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Post-War Ecosophic Intuition: About the (Im)Possibility of Ecological Coexistence in *Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City* by Italo Calvino

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Abstract: Taking in consideration, alongside Cheryll Glotfelty, that “ecocriticism seeks to evaluate text ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness in the responses to environmental crisis” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, p. 5), and that crisis refers not only to the ecology of the environment but also to that of social relations and the psyche, as proposed by Félix Guattari (1990), understanding that there is a lack of equilibrium among the three registries that provoke the crisis lived by the contemporary individual, in a broad spectrum, this work intends to understand how the character Marcovaldo, from Italo Calvino’s *Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City* (1963), articulates modes of being, dwelling and surviving in a great metropolis, through the adoption of postures coherent with what we would call, later, ecosophy. In addition to the two aforementioned theorists, the ideas of Garrard (2006) and Serres (1991) will be used. Also, we intend to show how much the stories in the collection hold great potential for ecocritical reading and, therefore, for a response to the level of awareness about the ecological crisis.

Keywords: ecocriticism; ecosophy; Marcovaldo

1. Introduction

The oeuvre *Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City*, by Italo Calvino, is made up of 20 short stories that present Marcovaldo, an Italian proletarian, as the protagonist: a simple, naive man who constantly seeks refuge in the midst of nature—or what is left of it, as the natural environments encountered by the worker throughout the stories have undergone interventions and constraints imposed by new urbanistic (and human) needs arising from the consolidation of industrial capitalist societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Set in an unnamed but essentially urban space, the stories can be read separately, but they establish another correlation with each other, besides Marcovaldo’s protagonism: all narratives are responsible for guiding the worker’s mishaps through the seasons of the year and all the (im)possibilities that arise from them.

Responsible for supporting six children and his wife Domitilla, Marcovaldo experiences a reality far removed from what we could consider pleasant. Sharing with the family the tiny space of only one room, the proletarian protagonist is presented along the stories as being, regarding the author, a sort of a “*engraçada e melancólica*”¹ (Calvino [1963] 2015) character, disconcerted by an aggressive, excludent

¹ Translated by the authors: “funny and melancholic”.

existence, that equals him only to someone else—someone “falsamente vivaz, cansado e escravo”² (Calvino [1963] 2015), a reality shared by so many since the beginning of the third phase of modernity in the twentieth century, according to (Berman [1982] 1996).

On the other hand, in spite of “todas as agressões do dia”³ (Calvino [1963] 2015), Marcovaldo begins to walk through the city during his free time (or on the way from his home to his work) while looking at it through some naive, optimistic and, above all, resilient lenses, which belongs to a person who is simple yet extremely worn out by the few possibilities he finds in modern life. In this sense, there is a kind of *flânerie*⁴ in reverse across the urban space, for it is not a search for the secluded spaces of the city that bring poetics to life, but a kind of anti-modernity and/or a search for the idyllic in the city, since reality reveals itself as truly stunning, together with the innovations that have come to the forefront of the consolidation of the industrial capitalist system. Hence, the yearning for contact with nature becomes a way of escaping all these changes that arise from new market demands and false promises; it is in contact with the natural that Marcovaldo’s individuality is complemented and legitimized:

(...) tinha um olho pouco adequado para a cidade: avisos, semáforos, vitrines, letreiros luminosos, cartazes, por mais estudados que fossem para atrair a atenção, jamais detinham seu olhar, que parecia perder-se nas areias do deserto. Já uma folha amarelando num ramo, uma pena que se deixasse prender numa telha não lhe escapavam nunca: não havia mosca no dorso de um cavalo, buraco de cupim numa mesa, casca de figo se desfazendo na calçada que Marcovaldo não observasse e comentasse, descobrindo as mudanças da estação, seus desejos mais íntimos e as misérias de sua existência (Calvino [1963] 2015).⁵

It is necessary to understand some aspects related to the context of production of the 20 small narratives contained in the work regarding the economic, political and social aspects of a country in tumultuous recovery after World War II. In the years between 1958 and 1963 (the latter, the date of *Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City*’s publication), the world witnessed the beginning of a complete social revolution in Italy. In less than two decades, the country “became one of the major industrial nations of the West” (Ginsborg 2013). It is true that the second world war, with all its potential for warlike destruction, established a period of inexpressible progress in Western countries: The Golden Age had replaced that of Catastrophe:

A Segunda Guerra Mundial, na verdade, trouxe soluções, pelo menos por décadas. Os impressionantes problemas sociais e econômicos do capitalismo na Era da Catástrofe aparentemente sumiram. A economia do mundo ocidental entrou em uma Era de Ouro; a democracia política ocidental, apoiada por uma extraordinária melhora na vida material, ficou estável; banuiu-se a guerra para o Terceiro Mundo⁶ (Hobsbawm 2016).

With the end of the protectionism, it was necessary to renew the Italian productive system: modernization of industry was indispensable to accelerate the sectors that were already in movement.

² Translated by the authors: “falsely vivacious, tired and slave”.

³ Translated by the authors: “all the aggressions of the day”.

