

2014

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Recommended Citation

Pacini, G. (2014). Arboreal and Historical Perspectives from Calvino's *Il barone rampante*.

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Arboreal and Historical Perspectives from Calvino's *Il barone rampante*

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This article considers Calvino's *Il barone rampante* (1957) as a parable of the deforestation and excessive urban development that took place along the Italian Riviera, starting in the late eighteenth century. The novel's inter-textual references point to the intellectual foundations of the author's ecological ethics, and reveal his understanding of the Enlightenment as a culture vested in the protection of its forests and interested in recasting human relationships with the natural world.

KEYWORDS Calvino, trees, deforestation, Enlightenment, nature

Arboreal and historical perspectives from Calvino's *Il barone rampante*

Italo Calvino's *Il barone rampante* (1957) is a Italian parable that is frequently read as a reflection on the ideal role of the intellectual in contemporary society.¹ The novel, however, also illustrates in fantastic form the deforestation that took place along the northern Mediterranean coast of Italy. It offers both a literary response to the excesses of urban development that characterized the post-war period and a critical reflection on a longer history of human intervention on the Italian Riviera.² The text is in fact written with such botanical precision and refers inter-textually to works of such environmental importance that it begs its readers to consider the literal significance of Calvino's trees, and to recognize the long-standing literary and philosophical tradition upon which the author's ecological ethics were founded. As it laments its lost 'universo di linfa', *Il barone rampante* nostalgically reminisces about the ways in which eighteenth-century writers could think about forest sustainability and the responsibilities of humans vis-à-vis the natural world.³ Contrary to other scholars of his time, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who became notorious for their representation of the Enlightenment as a monolithic and violent project bent on establishing man's mastery over nature, Calvino evoked the worlds of Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint Pierre, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Denis Diderot, as he celebrated a culture that called for the protection of forests and sometimes even conceived of the intrinsic value of trees.

Il barone rampante is carefully set at the turn of the nineteenth century, at a particularly important turning point in Ligurian history: just before, during, and after the French take-over of the Republic of Genoa under Napoleon — that is, at the beginning of a period of intense deforestation.⁴ The novel's narrator looks back on this historical moment from a fictional place appropriately named 'Ombrosa'. He cries out: 'Il cielo è vuoto, e a noi vecchi d'Ombrosa, abituati a vivere sotto quelle verdi cupole, fa male agli occhi guardarlo. Si direbbe che gli alberi non hanno retto, dopo che gli uomini sono stati presi dalla furia della scure [...] Ombrosa non c'è più' (776). These trees, as critics often note, were lost during the Napoleonic wars, but deforestation along the northern Mediterranean coast of Italy was caused mainly by the fact that, from the early nineteenth century onwards, this woody and mountainous region was subject to extensive clearing to permit the construction of a vast network of roads and railways.⁵ In the decades and century that followed ever more routes were developed, and these allowed for, and ultimately encouraged, significant demographic movements towards ever-expanding urban centres and new industrial plants. Unfortunately, these projects heavily damaged the area's tree cover, for they required great quantities of wood for construction, as well as charcoal to feed the hard-working furnaces. The narrator of *Il barone rampante* was thus correct to complain:

Ora, già non si riconoscono più, queste contrade. S'è cominciato quando vennero i Francesi, a tagliar boschi come fossero prati che si falciano tutti gli anni e poi ricrescono. Non sono ricresciuti. Pareva una cosa della guerra, di Napoleone, di quei tempi: invece non si smise più. I dossi sono nudi che a guardarli, noi che li conoscevamo da prima, fa impressione. (577)

These changes were not the first to affect the Riviera's treescape, for archaeological research and the history of local agricultural practices show that already in the late eighteenth century the surrounding landscape was anything but natural. In the seventeenth century, for example, many of the area's traditional vineyards and citrus trees had been replaced by olive groves, whose strategic exploitation by large property owners was supposed to insert the Riviera in an international network of oil production and commercial distribution. When in the early twentieth century this initiative failed to produce the desired wealth (in part because of competition by other sources around the Mediterranean, and in part because of droughts and the arrival of a particularly pernicious parasite that systematically ruined harvests), the olive groves were replaced by a more profitable floriculture and other exotic cultures, and this process dealt yet another blow to the local tree cover. The most dramatic changes to the Ligurian landscape, however, came after World War II, at the time of the composition of Calvino's novel, when the region experienced a formidable and largely uncontrolled housing boom. In protest, Calvino sat down to write the novel *La speculazione edilizia* (1956–57), a scathing critique of this unruly construction, of the damage done to local gardens, and of the psychological and social costs of these developments.⁶

