Through a Glass Brightly: A Posthumanist Rereading of Fausta Cialente's *Cortile a Cleopatra*[1]

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A Levantine novel by Fausta Cialente (1898–1994), beloved by its eventual readers and "molto caro" (Cialente 1953, 11; 2004, 17; "very dear") to the author herself, *Cortile a Cleopatra* (Courtyard in Cleopatra) has invited updating, reframing and reinventing since at least its second printing.[2] The first edition, published in 1936 at the height of the Fascist regime, quickly fell out of public circulation and, after struggling to sell, unsold copies of the novel were pulped. Republished by Sansoni in 1953, with the addition of a laudatory preface written by acclaimed critic Emilio Cecchi and a brief foreword by the author herself, the new *Cortile a Cleopatra* departed significantly from the original and offered a markedly different reading experience. On opening this new edition postwar readers found Cecchi's assessment, calling the book "uno dei più bei romanzi italiani dell'ultimo ventennio" (Cialente 1953, 7; "one of the finest Italian novels of the past twenty years"). And while Cecchi's critical reevaluation promised a novel with the makings of a bestseller, Cialente's brief foreword reframed *Cortile a Cleopatra* as a book in a state of perpetual becoming, untethered from the elusive intentions of the author and, most importantly, as projected beyond the narrow scope of the human. A new generation of readers would find in the preface a new interpretative key.

Beginning with a close reading of Cialente's foreword and focusing on the novel's consistent attention to the nonhuman, this article will argue that, re-read in light on the posthumous foreword, *Cortile a Cleopatra* invites an interpretation that centers on a representation of the human-nonhuman continuum that rejects a human-centered perspective in ways that resonate with posthumanist critiques of human exceptionalism.[3] A large umbrella term that points to a diverse and evolving field of enquiry, at its broadest posthumanism refers to a line of thought dedicated to rethinking the human in relation to technology, non-human animals and the inorganic. It proposes, as Serpil Oppermann has put it in this recent comprehensive summary, "rethinking the conceptual frameworks within which we have defined human subjectivity, agency, identity and self, acknowledging the permeable boundaries of species in the natural-cultural continuum, and recognizing the profound interconnections between different forms of life in the composite world where previously we had seen separations" (Oppermann 2016, 275). Although posthumanists have been urging the "re-understanding of the place of humankind within biogeological processes" (Buell 2017, 417) with a view to securing "a sustainable present and an affirmative and hopeful future" (Braidotti 2019), as Lawrence Buell

[1] Many thanks are owed to Jonathan Bates for his ecocritical example, to Giuliana Minghelli for introducing me to the novel and to Troy Tower, Amy Bard and the two anonymous readers for helping clarify the following arguments.

[2] Parenthetical references to the novel refer to the 2004 reprint except in cases where it diverges from the 1953, such as here, where the "Avvertenza" reflects some slight revision, or with Emilio Cecchi's preface, which becomes a postface in the 2004. All translations are mine unless otherwise attributed.

[3] The bibliography on posthumanism is vast but see, among others, Derrida (2002); Wolfe (2010); Braidotti (2013 and 2019); Hauskeller (2015). For an agile discussion of the field of posthuman studies see Ferrando (2020).

has recently put it "posthumanism has the potential for further needful reconception of environmental memory" (418).

In my re-reading, posthumanism provides the impetus and the intellectual framework to recognize and re-evaluate the novel's outsize and as yet unnoticed attention to the non-human as a disposition that points to a valuable alternative figuration of the human. As I embark on a posthumanist rereading of *Cortile a Cleopatra*, I want to clearly establish that I do not wish to project any of today's posthumanism onto the past My analysis seeks to complement — not replace — earlier interpretations of the novel with the hyperopic lens of a posthuman sensibility that is rooted squarely into the present and projected into the future. Following the example of Jonathan Bate, the scholar of British Romanticism who pioneered ecocriticism and who argued that "[i]n the age of ecocide we need to attend to things which were invisible to the cultural criticism of the Cold War era" (2000, 102), my analysis promotes posthumanism as a call to action and a corrective to the blindness of earlier scholars. While it primarily answers posthumanist feminist Rosi Braidotti's call for "a new vocabulary, with new figurations to refer to the elements of our posthuman embodied and embedded subjectivity" (2013, 82), by bringing attention to an artifact of the past that furthers a "conception of the human that refuses to define itself in violent opposition to the nonhuman" (Peterson, 127) my analysis asks that Cialente's powerful counternarrative be placed in a dialogue with the cultural imaginary of both our present and our past. In this respect, I join a new generation of scholars like Anat Pick, Deborah Amberson and Danila Cannamela, who bring to their construction of modernism a more nuanced understanding of the continuum of the bond between the human and non-human.

Cialente's foreword to the 1953 edition of the novel warrants considerable scrutiny. Offering the book for reprint seventeen years after its original publication, Cialente alerts her readers that *Cortile a Cleopatra* ought to be received as a new novel even though the changes they would find there only amount to "lievi ritocchi" ("light retouching") as she had refused to alter the "freschezza originale del racconto" ("original freshness of the story"), not even clarifying the title that had originally caused confusion for readers who were unaware that "Cleopatra è un sobborgo di Alessandria d'Egitto" (11; "Cleopatra is a suburb of Alexandria").[4] Though the novel itself was not altered, it had evolved past the original publication due to Cialente's reformed stance toward the Levant. In a move reminiscent of Dr. S.'s fictional introduction to Italo Svevo's 1922 novel *La coscienza di Zeno* (*Zeno's Conscience*)—only with benevolence here replacing spite—Cialente revealed that her newly discovered love for the Levant had radically reoriented the intended meaning of the novel:

> Nella storia di Marco, dei suoi amori e peccati, scritta fra due guerre dopo circa dieci anni di permanenza in Egitto, io avevo creduto di esprimere la mia insofferenza per una terra, un clima e una gente che non mi sembrava di amare affatto; mentre il tempo e il risultato mi hanno rivelato che se ho scritto il *Cortile* è stato proprio perché amavo quella terra, quel clima e quella gente; e di tutto ciò porterò ormai per sempre un'inguaribile nostalgia. (1953, 11)[5]
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> (In the story about Marco, about his loves and sins, which I wrote between the two wars after about a ten-year-long stay in Egypt, I thought I had expressed my

[4] The 1953 edition offers a footnote for the title with the sentence "Uno dei sobborghi di Alessandria d'Egitto, sulla costa di Ramleh" ("A suburb of Alexandria in Egypt, on the Ramleh coast").
[5] The phrase "e il risultato" does not appear in subsequent editions.

> irritation towards a land, a climate, and a people I did not think I loved at all; while time and the outcome have revealed to me that if I wrote the *Cortile* at all it is because I loved that land, that climate and that people; and I will forever hold onto an incurable nostalgia for all of it.)

