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HOME, ROOTS, COSMOS: A PATH THOROUGH CALVINO'S ECOLOGY

Serenella Iovino

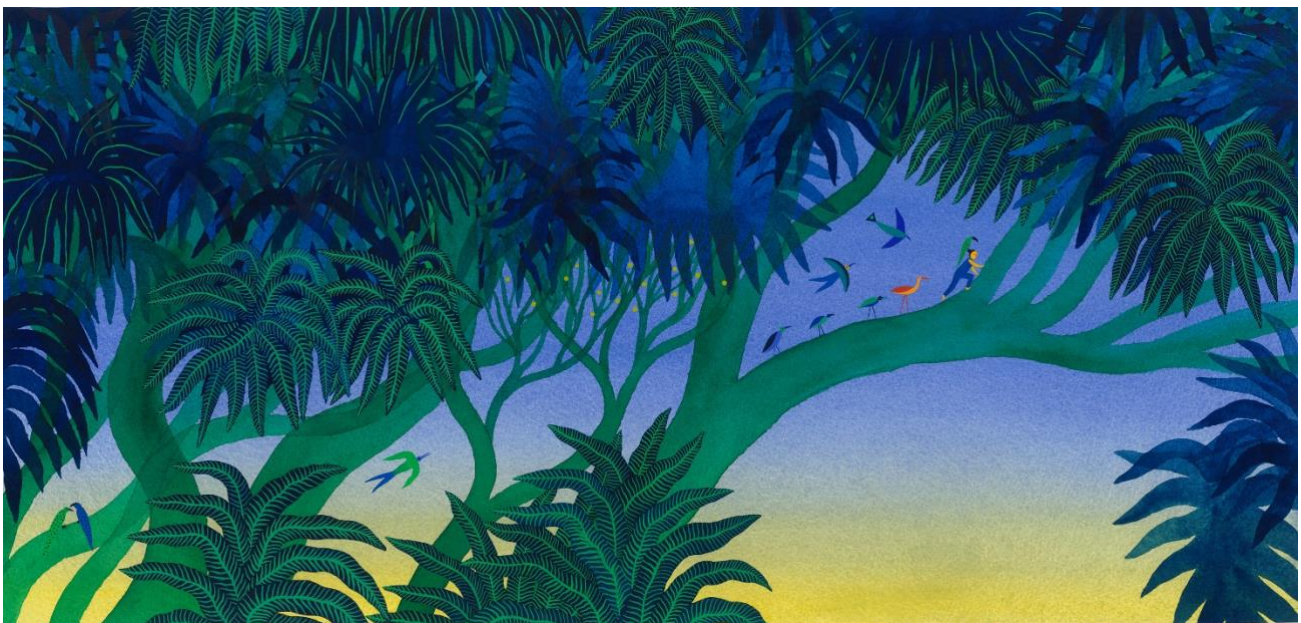
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The house is Villa Meridiana. You get there by going up a little side street that skirts Via Alessandro Volta, just outside the center of town. It's up high, on a steep slope overlooking the sea. All around are palm trees. Ahead, you find the cosmopolitan city of Sanremo, of the Hôtel des Anglais, of the casino that—in the time in which we find ourselves, the beginning of the 1900s—is one of the main attractions bringing visitors to the city. Behind it is another world.

You exit the little door onto a stone-paved mule path next to the *beudo*, a small canal, to find yourself in the countryside, where the languages spoken are no longer those of the tourists and the Italians that welcome them. They are other languages entirely: the guttural dialect of Ligurian peasants, the cracks and flutters of hunters, and the “absurd Latin of botanists”¹—the language in which Mario Calvino thinks his plants and through which he attempts to teach his children about them. More than languages, the main thing you hear are voices: the voices of the *gerbido*, the wild intermezzo between the forest and the agricultural *borgo* (village), and the voices of nonhuman animals—the birds and Mario's dog. And then there's the wind, which blows hard in this region.



Jean Mallard, *Expédition Végétal*. Pigment-inks print, 80 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist and La Slow Galerie. All rights reserved.

Roots. In Villa Meridiana, there are many. Most are underground, or tucked snugly inside large terracotta pots. Each plant has a name. Each plant is carefully catalogued, studied, observed—cared for. But this is the way it must be: we are in a floricultural experiment station, a botanical garden specifically for researchers. Other roots are not subterranean, though they are still tied to the earth: the roots of family that strengthen Italo's connection with this place and this landscape. They are Mario Calvino and Eva Mameli, and they are both scientists.