That same year Calvino also wrote *Il barone rampante* in a rapid burst of verbal energy. This novel's tones are much more lyrical than those of *La speculazione edilizia* because, instead of describing the new cement jungles, Calvino chose to focus on the region's lost woods and to frame his narrative within nostalgic memories of the beautiful trees of Ombrosa:

Allora, dovunque s'andasse, avevamo sempre rami e fronde tra noi e il cielo. L'unica zona di vegetazione più bassa erano i limoneti, ma anche là in mezzo si levavano contorti gli alberi di fico, che più a monte ingombravano tutto il cielo degli orti, con le cupole del pesante loro fogliame, e se non erano fichi erano ciliegi dalle brune fronde, o più teneri cotogni, peschi, mandorli, giovani peri, prodighi susini, e poi sorbi, carrubi, quando non era un gelso o un noce annoso. Finiti gli orti, cominciava l'oliveto, grigio-argento, una nuvola che sbiocca a mezza costa. In fondo c'era il paese accatastato [. . .] ed anche lì, tra i tetti, un continuo spuntare di chiome di piante: lecci, platani, anche roveri, una vegetazione disinteressata e altera [. . .]. Sopra gli olivi cominciava il bosco. I pini dovevano un tempo aver regnato su tutta la plaga, perchè ancora s'infiltravano in lami e ciuffi di bosco giù per i versanti fino alla spiaggia del mare, e così i larici. Le roveri erano più frequenti e fitte di quanto oggi non sembri, perchè furono la prima e più pregiata vittima della scure. Più in su i pini cedevano ai castagni, il bosco saliva la montagna e non se ne vedevano i confini. Questo era l'universo di linfa entro il quale noi vivevamo, abitanti d'Ombrosa, quasi senza accorgercene. (577–78)

The wealth and precision of Calvino's arboreal details leave no doubt about the importance of trees in his narrative; it seems impossible to dismiss the represented landscape as a purely decorative or symbolic backdrop. The vegetation, moreover, is clearly identifiable as Ligurian.

One of the reasons why trees play such a central role in the novel may have to do with the fact that Calvino's father Mario was an internationally recognized agronomer and his mother Eva a similarly successful botanist. The author's childhood was therefore spent first in an experimental agricultural station in Cuba and then in an experimental laboratory for flori- and fructiculture in Sanremo, on the Italian Riviera, where Mario Calvino acclimatized exotic plants such as the avocado, the papaya, the guayaba, and the pink grapefruit (Scarpa, 1999: 2). Mario's work, moreover, was driven by a commitment to social reform and by the hope that innovative agriculture could fuel political revolutions, notably in Mexico and Cuba. The young Calvino thus grew up in a culture that not only studied and appreciated trees, but also saw their importance from an anthropological perspective. His family was well aware of the ways in which trees played formative roles in different societies' customs and forms of socio-economic organization.

Calvino's article 'Liguria' (1973) clearly speaks to this notion that landscapes define a way of life and inform a people's local character (Calvino, 2001d). With a socio-anthropological analysis of the *Festa della Barca* — a Pentecostal event that still takes place every year in Baiardo, a hill-top town in the hinterland above Sanremo — Calvino showed the primacy of trees as cultural signifiers by recognizing that the region's traditional songs, rituals, and economy revolved both figuratively and literally around these plants (Calvino, 2001d: 2379–81). Calvino argued vehemently that traditional ways of 'vivere la Liguria' were being destroyed by the urban boom and the process of deforestation it entailed (Calvino, 2001d: 2389). An ancient 'terra d'agrumeti' was being replaced by a new 'mondo di contratti commerciali, di disboscamenti, di trasporti marittimi e cantieri' (Liguria, 2381). At stake here and throughout Calvino's work was thus the notion that trees and other natural elements were not simply passive objects external to men. Civilization, Calvino claimed, was a 'simbiosi umano-vegetale', and the definition of a landscape that emerges from his

works is best understood in relational terms, as an embedded cultural ‘taskscape’ constituted by the dynamic interaction between humans and trees.⁷