Announcing that, “with time,” a book she “thought” she had written to convey hostility towards the place where she had resided between the wars instead “revealed itself” as evidence of her enduring love for it, Cialente modeled and invited a readerly benevolence towards the subject matter that made the new edition incongruent with the original. Like an avant-garde readymade, even though it was textually comparable, the 1953 *Cortile a Cleopatra*, once decontextualized and estranged from the original time and place of publication and repurposed in the present, proved incommensurable with its earlier counterpart. So different did it seem even to Cialente herself that she agreed to enter it for the prestigious Premio Viareggio in 1953, but it was excluded as it was considered a reprint.[6]

Careful to word her shift in perspective as unconscious but not capricious—in what has been described as a “condizione di esilio e una fondamentale ignoranza di sé” (Azzolini 1992, 106; “a state of exile and essential ignorance of oneself”)—Cialente was deliberate in extending the activity of reading beyond the author’s intentions and in positing the present-day rereading as essential events in the lives of books. The foreword opens with the request that readers pay attention to the dates attached to the novel:

> *Cortile a Cleopatra* porta la data del 27 aprile 1931, ma fu pubblicato solamente nel 1936. Nel riconsegnare oggi [1953] alla stampa questo libro che mi è particolarmente caro, come lo sono i figli dei quali si pensa che non hanno avuto la sorte che si meritavano, mi sembra opportuno indicarne le date all’attenzione del lettore, benché siano di per se stesse eloquenti. (1953, 11)[7]
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> (*Cortile a Cleopatra* is dated 27 April 1931, but was only published in 1936. Preparing now to reprint a book that is very dear to me, as are the children that one might think did not meet the fortune they deserved, I find it a good opportunity to point the reader to these dates, even if they are telling in and of themselves.)

By drawing attention to the longevity of the novel—and not just its author—and by comparing books to children, Cialente proposes that books live on as beings shaped by the passing of time, vulnerable to chance and more dependent on outside circumstances for their success or failure than on their own worth—or the wishful thinking of parents and authors. Significantly, the dates cited resonate far beyond the tormented history of the publication of the book and in fact position the novel within the larger shared history of Italy’s Fascist past and the Levant’s postwar present. Cialente is not simply lamenting that the manuscript, published five years after its completion,

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[6] See Palieri 2018, 224: “Ci sono tracce di una candidatura al Premio Viareggio respinta perché si tratterebbe di una ‘ristampa’. Lei si lamenta: chi l’ha consigliata le ha fatto fare la figura della scrittrice ‘petulante e di scarso valore’ che voleva concorrere ‘per forza’” (“there is evidence of her candidacy for the Viareggio Prize, rejected because it was a ‘reprint’. She complains: whoever advised her made her look like a ‘petulant and worthless' writer who sought nomination ‘at all costs.’”)

[7] The evident redundancy of the phrase, “Benché siano di per se stesse eloquenti” (“even if they are telling in and of themselves”) is not given in subsequent editions.

struggled to find a publisher nor is she pedantically noting the difference between a manuscript, a first edition, a new edition and a reprint. Those dates are salient because they evoke the period during which Italians collectively —and Cialente personally—experienced the increasing brutality of totalitarian regimes. She later described the moment as "un tempo divenuto intossicato e feroce […] sempre più velenoso e sempre più feroce" (1991, x; "a time that turned toxic and vicious, […] ever more poisonous and ever more vicious"). The year 1936 in particular saw Cialente temporarily barred from re-entering Egypt due to the sanctions imposed on Italy after Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia: "la sciagurata guerra fascista in Etiopia sembrava dovesse impedirci il ritorno a casa, cioè in Egitto, quasi fossimo sospetti e colpevoli" (1991, xv; "the miserable Fascist war in Ethiopia looked like it would stop us from going back home, that is, to Egypt, almost as though we were guilty suspects"). If we consider that the Levant that she might have wanted to leave in 1931 suddenly became, in 1936, the home to which she could not return, Cialente's change of heart acquires new significance. Far from irrational, her newly found attachment to the region may well have originated in the macrohistory of displacement, totalitarianism and war.

But if 1936 was the year when the book was first published and also the year when geopolitics suddenly shook Cialente's conflicted sense of belonging to the Levant, enabling her nostalgia, then the 1950s are written into the preface as the decade when nostalgia became the only stance left towards the landscape and the ecosystems in which she had spent time between 1921 and 1947:

> Il tempo trascorso fra la prima e la nuova edizione è tale che molti dei luoghi qui descritti non esistono più. Da quando Marco sbarcò in Egitto dopo la prima guerra mondiale, l'asfalto ha divorato le grandi spiagge solitarie e il lago di Hadra è stato prosciugato; i soldati inglesi, pur stazionando imperterriti sul Canale, non abitano più le caserme di Mustàfa; e la giovane generazione non ricorda nemmeno che siano esistite, in via Fuad, le *Galeries Lafayette*. Gli anni, la guerra, hanno stravolto la fisionomia delle sabbie vergini con i dattolieri sepolti a metà fusto e si è perduto anche quel molle ritmo di vita tra levantino e coloniale. (11–12)
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> (The time elapsed between the first and the new edition is such that many of the places here described no longer exist. Since Marco landed in Egypt after World War I, the asphalt has devoured the large solitary beaches and Lake Hadra has dried up; the English soldiers, even though still stationed on the Canal undeterred, no longer live in the barracks in Mustàfa; and the new generation cannot remember that the *Galeries Lafayette* on Fuad Avenue ever even existed. The years and the war have changed the appearance of those pristine sands, with their half-buried date trees, and that relaxed pace of life, somewhere between Levantine and colonial, has also been lost.)

The decades between the first and the second edition of the book are not only the period when an underappreciated text was given a new chance for an audience nor merely the time it took for the author's repressed love for the Levant to resurface. Instead, those years also mark the period when war and reconstruction left the Levant, as a landscape of sand dunes and date trees, an outpost of colonial consumerism and as an ecosystem of easy living—the untranslatable "molle" —forever lost to consciousness, to live on as words only.

Introducing postwar readers to the book, Cialente highlights the instability of both time and place. Neither locked into an irrevocable contempt nor simply frozen at the periphery of Italian colonialism, in the new preface Cialente conjures the Levant as a vast landscape, a space large enough to contain a changeable self and a changing ecosystem. Still speaking *for* her novel as an eyewitness and a historical agent, moments before adopting her role as narrator, Cialente asks her readers to measure the courtyard that will stage "Marco's loves and sins" against a scale that transcends the geographic, the historic and the narrowly human and is calibrated instead to record the protean unfolding of life. The faint but indelibly sketched landscape on which the preface ends frames the human and shrinks its relevance in preparation to a novel which, as I will discuss later, will consistently refuse to stage the nonhuman as a framing device.

