

Settimana della Lingua Italiana, 16 ottobre 2023

Yesterday, October 15, was Italo Calvino's 100th birthday. Unfortunately, he was not there to celebrate. Calvino died thirty eight years ago, as he was preparing to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University, at a time when he probably was the most famous and most translated Italian writer in the world. He was also a most innovative and surprising thinker whose work is still relevant today thanks to a visionary quality that may have escaped his readers when he was alive. As a young man, Calvino published many short-stories and a novel on the recent war and the fight against Nazi-fascism (*The Path to the Nests of Spiders*), a subject that was very much in tune with the political mood of the times. But then, suddenly, he produced a novel, *The Baron in the Trees*, that shocked his readers. It was the story of Cosimo, a brilliant twelve year old boy, who one day, frustrated by his narrow-minded family, climbs into the trees and stays there not only for one or two days, but until the end of his life ... when he disappears in a balloon. I still remember how disappointed we were in Italy. Calvino's change seemed outrageous to us until we realized how his book could entertain children's imagination and at the same time tease, provoke, stimulate the minds of adults towards a fresh understanding of the world.

This is something that the book still does today in ways that perhaps not even Calvino imagined. The story is set two and a half centuries ago, in Liguria, the region of northwestern Italy where Calvino grew up, between the mountains and the sea, a region largely covered by trees: oaks, pines, larches, chestnuts, plane-trees. They were so thick – writes the narrator, Cosimo's brother -- that Cosimo could move for miles by passing from one branch to another without ever needing to descend to earth. However, this state of affairs did not last for long, for

people began cutting the woods as if they were meadows that are cut down every year and grow again. At first we thought -- the narrator says -- that it was something to do with the war, with Napoleon, with the period; instead of which it went on. Now the hillsides are so bare that it gives us a shock when we look at them, we who knew them before.

These lines could have been written today, of course. Most of the woods that populated that region have gone; in their places there are roads and building developments. Great progress, no doubt, that has benefitted everyone in the region. Except that, when it rains more than usual, it can happen that the land, no longer sustained by the trees, slides down sweeping away everything in its path, including people and all their belongings. It's a tragic sign that we have broken the balance between us and nature.

Calvino's stories of *Marcovaldo*, a book he published exactly 60 years ago, bring this idea much further. Marcovaldo, the protagonist, is a factory worker who lives with his family in a city where nature has been almost completely obliterated. Roads, housing, factories, commercial buildings, concrete have taken over completely. There are no trees left, no meadows, no open spaces. As Adriano Celentano sings in a famous song of 1966, *Il ragazzo della via Gluck*: "Solo case su case / Catrame e cemento / Là dove c'era l'erba ora c'è / Una città." (Just houses upon houses, asphalt and cement, where there were meadows there is a city) Industrialization has destroyed the natural habitat. It has reached ends that are the opposite of what Marcovaldo needed.

In *Le città invisibili (Invisible Cities)*, published fifty years ago, there is a city, Leonia, whose inhabitants love so much having everything new, that every day they throw out everything they had the day before. Every day street cleaners come and take the old things away, but nobody wonders or cares where they carry such immense load of refuse. The garbage is so robust and well-made, that it "resists time, the elements, fermentations, combustions."

Soon, “a fortress of indestructible leftovers surrounds Leonia, dominating it on every side, like a chain of mountains.” It sounds paradoxical, extreme, but is it really so? In fact Calvino foresaw a crucial issue that, fifty years later, was to become obvious to everyone: how and where to dispose of the huge amount of garbage that the civilized, opulent world produces every day. The scientists of Leonia, as the scientists of our time, are so clever that they develop almost indestructible raw materials... wonderful progress, no doubt, except that they are almost indestructible. Calvino foresaw how materials, objects and devices, created by human ingenuity, can have disastrous effects on our earth. Think only of the daily use that almost every human being in every corner of our planet makes of plastic, a material that in its countless guises has become integral to our lives, our comfort and convenience. Unfortunately, since we do not know how to get rid of it as rapidly as we produce it, sooner or later it will engulf and smother us, polluting most of our land and water. Already, gigantic islands of garbage have formed in our oceans and enormous quantities of microplastics are mixed with the waters of the Mediterranean. In many cities all over the planet, as Calvino already imagined in *The cloud of smog* (1958), there are days when the air is so polluted that it is dangerous for people to leave home.

Calvino was a writer who loved science, and often wrote about it, but also one who understood how essential it is that the discoveries of science and their practical applications be used responsibly – where responsibly means paying serious attention to their long term consequences. At first the deforestation of Cosimo’s time and the industrialization of Marcovaldo seem to be, and in many ways are, good for humanity, but in the long run they may have devastating effects on our life, unless they are practiced paying serious attention to natural sustainability.

Literature understood this fundamental principle well before it became the object of political controversy. Seven hundred years ago, Dante Alighieri

made it very clear in his *Divine Comedy*: we, human beings, in our constant search for prosperity and happiness, must use our intelligence with moderation lest we destroy whatever good we may be given by God or Mother Nature. This is the awesome challenge to which Calvino in his writing calls young people today: by all means, use all the resources of our planet for your needs, but only to the extent to which nature renews them for the use of future generations. Again the vision of literature proves to be as vital to the wellbeing of humanity as the discoveries of science.