Before mobilizing these ideas as useful context for *Il barone rampante*, one should acknowledge that several of Calvino’s autobiographical texts speak of an initial disinterest in agricultural matters. Critics sometimes mention that, in *La strada di San Giovanni* (1962), Calvino recalls his father’s passion for agronomy and laments the fact that, as a child, he had had no interest in flora or fauna: ‘io non riconoscevo né una pianta né un uccello. Per me le cose erano mute’.⁸ While his father ran through the woods, joyfully examining every form of life he found, the young Calvino dreamt of an urban existence and refused to take an interest in his father’s teachings.⁹ It is important to realize, however, that he eventually developed an admiration for his father’s attempts to resist industrialization and to protect the local landscape. This did not mean holding on to romanticized notions of a virgin and untouchable Nature. Rather, Calvino came to appreciate the ways in which the agronomer sought out the genius of a place and did his best to guard and direct the intrinsic vitality of the very plants he so artfully mastered. He commended his father’s desire to establish a dynamic relationship with nature, a partnership in which the progressive scientist would wrestle with the writhing, live landscape to bring out its hidden potential and energy:

[mio padre] cercava di allestire un podere moderno che non fosse prigioniero della monocultura, [...] tutto per trovare un’altra via da proporre, *che salvasse lo spirito dei luoghi e insieme l’inventiva innovatrice. Era un rapporto con la natura che voleva stabilire, di lotta, di dominio: darle addosso, modificarla, forzarla, ma sentendola sotto viva e intera. E io? Io credevo di pensare ad altro.*¹⁰

As he underlined the childishness of his own behaviour, the mature Calvino finally recognized the influence of his father’s example. In the 1950s and early 1960s he started looking back, and actively drew upon his studies of the natural sciences (at his parent’s urging, he had even sat through three years’ worth of university exams in the School of Agriculture, before transferring to a department of literature at the end of World War II). Calvino eventually became deeply concerned with the state of the Italian Riviera whose landscape was rapidly being destroyed by capitalism, the post-war building boom, tourism, and profit-driven monocultures (of flowers in particular). He articulated strong critiques of these developments in three essays published in 1945–46 in *Il Politecnico*, the highly influential literary journal edited by Elio Vittorini, and then in *La speculazione edilizia*. Regardless of what he may have thought of botany in his early youth, by 1957 he was taking pleasure in his knowledge of matters arboreal.¹¹ Giuseppe Bonura has therefore rightly concluded about *Il barone rampante*:

dove altri scrittori parlerebbero confusamente di alberi, lui [Calvino] elenca con gusto tutte le specie arboree della sua Liguria, dai limoneti ai contorti fichi, ai ciliegi, dalle brune fronde, ai teneri cotogni, e i peschi, i mandorli, i giovani peri, i prodighi susini, e sorbi e carrubi e gelsi e noci annosi; e più su l’oliveto, e lecci e platani e roveri; ed i pini, i faggi e i castagni, ed il bosco che non ha fine.¹²

Trees are in fact figures of critical importance in this story of a young eighteenth-century baron, Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, who flees the perversions and oppressiveness of his aristocratic family’s lifestyle by climbing up a holm oak and then refusing

to come down. His younger brother, Biagio, narrates these events and explains how the baron eventually finds ways to eat, sleep, hunt, make love, pray, study, serve different communities, keep abreast of current events, and engage in contemporary philosophical discussions and French revolutionary politics — all without ever touching ground again: ‘Tutto faceva, insomma, sopra gli alberi’ (622). This new lifestyle is initially found surprising, but many characters in the novel ultimately accept it as yet another (normal) expression of aristocratic strangeness. The story’s fantastic tones are thereby subdued, and even the conformist Biagio ends up admiring his brother’s ability to express his authentic self. He recognizes that the baron leads a full life up in the trees: Cosimo finds himself in their branches, and clearly becomes much more engaged with society than he would have been, had he remained within the ivory towers of his ancestral home. His seriousness of purpose and newly found pragmatism become evident when he helps people of all classes with their daily activities, as they plant, prune, water, put out forest fires, catch fearsome wolves, and so on. Ultimately he becomes a much better steward of the land and leader of his people than his old-fashioned, pretentious, and socially disconnected father. Life in the trees opens up new and heightened perspectives for Cosimo, and supposedly allows him to become simultaneously more productive and more respectful of the natural, live forces with which he comes into contact.