Cialente reframed the novel yet again in the consequential overview of her career with which she prefaced her *Interno con figure* (Interior with Figures), a collection of previously published short stories, which she published in 1976, the year she was awarded the prestigious Strega Prize for her memoir *Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger* (The Four Wieselberger Girls). In this preface, an almost eighty-year-old Cialente, active first in the Resistenza and later in the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and Italian feminist movement, volunteered that historical and political interpretations were the most appropriate key to her work. She countered the accusation of having provided nothing more than an escapist "caldo cuscino messo sotto i piedi infreddoliti in una cattiva stagione" (1991, x; "warm pillow to place under one's feet in bad weather") with the assertion that her work was in fact a "testimonianza del mio tempo" (ibid., xvii; "a testimonial of my time") complete with "riferimenti ben precisi—direi storici […] basta saperli leggere" (ibid., xii; "precise references, I would say, historical, […] one just needs to know how to read them"). She invited readers to discern "accennato qua e là il ritratto d'un'incosciente o colpevole borghesia, che è poi il tema fondamentale di quasi tutta la mia opera" (ibid., xi; "hinted at here and there the portrait of a reckless or guilty bourgeoisie, which is after all the fundamental theme of almost all my work") while also famously denouncing Levantinism as a "fibroma incrostato su tutto il medio Oriente e destinato a scomparire" (ibid. xii; "a fibroid encrusted on all the Middle East and destined to disappear").[8] Forty years after first publishing *Cortile a Cleopatra*, Cialente thus provided her postcolonial readers with a welcome disambiguation when she made clear that her nostalgia for the Levant ought not be taken as an endorsement of Levantinism, a racist culture intimately connected to colonialism, for which she only felt "insofferenza" (1953, 11; "irritation"). And while she did not advocate for an environmentalist reading of her work, I would be remiss to overlook that, while providing important biographical information relating to her life between the wars and reframing her Levantine fiction as a critique of fascism and colonialism, Cialente also inadvertently yet unambiguously documents her sensitivity towards animal welfare.

Her concern for animal life—perhaps as unconscious as her love for the Levant but nonetheless significant given the attention paid to the non-human in *Cortile a Cleopatra*—stands out in a long passage of her preface to *Interno con figure* in which she reminisces on a dangerous sea-crossing she shared with a cargo of livestock in the winter of 1936:

[8] She continues: "La vita quotidiana era incredibilmente 'dolce e facile' e se ne vantavano quasi fosse tutto merito loro e un loro diritto, senza guardarsi intorno, quindi senza nemmeno darsi la pena di vedere che di quei privilegi la 'massa' non godeva assolutamente nulla" (xii; "daily life was so unbelievably 'sweet and easy' and they bragged of it as though everything was deserved, their right, without even looking around themselves and thereby taking the trouble to see that absolutely none of those privileges did the 'masses' enjoy").

> Dovevamo viaggiare fra l'altro con la stiva aperta per via di un carico di bestiame destinato a Haifa, in Palestina; giacché la nave turistica che in agosto ci aveva portati a Varna si trasformava durante la bassa stagione in nave da carico, e se un'ondata ci avesse assalito e fosse entrata nella stiva aperta—allegramente ce lo dicevano a bordo—saremmo calati a picco con tutti quei manzi e cavalli, e pecore e maiali, più le tredicimila galline e papere che avevamo imbarcato a Costanza, stipate in gabbie sui ponti, tanto che giornalmente morivano, povere bestie, e venivano ufficialmente gettate in mare; nondimeno non osammo durante tutto il viaggio farci servire il pollo arrosto che molto spesso compariva nel menu. (1991, xv)
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> (Among other things, we had to travel with the hold open because of a cargo of livestock bound to Haifa, in Palestine; since the tourist boat that took us to Varna in August in the low season was serving as a cargo ship, if a wave were to have swept over us and entered the hold—so they cheerfully told us on board—we would sink with all those oxen and horses, and sheep and pigs, plus the thirteen thousand chickens and ducks that we took on in Konstanz, so crammed into cages on the decks that several died every day, poor animals, and then were officially thrown into the sea; nevertheless for the whole journey we did not let them serve us the roast chicken that very often appeared on our menu.)

In this long and syntactically challenged, almost incoherent sentence, Cialente effectively conveys the chaos and anxiety of the situation she remembers. Although what actually happened (that a few animals died from the inhumane conditions of their transport) is not easily discerned from what she feared would happen (that both the passengers and the other animals would die) Cialente's own concern for the animals clearly contrasts with the callousness of those who would find the drowning of thousands of animals comical. Far from mere rhetorical positioning, her compassion for the "poor" animals—which are not referred to generically as a cargo of livestock but meticulously broken down into the various species of ox, horse, sheep, pig, chicken and duck—in fact translates her pity into commensurate action, namely, her family's refusal to eat roast chicken.

In the context of Cialente's weighty introductions to later editions of the novel and to *Interno con figure*, *Cortile a Cleopatra* as a whole has become legible as a critique of fascism. Building on Giuliana Minghelli's analysis of the novel as a commentary on Italian colonialism, Rosetta Caponetto has recently argued that Cialente's "emphasis on the cultural hybridism of Alexandrian society presents the reader with a wider spectrum and an alternative model of cultural identity that challenges the binary view of Italians versus non-Italians and the superiority of the Italic stock versus the inferiority of other ethnicities" (2015, 62). Focusing on the protagonist Marco, the young man who travels back to Alexandria in Egypt after the death of his Italian father to reunite with his Greek mother and settle there, Minghelli has pointed to a "soggetto coloniale frammentato" (1994, 231; "fragmented colonial subject") fleeing Fascism. Caponetto meanwhile has argued that the embodied hybridism of the "mediocre Italian protagonist […] challenges Fascist ideas of masculinity, race, and work ethic" (2015, 87). The adjectives "incosciente o colpevole" that Cialente used to define the bourgeoisie's role in building support for totalitarian regimes and in precipitating two world wars also come to mind when thinking of Marco's "amori e peccati" (1953 11; "loves and sins"). Marco, who engages in

"reckless" flirtation with his fiancée's mother, and whose inconsiderate approach to interpersonal (and interspecies) relations make him "culpable" of the suffering he causes to lovers, friends and companions, is a figure whose social and ecological behavior can be seen as the psychological if not also socioeconomic embodiment of the casual destructiveness of the bourgeoisie at the dawn of World War II. Cialente had foregrounded this very quality in the summation of her work with which she prefaced *Interno con figure*.

Rereading *Cortile a Cleopatra* today in light of Cialente's brief allusions to animals and the environment and allowing for a posthumanist interpretive paradigm to infuse new meaning into the novel, we could make a case that a novel that had grown into a memento of the author's love for the Levant and then into a sustained critique of Levantinism could also "reveal itself" many decades later as a compelling new figuration of the human as an "evolutionary co-emergence within a shared field of existence marked by the interdependency of life" (Oppermann 2016, 26). The ubiquitous presence of animals, plants and geological and meteorological elements, which is indeed visible to the casual reader, and the consistent attention to the other-than-human point of view and agency conjures a dimension that approximates the posthuman which Serenella Iovino has recently evocatively phrased as "a dimension in which 'we' and 'they' are caught together in an ontological dance whose choreography follows patterns of irredeemable hybridization and stubborn entanglement" (Iovino 2016, 11). The novel opens on a scene of human animal interaction and will continue to inscribe animals not as cliché props in an exotic landscape nor as objects of human affection but instead as legitimate inhabitants of a shared environment and an indispensable point of view. Throughout the work, non-humans are represented without affectation often through constructions that ascribe them grammatical agency, as alive, sensing and moving deliberately.