⁴ According to Walter Benjamin (2000), *flânerie* is a term related to the experience of the modern man (represented by the figure of Charles Baudelaire, the French art theorist and poet) that observes the city and its constant transformation and re-creation (accelerated by the process of modernization of urban centers) in a surprising, curious and stunning way.

⁵ Translated by the authors: “(...) [This Marcovaldo] had an eye ill-suited to city life: billboards, traffic lights, shop windows, neon signs, posters, no matter how carefully devised to catch the attention, never arrested his gaze, which might have been running over the desert sands. Instead, he would never miss a leaf yellowing on a branch, a feather trapped by a roof tile; there was no fly on a horse’s back, no worm hole in a table, or figpeel squashed on the sidewalk that Marcovaldo didn’t remark and ponder over, discovering the changes of season, the yearnings of his heart, and the woes of his existence”.

⁶ Translated by the authors: “World War II, in fact, has brought solutions, at least for decades. The impressive social and economic problems of capitalism at the Age of Catastrophe seem to have disappeared. The economy of the Western world has entered into a Golden Age; Western political democracy, supported by an extraordinary improvement in material life, remained stable; the war for the Third World was banished”.

This new structural dynamic in the country is reported and denounced in *Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City*: it is clear the intervention of external capital not only in the streets, but also in all the possibilities of purchase coming from the economic miracle. Marcovaldo, an example of the working class of that time, finds himself faced with a modified city that is never silent nor sleeps, feeling uncomfortable in the face of a distortion of consumption patterns (lack of a broader and more social vision), encompassing population and all of their needs related to health, education and public transportation, emphasizing the importance of individual prosperity (and relative to family clan) and ignoring collective and public demands. However, no matter how much he tried to enter into the new logic of the system, he was unable to enjoy all this consumer schizophrenia (as industriously expressed in *Marcovaldo at the Supermarket*), since the social class to which he belonged had not yet risen enough to surrender to the pleasures of exacerbated consumption. It is then, in the malaise of the feeling of non-belonging to the *modus operandi* that is directed towards a consumption society, that Marcovaldo seeks to reconnect with nature and its uniqueness, thus becoming a contact with this new world that makes him relive “as coisas de todos os dias, ásperas e hostis”⁷ (Calvino [1963] 2015).

Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City would be an objective of not only a denunciation of social reality, but also of an environmental one, based on the logic of man believing to comprise the top of the animal hierarchy and, consequently, irresponsibly exploring nature. Even at the apex of “racionalidade técnica e do domínio sobre a natureza”⁸ (Candido [1988] 2011), the possibility of solving questions for the benefit of humanity and the planet seems to be removed from the present context as well as from the past, not only in the period of the Italian Golden Age, but also in different conjunctures throughout the twentieth century, since, according to Eric Hobsbawm (2016):

Durante a Era de Ouro, isso [a questão ecológica] chamou pouca atenção (...) porque a ideologia de progresso dominante tinha como certo que o crescente domínio da natureza pelo homem era a medida mesma do avanço da humanidade [grifo nosso] (...) não há como negar que o impacto das atividades humanas sobre a natureza, sobretudo as urbanas e industriais, mas também, como se acabou compreendendo, as agrícolas, aumentou acentuadamente a partir de meados do século. Isso se deveu em grande parte ao enorme uso de combustíveis fósseis (carvão, petróleo, gás natural, etc.), cujo possível esgotamento vinha preocupando os que pensavam no futuro em meados do século XIX.⁹

What this article would want to point out is the misery of Marcovaldo, not only in regards to the material sense, but also the misery as perceived by the awareness of the human condition. Therefore, the misery to which Marcovaldo is subjected is not only related to his class but also as pointed in narratives as *Marcovaldo at the Supermarket* and *Santa's Children*, analyzed in a later section of this article; the misery also comes from the difficulty in establishing contact with some secondary personages that appear during the plots. In *Mushrooms in the city*, Marcovaldo is deliberately ignored (after suggesting that everyone eat a mushroom fry together) by people who, just like him, were there to pick up the fungi that grew spontaneously on the street. It is a fact that, at first, Marcovaldo seems to adopt a somewhat individualistic stance in wishing to have those mushrooms only for himself and his family; later, the protagonist changes his mind. This difficulty in strengthening ties with other human beings, such as those of his own family (as noted in narratives such as *The lunch box* and *Moon and GNAC*), seems to contribute to the reiteration of his melancholic state and the desire to move away from the

⁷ Translated by the authors: “everyday things, rough and hostile”.

⁸ Translated by the authors: “technical rationality and domination over nature”.