The novel can therefore be read as a reflection on how best to use, view, handle, and above all relate to trees. From a material point of view, trees equip Cosimo with invaluable support: they offer him food, shelter, tools, and routes for transportation. Yet far from merely being socially and financially significant property, as his status-conscious father argues, in the young baron’s mind these trees also constitute botanical wealth and knowledge (660–61). In addition, Cosimo appreciates trees’ ability to create a diverse social space, a habitat for animals and people ‘di tutte le professioni’ (661). And he and his brother enjoy trees for the pure pleasure of exploring their places: they engage in ritualistic initiation activities as they enter a special new world of branches and leaves (553). While other children in the neighbourhood climb ‘per motivi utilitari’ (559), to find fruit or to look for birds’ nests, Calvino’s protagonist and his narrator-brother climb for the pure love of climbing and for the pleasure of being in and with the trees (594).

Of course, living in the trees is also a polemical form of self-expression, and the last lines of the text insist on the ways in which tree-living can be similar to writing (‘Quel frastaglio di rami e foglie [...] assomiglia a questo filo d’inchiostro’, 776–77). Yet when Cosimo starts to gloss the precise meaning of his arboreal statement, he fumbles; on various occasions, early on, he tries to explain what exactly he is doing by choosing this arboreal existence, but his reasons are so intimate and bound up with his sense of self that he gets embarrassed, and swears never to speak of them again (591). Years later, he will say that he intends to ‘resist’ without ever detailing the object of this action (690). And at the very end of his life, when Cosimo meets a Cossack soldier who laments that he has been making war for many years, the baron proudly announces (in French) that he instead does something inherently moral by living in trees: ‘io [...] vivo da molti anni per degli ideali che non saprei spiegare neppure a me stesso, *mais je fais une chose tout à fait bonne: je vis dans les arbres*’ (772). The baron thus suggests that living in the trees is a meaningful and positive act in and of itself.

Cosimo does not view trees merely as a means to an end (they are not *just* inert timber for use, or the source of food for his stomach; nor are they *just* his passive language of social protest and freedom — although they are this, too). The baron understands that trees also have a certain (admittedly non-conscious and yet purposive) degree of agency insofar as they create places, and thereby allow for special activities, feelings, and social relations.¹³ In other words, the text broadens traditional perspectives as it considers what trees do for Cosimo, and how humans and plants relate to each other, rather than focusing exclusively on how Cosimo uses the latter. Not only does the text resist the complete objectification of trees, as it shows their ability to push back and act upon the baron's legs, slowly curving these limbs around their branches (621, 768). The novel also sheds light on the ways in which this arboreal life is a dynamic and interactive relationship that allows the young man — an immature adolescent and a discontented aristocrat — ultimately to create a stronger and more purposeful sense of self.

To understand better this ineffable and yet positively connoted human-arboreal bond, one must remember that Cosimo's life in the trees starts as an expression of 'solidarietà' with his mad sister's captive snails, which Cosimo first attempts to free and then categorically refuses to eat (556). In other words, Cosimo's escape from the perversions of his family table and his consequent scramble into the woods are to be understood from the very beginning as a determination to recast his relationships with the social and natural worlds. This ambition stimulates the adult Cosimo's readings, as he applies himself to contemporary treatises of natural history and to French revolutionary tracts, which in turn inspire him to write alternative contracts or constitutional projects to protect the natural liberties of humans, animals and plants. For an ideal *Repubblica d'Arborea* populated by virtuous men living in trees, the baron drafts a utopian '*Progetto di Costituzione d'uno Stato ideale fondato sopra gli alberi*' (695). He furthers this work in a '*Progetto di Costituzione per Città Repubblicana con Dichiarazione dei Diritti degli Uomini, delle Donne, dei Bambini, degli Animali [...] e delle Piante sia d'Alto Fusto sia Ortaggi ed Erbe*' (764). Although Cosimo never actually theorizes the subjectivity of animals and plants, it is important to realize that with these texts he recognizes their intrinsic worth, their vitality, and their right to protection by civil code. Nature is definitely not envisioned as a mechanical object passively available for any kind of human manipulation; rather Cosimo slowly deepens his understanding of the similarities and symbiotic connections that exist between different forms of life. His writings imply that the well-being of animals and plants can affect that of humans — hence the need for legislative action.