Pivoting around a space that, as Minghelli has noted, is precariously positioned as a threshold both between Africa and Europe and also between the real and the imaginary, the titular courtyard is also recognizable immediately as an ecosystem which is both inside and outside the home, one where the ecology—*oikos*, the home—is claimed by humans and non-humans alike. Quite importantly, the novel opens with the narrative validation of the point of view of Marco's pet monkey Beatrice:

> Seduta sul ramo basso del fico la scimmia sorvegliava Marco che dormiva lì sotto sdraiato all'ombra festosa e ondeggiante delle foglie […]. La scimmia lo guardava, seduta come una donna, i gomiti sulle ginocchia; ogni tanto si tastava il ventre e se lo spulciava, oppure frugava col dito nel guscio vuoto delle nocciole che aveva raccolto nel cavo del tronco. Vecchio, il fico, e polveroso. Piccoli, i fichi, e immaturi, quasi bianchi. La scimmia li stuzzicava e sembrava che sorridesse. Quando ne ebbe staccato uno, strizzò con le dita brune un po' del succo lattiginoso dove aveva rotto il picciuolo, guardò in basso e lo lasciò cadere sulla testa di Marco. Egli aperse gli occhi e in alto vide confusamente la scimmia, il fico, il sole. (21)
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> (Sitting on the lower branch of the fig tree the monkey watched over Marco who was sleeping down there lying among the festive and oscillating shadow of the leaves […]. Sitting like a woman, elbows on her knees, the monkey observed him; every now and then she probed her belly to groom it, or she searched the empty shells of the hazelnuts she had gathered in the hollow of the tree. The fig tree was

> old and dusty. Small, those figs, and unripe, almost white. The monkey poked at them and looked like she was smiling. When she picked one, she squeezed a little of the milky juice where she had removed the stem with her dark fingers and let it fall on Marco's head. He opened his eyes and saw, blurred together up there, the monkey, the fig tree, the sun.)

We first approach the courtyard through Beatrice's eyes, not Marco's. Before turning to the monkey's human companion, Cialente begins by detailing Beatrice's actions: watching over Marco, picking at her belly, carefully scrutinizing the hazelnut shells she had gathered in the hollow of the fig tree, probing the figs and pestering him by dropping an unripe one on his head, an act that will set in motion a scene of quarrel in the courtyard. Refraining from over-humanizing the monkey, Cialente employs similes to record that she was sitting "like a woman" and it "looked like" she was smiling to herself. Neither humanized nor valorized for her potential for humans, Beatrice is caught bothering Marco, instead of showing loyalty or begging for care. Momentarily but importantly, with the deictic phrase "lì sotto" ("down there"), Cialente situates the narrator "up here" with Beatrice as she looks down on the scene, the reader joining them in a vantage point onto an interconnected ecosystem.

Shortly after her first appearance, we learn the gruesome details of Beatrice's entrance into Marco's life. While aboard the ship that transported him from Italy to Greece and then to Egypt, Marco claimed ownership of the monkey to save her from the captain who wanted her captured and killed. The act of mercy will cause him to be lashed until he bleeds and faints. Although we don't know the reason why the captain orders the lashing—punishment for insubordination? for lying? for keeping a pet? compensation for not getting to kill the monkey?—the command "Frustatemi quel porco!" ("Whip the pig for me!) is worded such that animalization is essential to the gratuitous brutality, which Cialente allows to reverberate even longer with the graphic description of the effects on Marco's body: "e lo frustarono. Accecato dal sole egli si rotolò sul ponte a dorso nudo, schiumando e gridando. Quando ebbe tutta la schiena striata di un bel rosso vivo, il buon capitano gridò che bastava e che gli dessero la scimmia" (52; "and they whipped him. Blinded by the sun, he rolled his bare back across the deck, screaming and foaming at the mouth. When all his back was streaked with bright red, the good captain yelled that that was enough and they could give him back his monkey").

Although Beatrice is not the only animal to appear in the book, she alone caught the attention of the critic Paola Azzolini, who elevates her to the role of "protagonista, silenziosa e fondamentale" (1992, 188; "silent and essential protagonist") but insists on interpreting her presence as exerting a literary function. For Azzolini, Beatrice is a "parodia fantastica, metamorfosi umana e subumana del femminile" (ibid., 118; "fantastic parody, a human and subhuman metamorphosis of the feminine") "archetipo di tutte le metamorfosi del femminile minaccioso e divoratore" ("archetype of all the menacing and devouring metamorphoses of the feminine"), "un mito, quello della donna come *Naturwesen* che ha le sue figure in certe leggende come quella di Melusina, metà donna e metà serpente" (1992, 119; "a myth, that of woman as *Naturwesen* which figures in some legends such as that of Melusine, half woman and half snake") she is the "idea del femminile cangiante, metamorfica, umana non umana" (ibid., 120; "the idea of the changing feminine, metamorphic, human and not human"), "folletto, demone benevolo, simbolo dell'infanzia, dell'altro se stesso al femminile, che Marco crede di abbandonare" (ibid., 121; "goblin, benevolent demon, symbol of childhood, of the female other self, which Marco thinks he is abandoning"). Parody, archetype, myth, idea, symbol and, above

all, prefiguration, Beatrice for Azzolini belongs with all the literary animals who, as Stephen Webb writes, are turned into "figures, rhetorical embellishments or marginal tropes" instead of being "taken literally on their own terms" (1998, 87). But with a close reading, it is apparent that, even though the novel is structured around events and elements where animal scenes can be interpreted as prefigurations of events involving humans, Beatrice is only one of the many animals the book acknowledges as both the tenors and vehicles of similes, as organic and legitimate dwellers of an ecosystem shared with humans. With respect to all the other animals, which are emphatically *not* represented as symbols and metaphors, Beatrice demands consideration as an independent actor who bears witness to human life.

Take for instance the passage where Marco, in an attempt to shake off his dissatisfaction with life that inexplicably follows his engagement to Dinah, the fur-maker's daughter, takes a walk into town and encounters goats, rams and chickens:

> Era arrivato in mezzo al quartiere indigeno: le capre uscivano dagli steccati, venivano a belare sommessamente in mezzo al vicolo per salutarlo, poi se ne tornavano indietro, sparivano nel buio trotterellando, e belavano ancora sopra un tono appassionato e lamentoso. I montoni, attaccati, si volgevano a guardarlo con indifferenza e gli mostravano, bassa, la fronte cocciuta. Galline invisibili aprivano le ali, starnazzavano in alto sulle piccole case di fango. (136)
>
> (He made it to the native neighborhood: goats slipped out of their corrals and came to greet him in the middle of the alley, bleating softly, then turned back, and disappeared sauntering into the dark, with a sound between the passionate and the plangent. The rams, leashed, turned to look at him with indifference and showed him their low, stubborn forehead. Invisible hens opened their wings, and squawked from high atop the small mud houses.)