⁹ Translated by the authors: “During the Golden Age this [the ecological issue] drew little attention (...) because the dominant ideology of progress took for granted that mankind’s growing control of nature was the very measure of humanity’s advance [emphasis added] (...) there is no denying that the impact of human activities on nature, especially urban and industrial, but also, as we have seen, on agriculture, has increased sharply since the middle of the century. This was largely due to the enormous use of fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas, etc.), whose potential exhaustion had worried those who thought about the future in the mid-nineteenth century”.

city, in the first place, and return to the natural environment. What becomes clear in *The good air* and *The city all to himself* is a will of the protagonist to depart not specifically from the city (which is totally resignified in the second story quoted), but from elements that define the modern human being and its context of life, such as exacerbated noise, traffic (issues quite well explained in the first story cited) and the evils, increasingly common, concerning to the human psyche (as explored in the second mentioned story). In this sense, it is possible to associate the conflicts experienced by Marcovaldo with an unbalancing of three ecological registries, as proposed by Félix Guattari: “[...] o do meio ambiente, o das relações sociais e o da subjetividade humana”¹⁰ (Guattari 1990). Each of them, according to the French thinker, has an intrinsic relation with the others, so that only by the balance and harmony of the three aspects can man overcome the profound socioecological-existential crisis, which is the most significant trait of modern and postmodern world and that the protagonist of the 20 short stories starts experiencing in his (dis)adventures.

There are multiple verifiable causes for such an imbalance: world market values, which privilege, on a scale of value, material goods over cultural and natural ones; the subservience of the social body to police and military machines; the one-dimensional cultural value system imposed by Western powers on other nations (Guattari 1990). The way out of this crossroads, in the present time, would be a resignification of the ways in which the human being became accustomed to behaving in the world. This would imply the recomposition of “[...] práxis humanas nos mais variados domínios”¹¹ of daily life, at individual and collective scales, which could result in a revolution enriching the ways of life, sensitivity, intelligence and desire (Guattari 1990).

In this vein, it is intended to examine a response to one of the basic questions of ecocriticism: “In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996).

2. Discussion: The Possibilities of Ecocritical Readings

2.1. The Idea of Consumption

The aforementioned context of the Italian economic miracle, although only artificial and the fruit of the political marketing, has fed an idea of development measured only in terms of production and consumption. This artificiality, generated by the opening of foreign capital in Italy, can be clearly identified in *Santa's Children*: while the protagonist tries, at all costs, to reach a goal of delivery of orders to receive a bonus in payment, not only the city but also the people change. A common scene, such as the approach of Christmas, is described in such a way as to enhance the mechanicity of personal behavior, as well as the artificiality, even aggressiveness, arising from the strong lights of the city center, totally modified for the occasion.¹² Still thinking about the issue concerning the pattern of artificial behavior, the ideas of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1978, 1997) about what the author called the only behavior pattern, motivated by the anthropological mutation occurred in Italy after the opening of the country to foreign capital, which provided a profound change in the culture at that the time. The unique and mechanical behavior of the population, as presented by Calvino in *Santa's Children*, tends to reveal this new phase in Italian society, the consumer society, which for Pasolini represented a power: “la nueva forma del poder, el poder del consumismo, la ultima de las ruinas, la ruina de las ruinas”¹³ (Pasolini 1997).

¹⁰ Translated by the authors: “[...] that of the environment, that of social relations and that of human subjectivity”.

¹¹ Translated by the authors: “human praxis in the most varied domains”.

¹² [...] the harmonica players advance, those who have come down from the mysterious and dark mountains and stop at the crossroads of the center, half stunned by the excess of lights, by the overly ornamented storefronts [...] among businessmen, the heavy disputes of interest are appeased and make room to a new competition: who offers more graciously the most distinctive and original gift (Calvino [1963] 2015).

¹³ Translated by the authors: “the new form of power, the power of consumerism, the last of the ruins, the ruin of the ruins”.

From the reading of *Marcovaldo at the Supermarket* and *Santa's Children*, it is possible to establish some similar parameters of appreciation, which are present in the selected texts. It is interesting to note how Marcovaldo, based mainly on his class question, is usually encouraged to participate in the same universe that promotes his exclusion. These ambivalent questions, common to modern subjects, permeate the daily life of Marcovaldo and his family, affected by the annoyance of hunger, but far from reflecting on the arbitrariness imposed on them by an oppressive and unbridled work situation, as it is made very clear in *Santa's Children*, for example. Even though he is challenged every day in his desire to live with a little more comfort, Marcovaldo still manages to set his sights on the possibilities arising from the urban, capitalist and exclusionary context: it is from the comparison of elements of the city with others linked to nature that the protagonist's desolation is attenuated a little, even if, in certain situations, he is absorbed by melancholy nuances projected by advertising and the effervescence of the consumer market. The topic on which these stories unfold concerns a stage in the evolution of post-industrial capitalism, which Félix Guattari prefers to call Integrated World Capitalism, which:

[...] tende, cada vez mais, a descentrar seus focos de poder das estruturas de produção de bens e de serviços para as estruturas produtoras de signos, de sintaxe e de subjetividade, por intermédio, especialmente, do controle que exerce sobre a mídia, a publicidade, as sondagens, etc.¹⁴ (Guattari 1990).