The baron's ideas are allegedly stimulated by his readings in eighteenth-century French literature and philosophy. Calvino was fascinated by this history, which he knew well thanks to his personal ties to intellectuals and historians of the Enlightenment, many of whom were scholars associated with the Einaudi publishing house in Turin. He was particularly interested in exploring the nuances and apparent contradictions within eighteenth-century culture: 'Certo il secolo XVIII continua a essere uno dei periodi storici che più mi affascinano, ma proprio perchè lo scopro sempre più ricco, sfaccettato, pieno di fermenti contraddittori che continuano fino ad oggi'.¹⁴ It should therefore not come as too much of a surprise that the Enlightenment represented in *Il barone rampante* cannot be reduced to the monolithic, hyper-rational,

technocratic, and ultimately destructive philosophical project so often described in twentieth-century histories of this period.¹⁵ Calvino explicitly stated his difference from this view in a conversation with Ferdinando Camon, to whom he explained that the concept of a rigid system can be an intellectual trap that does not allow one to recognize the eighteenth-century ‘giungla di contraddizioni insanabili’.¹⁶ Thus, whereas twentieth-century forest scholars have often represented the French Enlightenment as a period obsessed with the concept of utility or economic value, and therefore largely uninterested in the intrinsic value of trees, Calvino seems to have been sensitive to the ways in which philosophers and legislators of this period sometimes tried to protect nature in the name of larger ecological, spiritual, or sentimental causes. *Il barone rampante* evokes these increasing demands for forest legislation, and the development of increasingly respectful and affective relationships to trees.¹⁷ Calvino’s novel salutes and draws inspiration from an eighteenth century vested in questions of justice and ideal political governance, deeply concerned by ongoing deforestation, and seriously intent on discovering alternative modes of relating to nature.¹⁸

Calvino clearly found inspiration in the work of Bernardin de Saint Pierre, for the latter’s *Paul et Virginie* is the first of two novels which Cosimo chooses to read to his Spanish mistress (Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is the other: 685). *Il barone rampante* and *Paul et Virginie* share striking similarities in plot and descriptive language, for both describe unusual, idyllic childhoods immersed in arboreally rich environments: like Cosimo’s, Paul and Virginie’s life, too, ‘semblait attachée à celle des arbres’.¹⁹ Similarly, both narrators adopt an elegiac tone as they reflect retrospectively on the terrible effects of deforestation.²⁰ More importantly, *Il barone rampante* evokes Bernardin’s studies on the ‘harmonies’ of nature, as it speaks of the symbiotic connections that unite the natural world in a continuous and vital chain of being.²¹ Cosimo is said to establish nurturing ‘amicizie’ with his woods; he becomes one with the figs or other trees, listening to them, understanding and instinctively supporting their characteristic needs (620).

Rousseau’s ideas about the beneficial aspects of living in close contact with nature — and with live plants in particular — resonate even more loudly throughout *Il barone rampante*, and, lest anyone miss this inter-textual dialogue with the *Rêveries*, *Confessions*, *Emile*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and perhaps above all with Rousseau’s writings on botany, Calvino inserted a fleeting image of the *philosophe* herborizing in the Swiss forests (650).²² Cosimo is a Rousseauian creature, not because he might seem to incarnate a mythical ‘good savage’ who lives in virgin nature (he does not), but because he too finds his freedom and happiness ‘sous les ombrages d’une forêt’, and he too feels a revolutionary desire to reform man’s unhealthy and immoral relationship to nature and society.²³ Cosimo’s alternative and physically engaged lifestyle calls to mind Rousseau’s well-known statement about the salutary aspects of botany: ‘Si l’étude des plantes me purge l’âme, c’est assez pour moi, je ne veux point d’autre pharmacie’, just as it reminds us of the French philosopher’s insistence that the study of nature be an outdoor *practice* rather than a speculative activity.²⁴ It is not by coincidence, in fact, that the image Calvino offers us of Rousseau is one of the man in action, as he collected and classified plants for his herbaria.