Praised by Azzolini as a welcome subversion of exotic tropes, far from cliché—"L'altrove esotico si sfa nel fiato caldo di un Presepe brulicante, tenero e indifeso" (1992, 108; "The exotic elsewhere evaporates in the warm breath of a Nativity scene, teeming, tender and defenseless") —this passage ostensibly gives animals the visibility granted to them by being part of the protagonist's sensory landscape. As Marco approaches the indigenous quarter, the reader, listening in to his interior monologue until then, now takes in the scenery through his eyes. One could argue that, quite simply, Marco "sees" goats, rams and chickens. But the syntax tells a different story. Instead of representing Marco's agency, Cialente achieves the opposite by assigning active verbs and nuanced emotions to the animals while shrinking Marco's presence down to pronouns. Reduced to a "lo" and a "gli," Marco is only the object of the animals' active verbs. Cialente takes pains to recount the goats leaving the corral and moving towards him, greeting him with muffled bleats, turning back, disappearing into the darkness, sauntering and modulating their bleats differently, with a sound between passionate and plangent, while the rams, markedly less interested, stare at him with indifference, confronting him with their narrow and "stubborn" foreheads. While perhaps simply chronicling Marco's frequently referenced passion for nature or perhaps just informing the reader of his narcissistic personality as he imagines himself the center of the animals' attention, this passage clearly represents the encounter with animals as a two-way event: Cialente's wording appears to affirm "vital processes and the expressive intensity of a Life we share with multiple others, here and now"

(Braidotti 2013, 190). Her words come across as a powerful iteration of the "aesthetics of care" illustrated by Josephine Donovan as foundational of a "participatory epistemology—an 'I-Thou' relationship, in which the natural world and its multivarious creatures are recognized as subjects who have stories of their own" (2016, 73). As they cross the page, animals other than Beatrice are given ample space to tell stories that intersect with those of the humans of the novel.

Cialente consistently strays from the human to allow for the non-human to assume the foreground. The animals that fill almost every page of the book, despite escaping notice by past critics, are never given as passive objects of human admiration or violence but are instead portrayed as both responding to and shaping human action. To put it simply: they see and feel just as much as they are seen and felt. The casual act of Marco's moving wooden planks across a shed, for instance, also scatters spiders and centipedes, an act that reverberates into more stories of encounters past:

> Assisteva alla fuga di ragni e millepiedi; o di svelti scarafaggi, quelli grossi di un colore marrone rossiccio che la sera volavano pesantemente. Quando riusciva a colpirli li sentiva scricchiolare come se fossero di carta o di paglia, e poi li vedeva agonizzare a lungo, frenetici, agitando le zampe ripiegate. Qualche volta dopo morti sparivano e lui li cercava invano, anche le mosche le abbatteva a volo, e in terra le formiche se le trascinavano via con tanta pazienza e fatica (ma quegli scarafaggi sornioni che sparivano dopo aver fatto il morto durante tutta la giornata, lo insospettivano). (103)
>
> (He watched spiders and centipedes flee; or nimble cockroaches, the big fat ones, the reddish-brown ones who flew ponderously at night. When he managed to hit them, he listened as they crackled as if they were made of paper or straw, and then he watched them agonize for a long time, as they frantically agitated their folded legs. Sometimes after dying they disappeared and he looked for them in vain, he even hit flies in midair, and, down on the ground, the ants dragged them away with so much patience and toil [but those sly cockroaches who disappeared after pretending to be dead during the day, made him suspicious].)

This seemingly mundane scene transitions swiftly from the accidental dispersal of the insects to a series of detailed tableaux that depict different moments of past interactions with insects: Marco towering over vermin, chasing and hitting cockroaches and almost sadistically enjoying the cracking sound of their agony, but also ants patiently transporting cadavers of flies and individual "sly" cockroaches pretending to be dead. Beyond recalling the slaughtered bugs, the novel here depicts insects acting deliberately. Calling attention to the cockroaches' heavy evening flight and the many other times they mysteriously disappeared, Cialente importantly chronicles the animals' right to exist outside their momentary intersection with a human that seeks their death.

Cortile a Cleopatra as a whole testifies to the moral obligation to represent human life as ordinarily lived and shared and negotiated with the non-human. Insects and toads catch our attention and demand to be acknowledged. If flirting, as one episode suggests, occurs at the edge of a fountain where toads live, the scene will memorialize the actions and points of view of all the inhabitants of the ecosystem: "Gli innamorati se ne andarono all'angolo dove c'era la vasca a vedere i rospi. Tuffarono le mani fingendo di volerli acchiappare e di ridere per questo" (117;

"The lovers retreated to the corner where the fountain was to watch the toads. They dipped their hands into the water, pretending to catch them and laughing about it"). Far from a framing device, the toads are a constant presence: "un rospo gorgogliava in fondo alla vasca" (124; "a toad gurgled at the bottom of the fountain"). The lovers' casual handling of the toads is followed by a reference to the effect of the activity on Beatrice ("per il terrore di Beatrice che s'aggrappava frignando al collo di Marco" [117; "terrifying Beatrice who held on to Marco's neck crying"]), on the toads themselves ("I rospi tacevano là sotto, spaventati" ["the toads went silent down there, scared"]) and on the servant Haiganùsh ("s'avvicinò gridando che quelle bestiacce non la lasciavano dormire, la notte, e che avrebbe versato un fiasco di petrolio nella vasca" ["she came up to them screaming that those damn animals kept her up at night and that she was going to pour a jug of heating oil in the fountain"]). An avid reader and an adult admirer of the juvenile fiction of Emilio Salgari, Cialente occasionally passes on general knowledge of animal behavior in his characteristic style: "I rospi tacciono quando non c'è la luna" (123; "the toads go quiet on moonless nights").[9]

Whether the subject is a toad, goat, cockroach or monkey, the animal's point of view is consistently validated while its embodied experience is graphically presented. In one very important scene—routinely interpreted as a prefiguration of the human death that will close the novel, to which I will return below—the reader is made to perceive the presence of an ominously expanding pool of blood from Beatrice's narrow perspective:

> All'alba la scimmia guardava inquieta una chiazza densa e scura che s'allargava nell'angolo del cortile […]. Lo strano liquido colava giù dal tubo guasto. […] [S]'allargava palpitando, allungandosi, torcendosi. […] Aveva tirato la catena con tutte le sue forze, Beatrice, ma non aveva potuto spezzarla […]. Quella cosa nera aumentava, arrivava fino alle radici della zucca che cresceva intorno alla porta di Crissanti e mandava a traverso l'aria un odore acre. […] Ma Beatrice urlava e gemeva disperata, scotendo la catena a due mani e sembrava volesse dire: "questa sciocca ragazza non capirà se non guarda da quella parte dove c'è la cosa che ha uno strano odore e mi fa paura". […] Una pozza rossa si coagulava tra le zolle aperte. (71–73)
>
> (At dawn the monkey was restless as she watched a dense and dark stain grow in the corner of the courtyard […]. The odd liquid dripped from the broken pipe. […] It grew bigger, pulsing, stretching and twisting. […] She had pulled the chain with all her strength, Beatrice did, still unable to break it […]. That dark thing grew bigger, it now reached to the roots of the pumpkin that grew around Crissanti's door and gave off an acrid odor. […] But Beatrice yelled and moaned in despair, shaking her chain with both hands and looking as though she meant to say: "this dumb girl will not understand if she does not look over there where that thing is that smells funny and scares me". […] A red pool curdled amongst the cracked sods.)