Now, to produce and control the signs of contemporary life and, thus, to have the status of power to shape subjectivities is certainly a strategy of oppression/domination of human (in his three ecological dimensions), much more effective and lasting than any domination by force concerning the being and the landscape. For the French thinker, this apparatus of domination can no longer be opposed by traditional trade union and political practices; rather, it will require a work of social ecology that reinvents social and political practices that work effectively for humanity and rebalance “[...] seus efeitos no domínio da ecologia mental, no seio da vida cotidiana individual, doméstica, conjugal, de vizinhança, de criação e de ética pessoal”¹⁵ (Guattari 1990), and that they no longer be guided by the “Universo das semióticas capitalísticas”¹⁶ (Guattari 1990). It would be necessary, for this to happen,

[...] reapreciar a finalidade do trabalho e das atividades humanas em função de critérios diferentes daqueles do rendimento e do lucro¹⁷ (Guattari 1990).

2.2. Nature as Idealized Refuge

Lato sensu, the search for nature is the motto of the set of stories, together with the unfailing disappointment resulting from such search. In addition, this is the cause of the melancholy that comes off the narratives, despite their comic nuances. Part of the disillusionment is the result of external agency, which does not depend on the will of the protagonist, but much of it is rooted in its idealized vision of what the world outside the urban frontier would be. Melancholy, the fruit of disappointment, arises from the gap between expectation and reality. Thus:

O idílio ‘industrial’ é alvejado tanto quanto o idílio ‘campestre’; não apenas uma ‘volta atrás’ na história é impossível, mas também aquele ‘atrás’ nunca existiu, é uma ilusão. O amor de Marcovaldo pela natureza é aquele que pode nascer apenas num homem da cidade; por isso

¹⁴ Translated by the authors: “increasingly tends to decentralize its focus of power from the production of goods and services to the structures that produce signs, syntax and subjectivity, through, in particular, the control exercised over the media, advertising, polls, etc.”.

¹⁵ Translated by the authors: “their effects on mental ecology within individual, domestic, and conjugal everyday life, as well as that concerning neighborhood, creation and personal ethics”.

¹⁶ Translated by the authors: “Universe of capitalistic semiotics”.

¹⁷ Translated by the authors: “to reassess the purpose of work and human activities on the basis of different criteria from those of income and profit”.

não podemos saber nada da sua origem extraurbana; esse estranho à cidade é o cidadão por excelência¹⁸ (Calvino [1963] 2015).

In the meantime, for example, in *Park-bench vacation*, Marcovaldo dreams of being able to sleep under the greenery of the leafy, cool square and not in his hot and noisy room. When he decides to put his plan into practice, he finds it hard to sleep on a hard bench, with the noise and traffic lights flashing around the square.

In *A journey with the cows*, Michelino, one of Marcovaldo's sons, follows some cowboys to shepherd the cattle that pass through the city on their way to the mountains in search of pasture. The expectation was that the lucky son, when he would return, would come fat and tanned, as a result of the free life in nature:

—Sorte dele, sombra e água fresca, e se enchendo de manteiga e queijo—dizia Marcovaldo, e, todas as vezes que do fundo de uma rua lhe aparecia, coberto apenas pelo calor do verão, o recorte branco e cinzento das montanhas, sentia-se como mergulhado num poço, sob cuja luz, lá no alto, parecia-lhe ver cintilar copas de bordos e castanheiros, e zumbir abelhas selvagens, e Michelino lá em cima, preguiçoso e feliz, entre o leite e o mel e as amoras nas sebes¹⁹ (Calvino [1963] 2015).

The reality of the harshness and misery of the countryman's life is, however, imperative in the return of the young man:

—Trabalhava como uma mula—disse, e cuspiu longe. Tinha ficado com cara de homem—Todas as tardes a mudar os baldes dos ordenhadores de um animal para outro, de um animal para outro, depois esvaziá-los nos latões, rápido, cada vez mais rápido, até tarde. E, de manhã, bem cedo, rolar os latões até os caminhões que os transportam para a cidade... E contar, contar sempre: os animais, os latões, ai de quem errasse...

—E você deitava na grama? Quando os animais pastavam?...

—A gente nunca tinha tempo. Havia sempre o que fazer. Correr atrás do leite, da palha dos animais, do estrume. E tudo isso para quê? Com a desculpa de que não tinha contrato de trabalho, quanto me pagaram? Uma miséria. Mas, se estão pensando que agora vou dar tudo para vocês, desistam. Para casa, vamos dormir que estou morto de cansado²⁰ (Calvino [1963] 2015).

¹⁸ Translated by the authors: "The 'industrial' idyll is targeted as much as the 'country' idyll; not just a 'returning back' in the story is impossible, but that 'back' has never existed, it's an illusion. Marcovaldo's love for nature is that which can only be born in a man of the city; so we cannot know anything about its former extra-urban origin; this stranger to the city is the citizen par excellence".

¹⁹ Translated by the authors: "—Lucky him, shade and fresh water, and filling himself with butter and cheese," said Marcovaldo, and every time he reached the bottom of a street, covered only by the summer heat, the gray and white cliffs of the mountains, he felt as if plunged into a well, under whose light, above him, he seemed to see flickering crowns of maple and chestnut trees, as well as buzzing wild bees and Michelino, up there, lazy and happy, among milk and honey and blackberries in the hedges".