Above all, however, Calvino's novel echoes and retrospectively highlights Rousseau's notion that nature has an intrinsic value independent of human needs, desires and manipulations: as Alexandra Cook has recently demonstrated, Rousseau granted plants an importance that preceded all utilitarian calculation (Cook, 2012: 14, 18). Although he clearly appreciated both agriculture and horticulture, often speaking of their immeasurable value for human society, he also understood that plants existed (and should be considered) in their own right: they should be admired while alive, 'sur pied' (rather than under a microscope), and purely out of curiosity.²⁵ Allegedly, it was only this respect for the intrinsic vitality of plants that could teach humans the true meaning of freedom.²⁶ Cook's assertion about Rousseau's botany could easily apply to the arboreal living of Calvino's young baron: 'Botany not only shows Rousseau free beings, it allows him to be one' (25).

Cosimo's readings are similarly made to speak to the eighteenth century's interests in protecting nature and in naturalizing social contracts. Not surprisingly, some of his favourite articles from Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* are 'Arbre', 'Bois', and 'Jardin' (654). These are logical selections insofar as they address technical issues of immediate value to the baron. Yet Diderot's essay 'Bois' also underscores the primary importance of wood in all cultures, registering ongoing fears of deforestation, and therefore calling upon the good citizen's duty to resolve this crisis:

Le bois qui étoit autrefois très commun en France, maintenant suffit à peine aux usages indispensables, & l'on est menacé pour l'avenir d'en manquer absolument. Ceux qui sont préposés à la conservation des bois, se plaignent eux — mêmes de leur dépérissement: mais ce n'est pas assez de se plaindre d'un mal qu'on sent déjà, & qui ne peut qu'augmenter avec le tems, il en faut chercher le remède; & tout bon citoyen doit donner au public les expériences & les réflexions qu'il peut avoir faites à cet égard.²⁷

Cosimo's alternative life style answers this call for citizen engagement, just as more generally Calvino's text reminds us that, in the eighteenth century, the study of natural history included socio-ethical and philosophical considerations. Cosimo not only wants to explore and understand the natural world: 'Quelle prime giornate di Cosimo sugli alberi *non avevano scopi o programmi* ma erano dominate soltanto dal desiderio di conoscere e possedere quel suo regno' (594, italics added). He gradually feels the need to connect more deeply to his natural environment. In a statement reminiscent of Rousseau's 'Je raffole de la botanique: cela ne fait qu'empirer tous les jours. Je n'ai plus que du foin dans la tête, je vais devenir plante moi-même [...], et je prends déjà racine', Calvino writes: 'Quel bisogno d'entrare in un elemento difficilmente possedibile che aveva spinto mio fratello a far sue le vie degli alberi, ora gli lavorava dentro, malsoddisfatto, e gli comunicava la mania di *una penetrazione più minuta, d'un rapporto che lo legasse a ogni foglia e scaglia e piuma e frullo*' (598, italics added).²⁸ In addition to increasing his knowledge, this relationship with the surrounding flora and fauna allegedly transforms the privileged proprietor into a more equitable steward of the land.

Thanks to his sympathetic philosophy, in fact, the baron learns how to make trees grow better and how to prune them and shape them for everyone's benefit. His labour is represented as a socially useful act of love (and as such it recalls Mario Calvino's work in Sanremo):

Insomma, l'amore per questo suo elemento arboreo seppe farlo diventare, com'è di tutti gli amori veri, anche spietato e doloroso, che ferisce e recide per far crescere e dar forma [...] Così, questa natura d'Ombrosa ch'egli aveva trovato già tanto benigna, con la sua arte contribuiva a farla vieppiù a lui favorevole, amico a un tempo del prossimo e di se medesimo. (655)

As it moves between descriptions of Cosimo's arboreal 'friendships' and other acknowledgements of his utilitarian motives, the novel ultimately tries to negotiate the contradictions that emerge from the Enlightenment's multifaceted 'jungle' of opinions: the novel glosses over the tension between these competing discourses, and Cosimo is said to be both a technocrat and an idealistic protective ecologist.