Beatrice—and, with her, the reader—is unable to explain a phenomenon that she senses as menacing. It takes a few pages to discover that the dark liquid is blood, when the scene is taken in from the point of view of Marco's mother, Crissanti. Crissanti is just as upset, inarticulate and

[9] On Cialente's love for Salgari see Pozzo (2000), 29.

unable to explain the terrifying sight. Crissanti's screams and chest-pounding mirror Beatrice's behavior and validate her response. It takes a few more pages for the reader to learn that the swell of blood, inexplicable and terrifying to both Beatrice and Crissanti, is "nothing": "il padrone ha fatto ammazzare la bestia questa notte sul terrazzo. […] [Il] sangue è colato fuori dal tubo che è rotto invece di entrare nella fogna. Non è niente" (73; "The owner had the animal slaughtered on the terrace last night. […] The blood leaked out of the broken pipe instead of going into the sewage. It's nothing"). "Nothing" only for those who explained the blood in the courtyard as the immediate consequence of ruptured tubing and the culturally inevitable result of Easter celebrations, the animal-killing so viscerally opposed by Beatrice is represented in all its goriness. Readers are confronted with the realization that just as cockroaches make an unforgettably grating sound when squashed, so too do goats give off an acrid odor when butchered, their blood making an unsightly pool that mars the view of a pumpkin plant.

In fact, Beatrice's response will also be Marco's and, very likely, Cialente's. For Marco, the slaughtering of the goat becomes the objective correlative of his alienation from a place and culture he had resolved to leave. Even under the guise of a peace offering from Abramino—the fur-dealer living in the courtyard who had butchered the goat—to Crissanti, the dead animal continues to be a disquieting presence for Marco. Through Marco's eyes we see "una bella coscia di montone sanguinolenta ricoperta di una pelle grinzosa e gialliccia, bollata di viola, con l'osso troncato sull'orlo del piatto, dove colava un'acquerugiola sporca di sangue" (87; "a nice leg of mutton, bloody and covered by a wrinkled, yellowish skin, marked in purple, with the broken bone hanging from the plate's rim, where a dirty bloody liquid was gathering"). Withered, yellowed and oozing blood, the mutton is markedly unappetizing even when recoded as a roast hanging from a severed bone: "il pezzo di montone con l'osso spaccato volto in aria dondola e significa un bell'arrosto per domani" (ibid.; "the piece of mutton with the broken bone facing upwards is rocking back and forth and means a nice roast for tomorrow"). Neither the anticipation nor the imagined memory of the meal brings him any solace: "mangerà un bel pezzo di quel montone che sua madre avrà mandato al forno nella tortiera di rame, coperto di fette di patate crude e pomidori, aglio e rosmarino. Gli avrà fatto anche dei buchi col coltello per riempirli di sale e pepe… un singhiozzo gli gonfia il petto e si butta a dormire con la faccia nel cuscino preso da un lungo fremito di rabbia" (88; "he will eat a nice piece of that mutton that his mother will have put in the oven in the copper casserole, covered in sliced potatoes and tomatoes, garlic and rosemary. She will have also made holes with the knife to later fill with salt and pepper … he chokes up and he throws his face into the pillow to sleep, shaken by a long fit of rage"). The violence of the knife Marco imagines poking the dead flesh triggers a fit of impotent anger in him. A scene that begins with Beatrice instinctively recoiling before a pool of blood she does not comprehend ends similarly some twenty pages later, with Marco's inarticulate rage before a custom that, by encouraging the carnage of animals, exacerbates his lack of belonging to a place or culture—if not also to the human race altogether.

The same slaughtered animals that perplex and terrify Beatrice haunt Marco's dreams from the beginning of the novel, when Marco has a premonitory dream triggered by the sight of knives: "Egli s'addormentò e sognò di sangue, sangue di polli sgozzati, di conigli sventrati, di montoni squartati" (22; "he fell asleep and dreamt of blood, the blood of slaughtered chickens, disemboweled rabbits, quartered rams"). Indeed, dead animals also haunt Marco in waking life after he begins his apprenticeship at Abramino's fur shop. Marco feels shame handling the harmless furs into which the animals he had imagined as fiery opponents have been turned. A lover of animals in the wild, Marco sees the business as fraught with unwelcome cowardice: "Gli

sembrava che avrebbe avuto a che fare con bestie vive, astute, nemiche, non con le pelli vuote, così morbide" (135; "He thought he would be dealing with live animals, crafty opponents, not with skins, limp and soft"). Again filtered through Marco's nauseated sensibility, the graphic experience of the shop is terrifying and asphyxiating: "l'aria era pesante, infatti, e sembrava che ondeggiasse là dentro con l'odore animale delle pelli una lanuggine che però si attaccava in gola ed entrava nelle narici; […] sentì subito che doveva abituarsi a respirare in economia in quello spazio" (158-159; "the air was heavy, in fact, it felt like, together with the beastly stench of the hides, there was some fuzz wafting in the air that stuck to the throat and came through the nostrils. […] He knew immediately that he had to learn to breathe frugally in that space"). Even the bags stuffed with furs are "sventrati" (160; "disemboweled"). Like Beatrice, Marco recoils from the incomprehensible violence that characterizes the slaughtering of animals for sustenance and commerce.

Disemboweled, slaughtered, dripping with blood, stamped with an official purplish trademark insigne, further dismembered when cooked, larded, roasted and ingested and smelled to nauseous effect, the animals that enter Marco's sensory world are represented as almost exaggeratedly embodied. As Anat Pick reminds us, representing animals as embodied, "undermines institutionalized speciesism" and does "provide a powerful antidote to anthropocentrism" (2011, 6). The animal sacrifices that haunt both Marco and Beatrice are further from literary functionality than from the activism evoked by Carol Adams' statement that "[a]nimals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist" (1990, 40). Cialente's explicit reference to Marco's vegetarianism is worth noting. Marco's escape fantasy is made up of the anticipated pleasure of both encountering wildlife again—"presto vedrò gl'ibis e i nibbi" (239; "soon I will see ibises and kites")—and consuming simple lean meals that can be enjoyed without animal sacrifice: "Pensa che ora va lontano, nell'interno, a vivere piuttosto con gl'indigeni che con i levantini […]. Si vede già seduto sulla soglia delle loro piccole case a masticare la canna da zucchero dolce e succosa, le foglie di lattuga fresca, a mangiare in fondo a una scodella un po' di fave macerate o un pugno di riso bollito nell'olio. Così potrà facilmente dimenticare i cibi grassi della tavola di Abramino" (238; "He thinks that now he will travel far away, to the interior of the country, to live with the natives instead of with the Levantines […]. He sees himself sitting on the doorstep of their small houses, chewing the sweet and juicy sugarcane, fresh lettuce leaves, eating at the bottom of a bowl some soaked fava beans or a handful of rice boiled in oil. Like this, he can easily forget the fatty foods of Abramino's meals"). Marco's discomfort with consuming animal products reads as a rebuke to an accepted universal practice that exceeds the bounds of his own historical horizon.