²⁰ Translated by the authors: "I worked like a dog," he said, and spat away. He looked like a man. "Every afternoon moving the milker buckets from one animal to another, then emptying them in the vessels, fast, even faster, until late. And, in the morning, very early, rolling the vessels to the trucks that transport them to the city ... And counting, always counting: the animals, the vessels, and woe to the one who misses ...

— And have you laid on the grass? When animals were grazing? ...
— We never had time. There was always something to do. To look for milk, the animals straw, the manure. And all this for what? With the excuse that there wasn't a work contract. How much did they pay me? Almost nothing. But if you think that I'm going to give it all to you now, give it up. Let's go home, let me sleep that I am very tired".

In *Where the river is more blue?*, the expectation and the anxiety to find “ [...] o paraíso do pescador”²¹ (Calvino [1963] 2015) will become disillusionment due to the polluted river and the fishing restrictions in the wild section that belongs to the reserve.

In addition, in spite of being idealized, it is possible to return to a possibility of reading the story *The good air*, in which Marcovaldo and the children find a group of patients of a mental house, during a walk in the hills. In this case, however, nature is seen not only as a refuge. Often, throughout history, it has become a place of exile and banishment (Serres 1991).

In the wake of Garrard’s (2006) thinking about the work of Edward Abbey, it is necessary to consider that the idea of refuge in nature often only ratifies the natural versus cultural binarism and even that of gender, since the natural landscape is almost always seen as feminine, even though it is not a place for a woman (it is enough to see how Domitilla is not part of the plans and dreams of Marcovaldo). Also, since access to a tame wilderness is expensive and generally only achievable as a holiday season, not accessible to most, it eventually becomes the place for a pseudo-feeling of integration, remaining aseptically distant and mystified. To inhabit nature implies a different attitude; it is not a transitory state and cannot be based on either a tourist perspective or an idyllic dream, for it requires a “[...] imbricação a longo prazo dos seres humanos numa paisagem de memória, ancestralidade e morte, de ritual, vida e trabalho”²² (Garrard 2006). Serres complements in the same direction:

Para salvar a Terra ou respeitar o tempo, no sentido da chuva e do vento, seria preciso pensar no longo prazo e, para não viver nele, desaprendemos a pensar conforme os ritmos e seu alcance. [...] Tudo acontece como se [...] houvessem erradicado a memória do longo prazo, tradições milenares, experiências acumuladas pelas culturas que acabam de morrer ou que estas potências matam²³ (Serres 1991).

Guattari closes the question about the (impossible) return to nature as a place of an idealized refuge:

Certamente seria absurdo querer voltar atrás para tentar reconstituir as antigas maneiras de viver. Jamais o trabalho humano ou o hábitat voltarão a ser o que eram há poucas décadas, depois das revoluções informáticas, robóticas, depois do desenvolvimento do gênio genético e depois da mundialização do conjunto dos mercados. A aceleração das velocidades de transporte e de comunicação, a interdependência dos centros urbanos, estudados por Paul Virilio, constituem igualmente um estado de fato irreversível que conviria antes de tudo reorientar²⁴ (Guattari 1990).

Thus, the locus amoenus vision, even if supplied by Marcovaldo beyond the city limits, is constantly challenged by the fact that the separation between nature and city is culturally instituted from the superposition of the human figure over the figure relative to nature. The consideration of the two as part of the same whole, as two points of the same web, had been temporarily undone and proportionately deprived throughout the process of the rise of industry, capital, and consumption. It is true, therefore, that conceptions about nature, as admittedly being a space of reception and

²¹ Translated by the authors: “[...] the fisherman’s paradise”.

²² Translated by the authors: “long-term imbrication of human beings in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, ritual, life and work”.

²³ Translated by the authors: “To safeguard the Earth or to respect the weather, in the sense of rain and wind, one would have to think long term and, in order not to live in it, we would have to unlearn to think according to rhythms and their scope. [...] Everything happens as if (...) they have eradicated the long-term memory, millennial traditions, experiences accumulated by the cultures that have just died or that these powers kill”.

²⁴ Translated by the authors: “Certainly it would be absurd to go back to try to reconstitute the old ways of living. Human labor or habitat will never be again what they used to be a few decades ago, after computer revolutions, robotics, after the development of the genetic genius and after the globalization of all markets. The acceleration of transport and communication speeds, the interdependence of urban centers, studied by Paul Virilio, is also a state of irreversible fact that we should first and foremost reorient”.

rest, were also culturally constructed from the opposition based on the perception of the city as a sign of the vertiginous, the civilized, the disharmonious. Therefore, it is interesting to note that in *Park-bench vacation*, *The good air* and, especially, *The journey with the cows*, the natural environment is not exempt from suffering the same negative manifestations of the city exactly because these are affected by socially constructed human dynamics. The opposite, perceived in *The city lost in the snow* and *The city all to himself*, portrays the possibilities of legitimizing the city and its spaces externally to the questions of city logic driven by industrial capital, precisely because these cities (would they be the same?) have distanced themselves from culturally constructed conceptions, which recognize it as such (as Marcovaldo characterizes it) within its chaotic and stunning organization. In light of the above, it is possible, from the paths traced throughout the stories referred to, to understand that the binary visions concerning the city and the countryside do not apply in an idealized and definitive way, thus expanding the possibilities of reading these two spaces from other dynamics of resignification.

