguished critic of American literature, Pavese was a nonacademic critic, though he was far less anti-academic (or anti-intellectual) than Lawrence": Cesare Pavese, *American Literature: Essays and Opinions*, trans. Edwin Fussell (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1970), vi.

<sup>10</sup> Beno Weiss, *Understanding Italo Calvino* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1993), 1–9. Piero Nardi was also Lawrence's first Italian biographer: see Dieter Mehl and Christa Jansohn, *The Reception of D. H. Lawrence in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2007), 81.

<sup>11</sup> *A Bibliography of D. H. Lawrence*, eds Warren Roberts and Paul Poplawski (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 269–70. In a move to meet cosmopolitan communities of artists, Calvino also travelled to America from November 1959 to May 1960. He stopped in Taos, New Mexico, where he met Angelino Ravagli three years after Frieda's death. In his memoirs titled *Hermit in Paris* (*Eremita a Parigi*), he describes how the late Lawrences still attracted a crowd of visitors at that time and how Ravagli was "very friendly, what with all the chaos of this weird existence, and here in Taos he is very popular": *Hermit in Paris: Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Martin McLaughlin (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), 102.

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<sup>12</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'Introduction', *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Heinemann, 1932), xxx–xxxii.

<sup>13</sup> Weiss, *Understanding Italo Calvino*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Hope B. Werness, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in World Art* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 416.

<sup>15</sup> Carrie Rohman, *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference': Postcoloniality and Poetry of the Present* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 153.

<sup>17</sup> Italo Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, trans. William Weaver (London: Random House, 1999), 34. The short story 'The Loves of the Tortoises', collected in *Mr Palomar*, is subsequently referred to as *LT*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Rohman, 'On Singularity and the Symbolic', 63.

<sup>20</sup> The nonhuman animal "I", crucially salient in the economy of the short story, anticipates current debates on animal subjectivity which are beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>21</sup> My translation. The original reads "dell'impossibilità di pensare il mondo se non attraverso figure umane, o più particolarmente smorfie umane, borbottii umani": Calvino, *Saggi*, 234.

<sup>22</sup> Keith Sagar, *D. H. Lawrence: Poet* (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2008), 69.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Chaudhuri, *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 55. The critic borrows the term from Lévi-Strauss to illustrate the process of appropriation in mythical thought.

<sup>25</sup> Rohman, 'On Singularity and the Symbolic', 69. Rohman draws on Derrida's encounter with his cat that the French philosopher discusses in 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry*, 28.2 (2002), 369–418.

<sup>26</sup> Martin McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998), 131.

<sup>27</sup> Jeff Wallace, "'The World Before Eyes': Calvino, Barthes and Science", *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. Elinor S. Shaffer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 276.

<sup>28</sup> John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1908), 113:

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<https://archive.org/details/burnetgreek00burnrich/page/112/mode/2up>.

See also *2Poems* 1035.

<sup>29</sup> See Wallace, *D. H. Lawrence, Science and the Posthuman*, 130.

<sup>30</sup> Chaudhuri, *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 56.

<sup>31</sup> Soha El Samad, “‘Harmony with Time’: Lawrence’s Aesthetic in the Tortoise Poems”, *Etudes Lawrenciennes*, 48 (2017):

<https://journals.openedition.org/lawrence/301>, para. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Rohman, ‘Becoming-Artistic’, 174.

<sup>33</sup> Rohman, *Stalking the Subject*, 108.

<sup>34</sup> Rohman, ‘Becoming-Artistic’, 170.