A path through Italo Calvino's ecology cannot help but begin here, with his house and his roots. Etymologically, “ecology” means to speak (*logos*) of the house (*oikos*). Ecology is also the science that sees life as a harmonic symphony, an uninterrupted communication—whether problematic, competitive, or collaborative—between everything that lives, evolves, and dies in a particular environment. This includes ideas, imagination, and fantasy; it includes the roots of the past

interwoven with the soil of the present. Italo Calvino's roots bind him to the soil of his familial home, of his personal ecology. Villa Meridiana is fundamental because it is home, because it is a garden, and because it nurtures the vegetal life of continents and their knowledges. Above all, it orients everything because it is, for Calvino, the very horizon of space and time. In his essay collection *The Road to San Giovanni* (1990), he writes that "a general explanation of the world and of history must first of all take into account the way our house was situated."²

The novel *The Baron in the Trees* (1957) is part of this ecology, this story of dwelling. It is the story of a boy, Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, who leaves the ground to protest being given snails for dinner. He will spend the rest of his life in the trees and will experience all kinds of things there: love, adventures, hunting with his dachshund, reading books and studying, a gruff madness in his old age, and an ending where he disappears into the skies of the imaginary estate of Ombrosa aboard a hot-air balloon. It is his younger brother, Biagio, who tells us his story.

Much has been written about *The Baron in the Trees*, a wonderful novel for its inspiration, its linguistic richness, and the way the author, then only 34 years of age, manages to render historical, scientific, and philosophical complexity with a deft touch. The content is effervescent and unpredictable; it reads like a fable and can be interpreted in various ways: as Calvino's reaction to the ancien régime of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which supported the USSR's violent response to Hungarian students demanding freedom; or as a utopia, expressed in the dream of a boy who refuses to set foot on earth and cultivates a radical political project that includes trees and other plants, domesticated and wild animals, and all humans. *The Baron* is all of this, but more too, especially when read through the lens of the environment.



Italo Calvino and his younger brother Floriano, June 1933. Courtesy of [Internet Culturale](#). CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IT.

Calvino wrote the book in two and a half months, between 1956 and 1957, while also writing the short story "A Plunge into Real Estate," another "environmentalist" work, cautiously autobiographical, that discusses the destruction of the landscape of an unnamed Ligurian town (most likely Sanremo) at the hands of intellectuals and ex-partisans, land speculators of different varieties.³

The forest extends across the spine of the Alps, as if to embrace Europe in trees.

Although quite different, *The Baron in the Trees* and "A Plunge into Real Estate" are works that speak to one another. And they speak to a place, or of a place. They dialogue: one, *The Baron*, converses with the other, "A Plunge," from another time, from the Enlightenment and the era of Napoleon. It speaks from the heights of a forest that seems punctiform, located in the fictitious

Ombrosa, in the luxurious western Liguria (the Ponente). But the forest actually extends across the spine of the Alps, on this side and that, as if to embrace Europe in trees. And according to Calvino, it functions like an aerial highway—a world apart from the one below, one you could traverse from high in the branches. Set two centuries later, “A Plunge into Real Estate” listens from a changed earth. It listens from a ground where the surviving trees struggle to remain free in a landscape made of houses, condominiums, and construction zones that suffocate both the garden and the imagination.

What does *The Baron* say to “A Plunge into Real Estate”? In a certain sense, it tells its prehistory. It is a novel, as Calvino says, of “ancestors,” a chronicling that includes his other works: *The Cloven Viscount* (1952) and *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959). The ancestor in question in *The Baron* is Cosimo, who tells his descendants in 1957 about what the landscape used to look like. He also tells them of how they might interpret their humanity in a different way, not as terrestrial but as arboreal. He offers them an alternative genealogy, an alternative evolutionary branch—the path not taken. And he brings to light the interdependence (or the possibility of a biological, existential, and mental dialogue) between the human and vegetal worlds.

When *The Baron* begins, in 1767, most of the western Ligurian landscape was still covered in vegetation and trees. The aerial highway was in decline, but it was still present and full of vitality. Cosimo’s brother tells us this right away: Biagio recalls how he heard that once “a monkey that left Rome jumping from tree to tree could reach Spain without touching the ground.”⁴ By 1767, though, this was already changing. “The only place where the trees were so dense was the shoreline of the gulf of Ombrosa, from one end to the other, and its valley, up to the mountain ridges.”⁵ And these changes happened quickly. Biagio continues:

These places are no longer recognizable. First the French came, cutting down woods as if they were fields that are reaped every year and grow back. They didn’t grow back. It seemed a thing of the war, of Napoleon . . . but it didn’t stop. The hills are bare, so that to look at them, for us who knew them before, is disturbing.⁶

Biagio’s description of this universe of trees is impressively precise, and worth citing:

The only place where the vegetation was lower was the lemon groves, but in their midst rose twisted fig trees, which, higher up, obstructed the whole sky over the gardens with the cupolas of their dense foliage, and if not figs it was brown-leaved cherries, or the more tender quinces, peach, almond, and young pears, fruitful plums, and then service trees or carobs, when it wasn’t a mulberry or an ancient walnut. Where the gardens ended the olive grove began, silver-gray, a cloud with fraying edges. In the background was the town, stacked between the harbor below and the fortress above; and there, too, treetops sprouted everywhere amid the roofs: holm oaks, plane trees, even oaks . . . Above the olives the woods began. The pines must once have reigned over all the region, because they still infiltrated the slopes, in slivers and clumps, down to the shore of the sea, as did the larches. The oaks were denser and thicker than they seem today, because they were the first and most prized victims of the ax. Higher up, the pines gave way to chestnuts, the woods went up the mountain, and no limits could be seen.⁷

This is the world that disappears under “the fury of the ax” at the end of the novel, when the Restoration unfolds in Europe and Cosimo, now old and shabby, disappears into the sky attached to a hot-air balloon. That which remains on the ground is changed too: “no more the holm oaks, the elms, the oaks; now Africa, Australia, the Americas, the Indies extend branches and roots here,” the local fauna superseded by the imported.⁸

From the second half of the 1700s onward, the time in which Cosimo’s story unfolds, the rate of deforestation accelerated significantly across Italy. Forests were being cut down not just to fulfill the needs of the poor but also for the benefit of the rich. The forests became ever more implicated in the circuit of capital: lumber for ship production, construction, heating, and various industrial

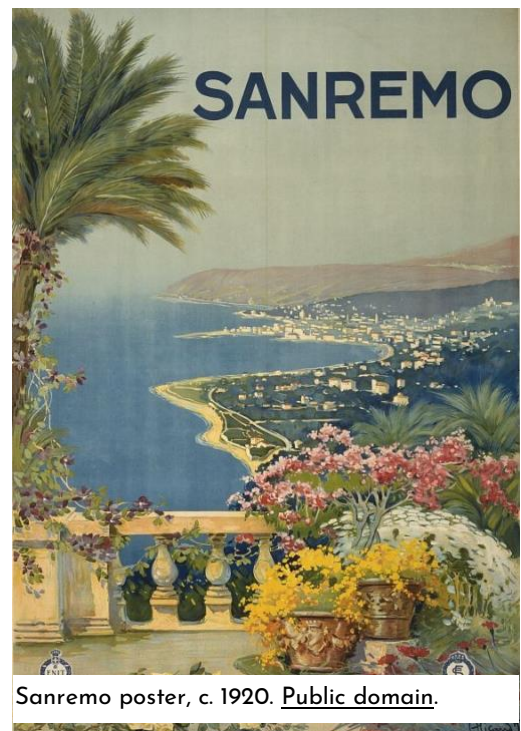
uses. This all led to a profound and lasting modification of the landscape. In his book *Il bosco negli scrittori italiani del Settecento e dell'età napoleonica* (1947), geographer Bruno Vecchio writes of:

an acceleration . . . of the pace of deforestation, and a conspicuous extension of deforested areas: those that were cultivated, but also, increasingly, those completely abandoned to hydrogeological disruption. This happened either because they were targets of commercial capital and loans, or because they were left uncultivated after an ephemeral period of fertility, or because they were damaged by indiscriminate grazing by livestock.⁹

The Ligurian forests (both on the Ponente and the Levante) are no exception. The Genovese fleets sourced their lumber from here. When the fleets declined, though, the situation did not improve. An increase in farming, the need to build new roads to replace the old Roman roads, and the destruction of forests for immediate short-term gains (and without any system of penalties to stop the practice) all brought profound changes to the region. The results of these changes are visible in the washing away of the deforested landscapes, now more susceptible to hydrogeological risk, and, in damage that is the mirror opposite, the abandonment of the remaining forested areas.

Cosimo, though, is the knight who brings aid and makes alliances. He knows how to prune trees; he founds and maintains a mutual aid society to prevent and put out fires; and when he goes hunting and gathering with his dachshund Ottimo Massimo, he takes only what he truly needs. He knows these plants, after all, and by way of them, he gets to know the animals.¹⁰ Scholars have identified 58 plant species and 78 animal species in the book along with a series of technical terms, from “bugno” (log hive) and “talea” (cutting) to “inforcatura” (fork) and “capitozzare” (head-pruning).¹¹ Caring for and knowing trees is, for Cosimo, a radical, republican political project; it is the politics that he wishes for all living beings, regardless of gender, age, or, above all, species.¹²

Calvino, in short, shows that he is every bit the son of Eva Mameli and Mario Calvino, pioneers of international botany and plant science. He is too hard on himself when he confesses, in “The Road to San Giovanni,” “I could recognize not a single plant or bird. The world of things was mute for me.”¹³ In *The Baron*, nature speaks loudly through a cacophony of whistles, caws, moos, whimpers, and squeaks; it articulates itself in one enormous language: the language of the forest. This is a language Cosimo not only interprets but understands and practices.