2.3. *Poisons of Man*,²⁵ *Remedies of Nature*

In the convulsion of centuries and millennia, what has been conceived as cultural was moving away from the natural saying and, therefore, man—culture lord—moving away from other beings, whose language and thought did not rise at the technical and symbolic level. “Gradually, as this inner world [of abstract thought] became increasingly abstract and complex, we began to lose contact with nature” (Capra 1996). George Lukács clarifies in the following terms: “Nature’s unawareness [of human nature] in the face of the first nature, the modern sentimental posture before nature, is only the projection of the experience that the surrounding world created for men by itself is not the paternal home anymore, but a prison” (Lukács 2000). For Nogueira, it is the nature of the man to depart from the natural, being that all evolution would put the “man out of man” (Nogueira 1994). There is a universal devaluation, to a greater or lesser degree, according to different times and places, of nature in relation to culture, besides differentiations and hierarchizations between specific cultures of one and other groups (Nogueira 1994). For the anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1979), all systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts) that are fruits of human consciousness, aim to transcend purely natural existence. It is obvious that to transcend is not necessarily to remove/oppose, in any way, every human gathering, even if they did not distinguish human culture from nature, they never simply let themselves be carried away by natural; they always tried to manipulate it, even in the most primitive rituals. Severino Nogueira refers to culture as “Second Nature”, claiming that it has always existed, since man is devoid of natural qualities to survive (Nogueira 1994). However, the second nature has always respected the rhythms of mother nature; it was the “progress” of certain civilizations that would have broken the balance, causing the second to overthrow and oppose the first (Nogueira 1994). Every culture then recognizes its difference of functioning in relation to nature and affirms its superiority, in as much as the second was born with the purpose of manipulating the first (Ortner 1979). Therefore, the distinction between culture and nature is in itself the product of culture (Ortner 1979), being that, in nature, there is no a priori hierarchy between the human and the non-human (Di Ciommo 1999). However, the human striving to dominate nature has been turned to be catastrophic, to the point that the assertion that every civilization ruins itself is true (Eagleton 2001). In fact, it seems more lawful to conceive that culture is part of human nature. This time, culture would not supplant or supplement nature. As a biological being, man’s physical nature is so weak compared to most animals that, at birth,

²⁵ The preference to choose lexically, in this section, the word “man”, is intrinsically linked to the figure of the white man and colonizer (and who, consequently, was allowed to participate in political and public life) as responsible for establishing the logic that underlies expansionist interests. This paradigm shift, initiated in the Modern Age, “was only produced once. To return to a well-known formula of Descartes (...), man then became ‘master and lord’ of nature. This resulted in an extraordinary development of the sciences and techniques, but also the unbridled exploration of a nature composed, from that moment on, of objects without connection with humans: plants, animals, lands, waters and rocks converted into mere resources that we can all use and which we can take advantage of. At that time, nature had lost its soul and nothing prevented us from seeing it solely as a source of wealth” (Descola 2016).

a whole cultural apparatus to survive is required (Eagleton 2001). If, on the one hand, the entrance into the sphere of symbolic thought has given dominion over all things, on the other hand, there is no escape from a minimum of “natural needs”, namely, need for food, warmth, sexual desire, etc., which resist the denial that culture imprints on nature (Eagleton 2001). In the words of Ngoenha, there will always be the possibilities of the first conditioning those of the second (Ngoenha 1994). For the first, the man is identical to the natural beings, and for the second he moves away from them (Ngoenha 1994) when it is not opposed to them. It turns out that man is a symbolic and somatic animal, “Sólo un animal lingüístico puede diseñar armas nucleares, pero solo un animal material puede resultar vulnerable a ellas”²⁶ (Eagleton 2001). For Plumwood, the human being must understand and affirm both his otherness and his community on Earth, so that the reason recognizes and respects the “others of the Earth”, including the care one must take toward them (Plumwood 1993). This is imperative in the view of Serres, for whom it is not redundant “to demonstrate that our reason violates the world” (Serres 1991). Man wanders halfway between nature and culture, but far from being a synthesis between the two. Ngoenha formulates the definition of “man’s place in nature” as the capital problem of the present time, continually transformed by his own practice. For him, both excessively mystical and radically instrumentalist attitudes are pernicious for nature and consequently for man himself (Ngoenha 1994). It seems that it is this lack of harmony/balance that comes from the deep ecological crisis that assails the Earth today, calling into question the very survival of the human species, among others.

This is another possible key to ecocritical readings of the work. The poisons present in elements of nature, which are aggressive to man when not properly handled, are present in *Mushrooms in the city* and *The wasp treatment* and also in *The lunch-box* where Marcovaldo feels the unhealthy taste of the aluminum of the container in which his wife puts the lunch he will eat at work.

In this battle, man poisons nature without much discretion and without realizing that it poisons itself in chains: innocently, the children throw soap in the river in *Smoke, wind and soap-bubbles*, a story in which there is also the pollution generated by the soot liberated by factories. The paint factory pollutes the river in the aforementioned *Where the river is more blue?*; doctors poison a laboratory rabbit in *The poisonous rabbit*.