Without needing to postulate a full identification between character and author, it is hard not to read into these scenes Cialente's own discomfort with consuming animal products when we recall the author's own refusal to eat meat after witnessing animal suffering while crossing the Black Sea or the approving memory in *Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger* of her grandmother's objection to killing farm animals: "la madre era sempre contraria a che si uccidessero gli animali del pollaio; 'ma se li go guardai nei oci!' esclamava intenerita. […] Il viaggio di ritorno in carrozza, con l'animale morto avvolto in una cartaccia in serpa a fianco di Micèl la intristiva, le guastava il piacere della gita in villa, diceva" (1976, 41; "mother was always against killing the coop's animals; 'It is that I looked them in the eyes!' she would shout out piteously. Going back in the coach, with the dead animal wrapped in paper on the front seat next to Micèl made her sad, it ruined her trip to the villa, she said"). As she revisits this episode, Cialente emphasizes her own approval of her grandmother's stance when she recalls "una tenerezza ammirabile che

sentivo di ammirare completamente" (ibid., 109; "an admirable tenderness that I felt I admired completely"). Even though Marco's objection is instinctive, rather than a sustained critique, his sensitivity to animal welfare reinforces an understanding of the human-animal continuum that resonates with a posthumanist sensibility. Indeed, Marco, who is described as "animale ferito e scontroso" (69; "a wounded and surly animal") and who is depicted feeding on food scraps, remaining alone and unwatched, favoring windows over doors to enter and leave houses, bonding with a pet monkey and being annoyed by human language and comforted by silence, is conjured not only as stateless and of mixed-race but also as barely and only hesitantly human.

Marco's alternative human model is complemented by an overwhelming non-human presence visible on almost every page of a novel teeming with animals of all species from pets to pests, wild to tame, food to ornament, mythical and real: goats, donkeys, and camels; doves, crows, quails and ibises; flies, mosquitos, gnats and moths; cockroaches, spiders and centipedes; ducklings and toads; cats, mice and rats; panthers, fish and dragons. Geological and meteorological elements are also consistently represented, often through constructions that ascribe them grammatical agency, as alive, sensing and moving deliberately. Reluctantly humanized, the screams of the wind "approach" and the waves "crawl," the moon is "hung from the gallows of a date tree that undulates," islands "wrap themselves in tinted fogs," the rain is listless, the "shadow of the sun jumps in the water," and "a monstrous sun hides behind incandescent clouds."[10] In fact, both the organic and the artificial are represented as alive: a "heart swings in the cool shade of the entry hall," "the shutters smile when freshly painted," "the plaster is parched," walls are "mangy," and "houses wobble out of tiredness."[11] Perhaps in a nod to the modernist prose of Federigo Tozzi—whose example Cialente seems to acknowledge in the very title, where Cortile *a* Cleopatra recalls Poggio *a* Meli, the setting of *Con gli occhi chiusi* (With Closed Eyes) and normalizes a potentially confusing toponomastic—the landscape throughout is conjured synesthetically. As with the "modernist embodiments" discussed by Deborah Amberson and the "quiet avant-garde" analyzed by Cannamela, Cialente's is a fictional universe where "the threshold of humanity" is "fitfully negotiated after Darwin" (Amberson 2012, 33) and in which "the identification of humans as subjects and non-humans as inert 'still life' loses its clear meaning" (Cannamela 2019, 9). As Azzolini and Marianna Nepi have noted, with Cialente's "expressionist style" (Azzolini 1992, 124) her "visione frammentata e ambigua della realtà in cui tutto risulta incerto e scomposto" (Nepi 2012, 61; "fragmented and ambiguous vision of reality where everything comes across as uncertain and disorderly") overcomes the limitations of nineteenth-century positivism.

To accommodate all the living, the syntax is at times stretched, as in the following evocation of a walk that anticipates Italo Calvino's *Città invisibili*:

> Quest'idea lo ha spinto fuori al mattino, con il fastidio di sentir gridare tanta gente, in cerca di una strada, una buona strada come ce ne sono in Italia, di quelle

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[10] Cialente 2004: "il grido del vento si fa più vicino, le onde cominciano a strisciare sulla spiaggia" (88); "luna impiccata alla testa di un dattoliere che ondulava col vento si lasciava solleticare la faccia" (109); "verso sera le isole magiche si avvolgevano in nebbie colorate e sparivano" (50); "pioggerella svogliata" (153); "ombra del sole che si tuffa nel mare" (36); "gli rombava il mare dentro la testa e gli sembrava che anche la spiaggia tremasse leggermente" (37); un sole mostruoso si nasconde dietro le nuvole incandescenti" (80).

[11] Cialente 2004: "Un cuore dondolava nella fresca ombra del tinello (32); "dopo qualche settimana le persiane delle case intorno cominciavano a sorridere pitturate di fresco" (39); "screpolato dal sole l'intonaco" (152); "muri macchiati rognosi" (156); "le case vacillano di stanchezza a destra e a sinistra" (63). See also 34: "Nel silenzio il suo riso discreto, liquido riempiva le tazze, le coppe, i vasi, colava fuori, scendeva a terra, montava."

> che quando s'incominciano non si ha più voglia di lasciarle né di tornare indietro; e non si sa se è per la smania di sorprendere una quaglia che ha fatto il nido in mezzo al grano verde, o d'inseguire l'odore del fieno, o di contare quanti sono i covoni in quel campo, ma c'è sempre qualche cosa che tira innanzi per quella strada. Il colle di faccia, verdolino, ha le curve amorose di una testa di bimbo o di un seno di donna, gli alberi non sono né folti né tragici, come nelle foreste a millecinquecento, ma sono spaziati, rotondi, grigiastri ulivi, sono, e montano il colle a ellissi, con ogni tanto in mezzo un vecchio olmo vestito di edera o un fiero cipresso che parla severamente alle bianche e sbandate nuvolette del cielo. (80)

> (This idea prompted him to go out in the morning, annoyed at hearing so many people shouting, looking for a road, a good road like in Italy, one of those that when one begins to walk one never wants to leave them or go back; and one does not know whether it is for the eagerness to surprise a quail that made her nest in the green wheat, or to chase the smell of hay, or to count how many balls of hay there are in that field, but there is always something on that road that pushes the traveler on. The hill right there, pale green, has the loving curves of a child's head or a woman's breast, the trees are neither too thick nor tragic, like in the forests at fifteen hundred meters high, but they are well distanced, those round grey olive trees are, and they climb the hill in an ellipsis, with an old elm in the middle every once in a while, covered in ivy or a proud cypress that sternly lectures the white clouds all mixed up in the sky.)

Cialente moves seamlessly from Marco's perspective to an impersonal subject to render the panic, the living, the protean that binds together the human and non-human, organic and artificial in an alternative figuration of the human which looks forward to Braidotti's search for "an adequate language for post-anthropocentrism" (2013, 82) and her championing of the "inter*relation* of human/animal as constitutive of the identity of *each*" (2013, 79, italics in original) in the hope that "the recognition of shared ties of vulnerability can generate new forms of posthuman community and compassion" (69).