Sanremo poster, c. 1920. [Public domain.](#)

Plants strategize, they join forces, collaborate, and organize.

The idea that forests think is, in fact, not so far-fetched. Plants are not only complex organisms but nodes in an underground communication network formed by the symbiotic links between roots and fungal mycorrhizae.¹⁴ Plants strategize, they join forces, collaborate, and organize. This is their way of thinking. The physical and philosophical relationship that Cosimo has with the forest is a conversation between different natures. It is defined by their reciprocal relationships, as scholars of biosemiotics, plant neurophysiology, and multispecies ethnography have long taught us. In this communication system, every tree—every blade of grass and every insect—is a self that has interests

and that carries information. This explains the solidarity that Cosimo—whose name means “world,” *cosmos*—shows with others. We must not forget that his decision to move into the trees because he refused to eat a plate of snails demonstrated a unique level of empathy toward the mollusks that his sadist sister, Battista, had been torturing.

In the end, Cosimo’s gesture is not just an act of juvenile insubordination or of refusal, it is also a return to the arboreal, to a previous stage of evolution in which hominids lived in trees to escape predators. It is perhaps also the dream of a different evolution, an alternative reality in which human beings never came down from the trees and instead developed their culture, thinking, and philosophy together with the forest. Cosimo, then, reawakens the Pleistocene in the trees of Ombrosa, a time when hunter-gatherers formed alliances with other species and the landscape was populated with stories. Humans became *narrative*.

Each reading of *The Baron in the Trees*, whether as a fable, a tongue-in-cheek historical novel, or an allegory for communism, is justifiable. But in the wild efflorescence of his imagination, Calvino’s landscape, created around this allegory—and encompassing these many possible interpretations—also documents a dynamic, historical, and ecologically accurate environment. Calvino is a humanist, but he is also deeply skeptical of the supposed centrality and superiority of the human, and he attempts to imagine an alternative humanity with the branches and genealogies of a different possible evolution. But the evolutionary path taken by Ombrosa was clearly following another direction, and Calvino saw that.

Today, Cosimo’s roots are covered in cement; and Ombrosa is no more. There is no longer a road to San Giovanni. Behind Villa Meridiana, the *beudo* and the mule path are now nothing more than a few bricks, lost beneath an avalanche of building speculation. To get to San Giovanni, you have to pass between tenements and paved roads, keeping one eye peeled for cars speeding around blind corners. Suddenly, a few hundred meters after a one-way street, the river, the little bridge, and the farmhouse appear. There are no longer diverse vegetable gardens but rather drab, green monocultures to be sold for floral arrangements—the decorative grass that they put around the edges of bouquets. Above, the Torino-Ventimiglia highway’s viaduct is crowded with stopped trucks because of another transit strike underway. Other highways, no longer of sap or leaves but of asphalt and cement, pockmark the landscape. A tacit reminder to the passing traveler: the Anthropocene has arrived here too.

Notes

¹ Italo Calvino, *The Road to San Giovanni*, translated by Tim Parks (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ Italo Calvino, “A Plunge into Real Estate,” translated by D.S. Carne-Ross, in *Difficult Loves*, 161–250 (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1985).

⁴ Italo Calvino, *The Baron in the Trees*, translated by Ann Goldstein (Boston: Mariner Books, 2017), 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁹ Bruno Vecchio, *Il bosco negli scrittori italiani del Settecento e dell’età napoleonica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 5.

¹⁰ Claudia Dellacasa, “La lingua degli alberi,” in “*E io non scenderò più!*” *Il barone rampante di Italo Calvino, 1767–2017*, eds. Mario Barenghi, Claudia Dellacasa, Laura Di Nicola, Bruno Falcetto, and Giacomo Raccis, special issue, *Bollettino di italianistica* 16, no. 1 (2019): 127–39.

¹¹ Dellacasa, “La lingua degli alberi,” 127–39.

¹² The idea has once again become current through the work of plant neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso, whose *La Nazione delle piante* proposes a “declaration of rights” for the vegetal world. Mancuso, *La nazione delle piante* (Rome: Laterza, 2019).

¹³ Calvino, *The Road to San Giovanni*, 11–12.

¹⁴ See, for example, Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (London: Polity Press, 2018); Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patricia Vieira, eds., *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (New York: Island Press, 2015); Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).



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