Recalling that both man and nature have their poisons (although those used by man have a natural origin), Calvino does not fail to corroborate the ideas of the Scottish writer John Muir, who stated:

[...] que os jacarés, os leões, os venenos e as doenças, tudo isso é uma ampla prova de que a criação não foi pré-fabricada para o uso e a comodidade humanos, e que todos os seres vivos, até ‘a mais ínfima criatura transmicroscópica’, têm um valor intrínseco²⁷ (apud Garrard 2006, p. 100).

These conceptions of extrinsic and intrinsic value, as suggested by Marxist criticism, are directly linked to the subtle withdrawal of the human being from nature and to the subversion, as already mentioned, of its function. Previously to the civilizational and urban process, for the, according to (Arendt [1985] 2017), animal laborans, the one who develops labor, an activity that corresponds only to its essential needs, that is, to feed itself, to dress itself, to defend itself, to sleep, it was possible to attribute intrinsic value to nature and its elements and phenomena, for this animal depended on them for his subsistence. More strongly, from the Modern Age onwards, the behavioral and thought traditions, as far as nature and its role are concerned, have abruptly changed: when the human being (not the animal laborans anymore) initiates the process of work development, modifying nature from the production of durable goods:

²⁶ Translated by the authors: “Only a linguistic animal can design nuclear weapons, but only a material animal can be vulnerable to them”.

²⁷ Translated by the authors: “[...] that alligators, lions, poisons and diseases, all this is a wide proof that creation was not prefabricated for human use and comfort, and that all the alive beings, even ‘the smallest transmicroscopic creature’, have an intrinsic value”.

Aos olhos do animal laborans, a natureza é a grande provedora de todas as ‘boas coisas’, que pertencem igualmente a todos os seus filhos, que ‘as tomam de suas mãos’ e se ‘misturam com elas no labor e no consumo. Essa mesma natureza, aos olhos do homo faber, construtor do mundo, ‘fornece apenas os materiais que, em si, são destituídos de valor’, pois todo o seu valor reside no trabalho que é realizado sobre eles. Sem tomar as coisas das mãos da natureza e consumi-las, e sem se defender contra os processos naturais de crescimento e declínio, o animal laborans jamais poderia sobreviver (Arendt [1985] 2017).²⁸

On a large scale, these poisons, manipulated or in natura, at one time or another, alert man to the need for redirecting the management of science and economics toward more humane purposes as, for instance, the industrialization of war, and the technological advances possible from the second world war: while the computer was a reality, it also became real exploration in the area of nuclear physics:

Chernobyl e a Aids nos revelaram brutalmente os limites dos poderes técnico-científicos da humanidade e as ‘marchas-à-ré’ que a ‘natureza’ nos pode reservar²⁹ (Guattari 1990, p. 24).

It is interesting to note how Marcovaldo, from his experience in the city and his estrangement from the natural world, undertakes difficulties in dealing with his altered spaces of organization; also, for the protagonist, it is difficult to treat plants and animals, precisely because he does not know their peculiarities, forms of handling, cycles and needs. This reality, therefore, is punctuated by a tendency to, from the consolidation of capitalist societies and urban centers, lose its valiant ancestral force: the wisdom of the herbs, motivated by a different perception of nature and its possibilities, away from the logic of unbridled exploitation and the pharmaceutical monopoly, based on the grounds of allopathic medicine. The proposition of Garrard corroborates with this idea, for whom, paradoxically, the information age became a period of disenchantment, insofar as man isolated himself from the lessons of nature (Garrard 2006).

The embarrassments of Marcovaldo in the face of these attempts at handling are motivated by the urgency to heal issues arising from hunger and pain; for reasons of class status, as pointed out earlier, the worker seeks exits close to nature and its manifestations to overcome economic obstacles.

In *Mushrooms in the city*, as an example, the protagonist is one of the “poucas almas sensíveis³⁰” (Calvino [1963] 2015) who realize the winds approaching the city, inaugurating spring with “pólen de flores de outras terras”³¹ (Calvino [1963] 2015). In the midst of the wanderings between home and work, Marcovaldo discovers, near a bus stop, “cogumelos de verdade, que estavam rompendo a terra bem no coração da cidade”³² (Calvino [1963] 2015). While promenading between his house and work, he had perceived, from this re-enlightenment, that “o mundo cinzento e miserável que o cercava se tornava de repente generoso em riquezas escondidas”³³ (Calvino [1963] 2015), attributing, therefore, to that natural manifestation an inestimable value: that of opening expectations and possibilities, the opportunity for the family to enjoy a mushroom fry that goes “além das horas pagas pelo salário contratual, da compensação de perdas, do salário-família e da carestia”³⁴ (Calvino [1963] 2015).

²⁸ Translated by the authors: “In the eyes of animal laborans, nature is the great provider of all ‘good things’, which belong equally to all her children, who ‘take them from their hands’ and ‘mix with them in labor and consumption’. This same nature, in the eyes of the homo faber, builder of the world, ‘furnishes only those materials which are worthless in themselves’, for all their value lies in the work that is performed upon them. Without taking things from the hands of nature and consuming them, and without defending itself against the natural processes of growth and decline, the animal laborans could never survive”.