More importantly, however, Cosimo's relationship with trees inspires his aforesaid *'Dichiarazione dei Diritti degli Uomini, delle Donne, dei Bambini, degli Animali [...] e delle Piante sia d'Alto Fusto sia Ortaggi ed Erbe'*, a text which recognizes plants' rights and need for protection. Cosimo and the eighteenth-century culture he represents are thus portrayed as the structural opposites of the nineteenth-century inhabitants of Ombrosa, and by implication the entrepreneurs and urban planners of Calvino's time, who do not share his arboreal values, 'generazioni più scriteriate [...] gente non amica di nulla, neppure di se stessa, e tutto è ormai cambiato, nessun Cosimo potrà più concedere per gli alberi' (655). Through this juxtaposition, Calvino articulated his critique of contemporary developments in post-war Italy, and suggested the need for a more respectful relationship to nature. The works of Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint Pierre seem to have been particularly valuable models in this regard, as they represented systems in which trees were not only, and not necessarily, conceived as useful mechanical objects, as something on which humans could act masterfully, according to their own needs. As it references their philosophies, in fact, the novel reminds us that in the eighteenth century nature could also be represented as a dynamic and interconnected system of vital forces whose protection was useful and necessary for humans, animals, and plants alike. *Il barone rampante* thus encourages us to look to this period for inspiration today as we try to rethink our relationships to nature: even contemporary environmental movements might benefit from this historical perspective.

Notes

¹ By writing *Il barone rampante*, Calvino seemingly processed his own difficult relationship to the Italian communist party (he distanced himself from it that same year, shocked by the Soviet military intervention in Hungary) (see Cannon, 1981: 11–47). This classic reading is supported by Calvino's own autobiographical statements in 'Postfazione ai *Nostri Antenati* (Nota 1960)' (2001c: 1213), and it certainly provides a useful interpretative framework for the fictional baron's idealism, his frustration with socially imposed norms, and ultimate resistance.

² Readers frequently mention this point, but then the focus of their arguments tends to shift away from environmental issues to analyse instead the novel's

philosophical and political undertones. The literary scholar Terrile (2005: 51–66) at least recognizes the importance of tree-climbing, as she stresses the value of Cosimo's physical engagement with the material world. Nevertheless, both she and other critics — such as Barenghi (2001: 1328) who admits that this novel and its 'twin' text, *La speculazione edilizia*, are linked by 'un inscindibile nesso tra mondo umano e mondo vegetale' — shift the focus of their argument away from the environmental implications of Calvino's work. While not focusing on trees specifically, many other critics have stressed the importance of the landscape and geography in Calvino's works. See, for instance, Nocentini (2000), McLaughlin (1998), Quaini (1988 and 1998), and