A crucial iteration of Pick's "creaturely poetics," which "grapples with what is inhuman in us" (2011, 6), and Braidotti's "vitalist materialism" (55) in pursuit of a "symbiotic relation that hybridizes and alters the nature of each and foregrounds the middle ground" (79), *Cortile a Cleopatra* resists interpretations that privilege the symbolic and the anthropocentric. Marco's desertion of the entire ecosystem of the courtyard—"vedeva passare ad uno ad uno i personaggi del cortile e con un senso di stupore s'accorgeva che a ognuno di essi egli aveva fatto un po' di male, soprattutto a Eva; e a Dinah, a Kikì. Sua madre […] Francesco […] Beatrice" (240; "he saw a flash of all the people in the courtyard go one by one and was surprised to realize that he had hurt each of them a little, especially Eva; and Dinah and Kikì. His mother […] Francesco […] Beatrice")—will lead to the suicide of Eva, wife to Abramino and mother to Marco's fiancée Dinah. Eva's suicide is just as gruesome and unexplained as the lashing that the captain had ordered to punish Marco for caring for his pet monkey. We do not get to know the reasons for her act—was it because she feared societal disapproval? She abhorred infringing unwritten rules? Or was life just meaningless without Marco? Performed with the same knife that was used to butcher the Easter goat, the same blade capable of "tagliare l'osso del vitello come se fosse pane" (241; "cut[ting] the kid's bone as if it was bread"), Eva's slaughter results in the same

ominous and inexplicable pool of blood, which meanders in the same pattern on the ground: "il sangue che si coagulava tra le zolle aperte: colava giù dal tubo guasto, a gocce, aveva fatto una pozza di un rosso quasi nero e un rivolo cominciava a scendere serpeggiando nella polvere" (242; "the blood that curdled amidst the open sods: it dripped from the broken pipe, drop by drop it formed a red pool, almost black, and a rivulet began to meander in the dust"). Her blood elicits the same inarticulate sound of outrage and fear that Beatrice expressed at the sight of the goat's blood: "'mmm, mmm' si lagnava Beatrice girando su se stessa, poi apriva le braccia, si grattava furiosamente il petto, le ascelle. 'mmm'" (243; "'mmm, mmm', Beatrice moaned, spinning around, then she opened her arms and began to scratch her chest and armpits furiously. 'mmm'"). With Beatrice suffering from the bloodshed, regardless of its provenance, Eva's death recalls the death of the goat just as much as the slaughtering of the goat foreshadows that of Eva. Only eyes trained to interpret animal sacrifice as necessary and human death as tragic would not see that *both* deaths are ultimately conjured as both unnecessary and worthy of grief. The counterpoint to the women screaming and crying is a simile that compares human voices to the bellow of a slaughtered ox: "Si unì un'altra voce, più bassa, lacerante come il muggito di un bue al macello" (246; "Another voice joined in, lower, as heartbreaking as the bellow of a slaughtered ox").

Occasionally tinged with violence and abuse, the bond between human and non-human is predominantly conjured as joyous, bright and forward-looking and the animal presence is decidedly luminous. The scene of the slaughtered goat is interwoven with references to bats looking on like soft angels ("Pipistrelli volavano bassi molli e pesanti come angeli" [61]), to moths gently whisking the air ("le piccole farfalle notturne e grigie che frullavano nell'ora del silenzio" [78]), to pelicans softly sleeping ("I pellicani dormono sull'orlo dello stagno, il becco adagiato sul ventre" [81]), and to ducklings bobbing among the reeds ("gli anatroccoli sparuti galleggiano tra le canne" [82]). Born "sotto il segno della felicità" (Cialente 1953, 7; "under the sign of joy"), as Cecchi wrote, *Cortile a Cleopatra* is more likely reborn as infectiously optimistic primarily because the novel conjures a world where animals are still reassuringly but precariously plentiful and appear to live on independently of man's destructive presence.

And it is on a scene of paradoxically giddy shared vulnerability that the book ends. As Marco realizes in tears that he has left Beatrice behind, his last thought is for the monkey's fragility: "Beatrice. L'ha dimenticata, lui, così piccola e fragile. […] Mai più le sue manine scure sulle guance e nei capelli, mai più sotto le carezze quel suo scheletrino leggero" (240; "Beatrice. He had forgotten her, so he had, so small and fragile. […] Her tiny, dark hands never again on his cheeks or hair, her slight little skeleton never again under his caressing hand"). Lightness and soft vulnerability are also the qualities that Marco's friend Kikì recognizes in Beatrice: "qualche cosa di leggero e molle cadde sulla sua testa, sulla sua spalla e poi giù tra i suoi piedi; […] quando la polvere dileguò vide la scimmia seduta più in là che la guardava" (246; "something light and soft dropped on her head, on her shoulder and then to her feet; […] when the dust dissipated she saw the monkey sitting over there looking at her"). Kikì's words, pronounced aloud, mirror Marco's own, but only in part: "'Beatrice!' Poi, con un fiero sussulto di gioia: 'L'hanno scacciata dal fico', pensò vedendo che le ciondolava dal collo un mozzicone di catena. 'Adesso l'acchiappo io'" (ibid.; "'Beatrice!' and then with a proud leap of joy: 'They kicked her from the fig tree,' she thought seeing that the chain stump was hanging from her neck. 'Now I'll catch her'"). Beatrice's jump and Kikì's bounce energetically offset Marco's tears and impress an optimistic forward movement on the ending. Ending not with the vision of Eva's gruesome death but with the irrepressible life instinct of Kikì, whom Andrea Gialloreto has named "vitalità

stracciona" (2011, 115; "ragged vitalilty") and whom Cecchi has compared to a "verdastra gramigna" (Cialente 1953, 10; "greenish weed"), Cialente concludes with a *Weltanschauung* where, in Franco Cordelli's words, "non succede solo che tutti si muore, succede molto di più: succede che ciò che davvero importa è come si muore, ovvero come si vive" (Cialente 2004, 16; "it is not just that everyone dies, a lot more happens: what really matters is how one dies, that is how one lives"). Kikì is jubilant at the thought of getting to care for Beatrice, a stance that reminds us of the privilege to care for the beautiful fragility of the living. In Kiki's last gesture we hear the echo of Simone Weil's words: "the vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is a mark of existence" (2002, 108), a statement that captures the ethical and aesthetic dimension of the posthuman sensibility that pervades the entire novel.

A book that began by challenging the supremacy of humanism by validating a monkey's viewpoint from above ends with an even more distant viewpoint. The last words come from a point that is barely equipped to register human suffering: "Quegli urli disperati non li sentiva più mentre inseguiva la scimmia che camminava sempre, laggiù, e ogni tanto si fermava, seduta sulla spiaggia e annusava il mare" (247; "She could no longer hear those desperate bellows as she chased the monkey who kept walking, over there, and every once in a while she stopped to sit on the beach and smell the sea"). Concluding with the sea drowning the noise of human suffering, quietly savored by the monkey who, for the time being, lives on, the novel invites a figuration of the human that brightly transcends the legacy of humanism.

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