²⁹ Translated by the authors: “Chernobyl and Aids have brutally exposed to us the limits of mankind’s technical-scientific powers and the ‘reverse ways’ that ‘nature’ can reserve for us”.

³⁰ Translated by the authors: “a few sensitive souls”.

³¹ Translated by the authors: “pollen of flowers from other lands”.

³² Translated by the authors: “real mushrooms, which were breaking the land right in the heart of the city”.

³³ Translated by the authors: “the gray and miserable world that surrounded him became suddenly generous in hidden riches”.

³⁴ Translated by the authors: “beyond the hours paid by the contractual salary, the compensation of losses, the family wage and the scarcity”.

The way in which Marcovaldo resignifies his surroundings simply by the existence of elements that subvert the organizational logic of the city is constantly put to test: it would not be different in *Mushrooms in the city*. As much as the discovery “de repente lhe encheu o coração de amor universal”³⁵ (Calvino [1963] 2015) and had awakened in Marcovaldo feelings, concerning solidarity and the sharing of his foraging with people like Amadigi, a street sweeper who had also discovered the source that would take them away from a meager dinner, at the end of the story occurs the revelation of the ignorance not only of the protagonist and his family, but also of others who shared the surprise of finding mushrooms “empinados em seus talos, com os chapéus altos sobre a terra ainda encharcada”³⁶ (Calvino [1963] 2015): the lack of knowledge of the species that appears in the middle of the asphalt ends up leading everyone to the hospital to rid them of poisoning caused by the ingestion of poisonous mushrooms. There is, in this passage, the desire to share the table with strangers, to approach them, just as in *Smoke, wind and soap-bubbles*: in both narratives, there seems to be an eagerness to resignify relationships with other individuals—previously established thanks to the ease in occupying public space—as advocated by Guattari (1990) in his social ecology:

façamos votos para que, no contexto das novas distribuições das cartas da relação entre o capital e a atividade humana, as tomadas de consciência ecológicas, feministas, anti-racistas etc. estejam mais prontas a ter em mira, a título de objetivo maior, os modos de produção da subjetividade—isto é, de conhecimento, cultura, sensibilidade e sociabilidade (...) A ecologia social deverá trabalhar na reconstrução das relações humanas em todos os níveis, do socius.³⁷

3. Conclusions

Other subtopics could be listed, but it seems that these three already serve for what was proposed. It is believed that some possible ramifications for analysis have been indicated between the lines, such as the idea of nature as a place of healing, which intersects the ideas proposed in items [1] and [3], to which still could be added the short story *A Saturday of sun, sand and sleep* (Calvino [1963] 2015), or the pollution theme, or the search for healthy and cheap, unadulterated foods, among many others.

It is also necessary to emphasize the importance of the study of the literary text to reflect, understand and connect the environments that surround us. According to Glotfelty,

In most literary theory, “the world” is synonymous with society—the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere [...] we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996).

From an ecocritical viewpoint of the work in question, it became possible to explore urgent paths regarding environmental, ecological, climatic, life-preserving (human and non-human) issues, linked to discussions prompted by the class stratum proposed both in the semantic scope of the narrative text and in the critical reading deployed during this research. Therefore, it is equally important to highlight the relevance of the role of literature as a tool for formation, inclusion and critical reflection, as well as a means of promotion of what concerns, from the poetics of otherness and the movement of looking and perceiving the other (perhaps distant from its reality), the possibility of breaking with socially pre-established hegemonic discourses, as well as demystifying statements that contribute to

³⁵ Translated by the authors: “has suddenly filled his heart with universal love”.

³⁶ Translated by the authors: “steep on stems, high up on land still soaked”.

³⁷ Translated by the authors: “we hope that, in the context of new distributions of the cards of the relationship between capital and human activity, the ecological, feminist, anti-racist consciousness views, etc., are ready to target the modes of production of subjectivity—that is, of knowledge, culture, sensibility and sociability (...) Social ecology must work for the reconstruction of human relations in all levels, of socius”.

the perpetuation of prejudices that cut across—in a violent or subtle way—all levels of contemporary modern capitalist societies.

In the scope of the thinking of Guattari and Serres on ecosophy and the natural contract, which can be synthesized in the urgency for the search of harmony between the three ecological dimensions, it is possible to understand that the protagonist (Marcovaldo) represents, still, a non-equal search; he is at a stage of liberation and self-understanding in relation to the medium which tends, in most cases, to exclude those around him, especially his family. Perhaps this is the trigger for the comic-disastrous consequences that come to the hero. He is still not in tune with the others. Or it would be more correct to say that others are not yet at his 'frequency'! Marcovaldo, even though he is undeserving and quixotic—and here he cannot imagine what else he could be—is treading the path he feels the most appropriate for his psychic and ecological evolution. And no one is better than a comic-lyrical-melancholic, like a Quixote, a Carlitos or a Marcovaldo, to indicate alternative ways in times of celebrated homogenization.

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