- Scarpa (1999: 195–203). For an example of a symbolic reading of the importance of trees in Calvino's work, see Frasson-Marini (1986: 34–51).
- ³ Calvino, 2001a: 578. All other page numbers in the text refer to this edition.
- ⁴ The French under Napoleon established a virtual protectorate over Genoa (renamed the Repubblica Ligure) in 1797, and then annexed its territories in 1805.
- ⁵ The information in this paragraph and the next comes from Giontoni (2007) and from the essays by Quaini, Bertone, and Gabrielli in Gibelli & Rugafori, 1994. A brief reference to the beginning of this roadwork and consequent deforestation appears at the end of the novel (764).
- ⁶ For an analysis of garden symbolism and of the relationship between history and nature in *La speculazione edilizia*, see McLaughlin, 1998.
- ⁷ From an interview with Daniele del Giudice, quoted in Scarpa, 1999: 28. See also the interview with Camon (1973: 184–85), where Calvino insists on the determining force of each man's 'rapporto con l'ambiente vegetale, i cespugli'. Following Ingold, I define a 'taskscape' as a culturally embedded pattern of activities performed over time in relation to, or rather with, a given landscape.
- ⁸ Calvino, 1990: 21.
- ⁹ Mario Calvino's explorations may have been the inspiration for the baron's in *Il barone rampante* (Pagano, 2005: 132–33).
- ¹⁰ Calvino, 1990: 38–39; italics added.
- ¹¹ Calvino's handwritten notes on the novel speak to his research on the history and introduction of various plants in Europe: 'magnolia 1732 Europa 1760 in Italia/ eucalyptus 1810 myrtaceae/ falso-pepe Perù — poi California' (quoted in Barenghi, 2001: 1335).
- ¹² Bonura, 1973: 19. For further proof of Calvino's interest in botanical precision, as well as his knowledge that specific trees serve as habitats for specific bird species, see his corrections to Colquhoun's English translation of the novel: letter to Archibald Colquhoun, 27 January 1959, in Calvino, 1991: 292. Calvino's awareness of the history of French forest laws is apparent in *Collezione di sabbia* (1984: 27).
- ¹³ Regarding the non-human agency of trees, see Jones & Cloke, 2002: 47–71.
- ¹⁴ Calvino, 1980: 89.
- ¹⁵ See Merchant (1980), and Horkheimer & Adorno (2002), in this regard. I differ from the eminent literary scholar and garden historian Harrison, who reads this chapter as Calvino's 'poetic critique of Enlightenment's humanist ideology' (1992: 259). Harrison underlines the fact that, within the plot, the French *philosophes* had no interest in Cosimo's writings, seemingly because they were blinded by their assumptions of human difference and their alleged superiority to plants. Harrison thus concludes that Calvino was lamenting that 'in the Age of Enlightenment the forest is subsumed altogether under [the] concept of usefulness' (120). Calvino, however, at least imagined the existence of this revolutionary treatise (regardless of its success or failure within the story). *Il barone rampante* thus seems to be an invitation to locate such hitherto unnoticed or forgotten 'natural contracts' or discourses of inherent value within the corpus of eighteenth-century texts.
- ¹⁶ Camon, 1973: 199. See also Calvino's interviews in 'Scienza e letteratura' (1980: 189).
- ¹⁷ According to the historian Keith Thomas, in the eighteenth century these plants 'gradually achieved an almost pet-like status' (1983: 212).
- ¹⁸ For this history, see the introduction to Auricchio et al., 2012: 1–19.
- ¹⁹ Bernardin de Saint Pierre, 1992: 126. When Paul and Virginie die, the narrator exclaims: 'ces bois qui vous donnaient leurs ombres [...] déplorent encore votre perte' (199).
- ²⁰ Consider Paul and Virginie's immersion in the natural landscape of Mauritius, as well as the lyrical description of nature's ecologies in Bernardin de Saint Pierre's *Etudes de la nature*. See Pacini, 2011, as well as her essays in Auricchio et al., 2012.
- ²¹ In *Etudes de la nature*, Bernardin de Saint Pierre explained that 'L'harmonie de ce globe se détruirait en partie, et peut-être en entier, si on en supprimait seulement le plus petit genre de plantes [...] La ruine totale des règnes pourrait naître de la destruction d'une mousse' (1820, 2: 297).
- ²² Regarding the influence of Rousseau's treatise on education *Emile*, see Bryce, 1989: 201–14. See also Jonard, 1984: 106, 109–10.
- ²³ Rousseau, 1972: 132.
- ²⁴ Rousseau, 1969a: 1251.
- ²⁵ Rousseau, 1969b: 1191, 1188 ('une étude de pure curiosité').
- ²⁶ Cook explains: 'Botany not only reveals truth; it reveals natural freedom: life according to one's species being, without being forced or dominated. Instead of the products of horticulture and agriculture, Rousseau sought «[la] nature entière [...] où rien ne montrant la main des hommes n'annonçait la servitude ou domination»' (2012: 25).
- ²⁷ Diderot, 1751: 297 (section 'Bois sur pié; voyez Forêt'). Italics added.
- ²⁸ Rousseau, letter to Ivernois (1976: 130). *Il barone rampante* contains a warning statement about the extent of this relationship, as it represents Cosimo's gradual absorption into the arboreal world. These warnings start early, as Biagio insists on the importance of maintaining one's human side (628). Calvino thus suggests that the human-arboreal connection that is so poetic and fruitful in the first part of the novel can only work if it is a dynamic relationship in which both poles maintain a certain

degree of integrity. The conclusion of the novel is upsetting precisely because it offers a series of negative pictures both of the baron, who seemingly goes mad and loses touch with his humanity, and of a

group of French soldiers who become indistinguishable from the woods in which they hide. The text seems to caution against falling into an indistinct 'amalgama animale e vegetale' (761).

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