Troubling the Boundaries: Human and Animal Spaces in Yitzhak Orpaz's *Nemalim* (*Ants*) and Italo Calvino's *La formica argentina* (*The Argentine Ant*)

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Abstract

The essay explores the portrayal of insects in literature, focusing specifically on the representation of ants in Yitzhak Orpaz's Nemalim (Ants) *and Italo Calvino's* La formica argentina (The Argentine Ant)*. Both stories delve into the dynamics of species interaction, specifically into the response of two married couples whose homes or apartments are invaded by ants. Despite the humans' efforts, particularly those of the husbands', to regain control of their territory, they are unsuccessful. Throughout the narratives, the ants, functioning as a superorganism, exhibit a greater degree of agency compared to the human characters. The house or flat transforms into an anthill, effectively reverting the anthropized space into a natural environment. Consequently, the two species intertwine, mingle, and hybridize.*

This analysis will be conducted through the lens of animal studies, highlighting the themes of animal agency and Otherness, which are particularly significant when considering insects. Additionally, the essay will draw upon the concept of consilience between the humanities and sciences.

Introduction

In the field of animal studies, insects have relatively recently begun to receive the attention and the consideration they deserve.[1] On the one hand, they are the Other—communication and empathy in their regards are admittedly difficult and for some people impossible. They are monsters or object of wonder,[2] although one must always keep in mind that the Latin word *monstrum* is connected to the verb *monstrare* that means "to point out, to show," [3] implying that a *monstrum*/monster is, first of all, something that deserves to be shown, but not necessarily a monstrosity.

To demonstrate the otherness of insects it suffices to compare two scenes. The first and most well-known is described by Jacques Derrida in *L'animal que donc je suis* and recalls the accidental encounter and exchange of gazes between the naked

[1] Cristopher Hollingsworth, *Poetics of the Hive The Insect Metaphor in Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001); Oddone Longo and Alessandro Minelli, *Entomata. Gli insetti nella scienza e nella cultura dall'antichità ai giorni nostri* (Venezia: Istituto Veneto di Scienze Lettere ad Arti, 2002); Eric C. Brown, *Insect Poetics* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Simon King, *Insect Nations: Visions of the Ant World from Kropotkin to Bergson* (Ashby-de-la-Zouch: InkerMan Press, 2006); Charlotte Sleigh, *Six Legs Better: A Cultural History of Myrmecology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Catherine Parry, *Other Animals in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), with a chapter dedicated to "Ants, Myrmecology and Metaphor," 63-110; Tiziana Nicoletta Beltrame, Sophie Houdart, and Christine Jungen, eds., "Techniques et cultures," in *Mondes infimes* 68 (2017); Daniela Bombara, Stefania La Vaccara, and Ellen Patat, eds., "Epifanie entomologiche nella cultura italiana," *Revue de Philologie* 46, no. 1 (2019); Wilt L. Idema, *Insects in Chinese Literature: A Study and Anthology* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2019); Aude Volpilhac, "Micrographies. Les insectes littéraires au XVIIe siècle: Le cas de 'Divers insectes' de Pierre Perrin," in "Créatures 'parlantes' et 'truchement' du conteur. Éthique et esthétique du discours animal," ed. Aude Volpilhac, *Animots, carnet de zoopoétique* (January 2020): 1-17; Anne Simon, *Une bête entre les lignes. Essai de zoopoétique* (Marseille: Wildproject, 2021), with a chapter dedicated to insects "La vermine dans les plis de nos villes," 313-336; Dror Burshtein, *'Olam Qatan: Diyoqan'ot shel heraqim* (Small World: Portraits of Insects) (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2021); Yvan Daniel and Alain Montandon, eds., *Observer et Décrire Des insectes et des hommes* (Paris: Garnier, 2022). In the remarkable series Reaktion Books has dedicated to animals several insects are covered: Charlotte Sleigh, *Ant* (2003); Marion Copeland, *Cockroach* (2003); Claire Preston, *Bee* (2005); Steven Connor, *Fly* (2006); Richard Jones, *Mosquito* (2012); Adam Dodd, *Beetle* (2015); Matthew Gandy, *Moth* (2016); Klaus Reinhardt, *Bedbug* (2018); Richard Jones, *Wasp* (2019).

[2] Simon, *Une bête entre les lignes*, 314.

[3] See P. G. W. Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), s.v.

philosopher coming out of his shower and his she-cat.[4] In a more ironical approach, the anthropologist Hugh Raffles describes two casual encounters with the big water bug, the American cockroach. Both encounters end up tragically for the bug in question:

> One night, distracted and without thinking, I swiveled around. A healthy-looking water bug was sitting on a pile of books behind my shoulder. We locked eyes. Its head extended like a turtle's. Its face was angular and inquisitive. [...], it had "the lofty brow of the philosopher." Our eyes met as in an animal movie. An understanding beyond words. But I must have moved too suddenly, and it took off and I took off after it, grabbing a broom...[5]

And the morning after:

> I was in the shower, daydreaming as usual under the soothing warm water, thoughts rambling around the chapter of this book I'm trying to finish [...] when out of nowhere, a three-inch water bug dropped from the bathroom ceiling and landed at my feet.
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> I admit it: I screamed: Wouldn't you? I shut off the water. It took a moment to get over the surprise. And then there we were, the water bug and I, trapped and defenseless and covered in soapsuds. And we both stayed very still until that very big little animal, a female animal, I noticed, climbed swiftly up onto the towel rack and stopped there at eye level a few inches away, her handsome and intelligent face cocked at a philosophical angle, giving me a funny quizzical look up and down as if amused by this unexpected situation and intrigued to see what would happen next. One of us was very calm. One of us—it was the bathroom after all—began

[4] Anna Lissa, "Introduction," in "Created from Animals: Thinking the Human/Animal Difference in Jewish and Hebrew Literature," ed. Anna Lissa, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 23, no. 1 (2023), viii-ix.
[5] Hugh Raffles, *Insectopedia* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 299.

> carefully to groom her antennae. I won't go into the details of what happened next.[6]

Consciously or not, the second scene echoes, one may be tempted to say re-enacts, Derrida's encounter—the she-water bug, the exchange of gazes—and although it ends up in a fast scene reminiscent of Sergio Leone final duels, it prompts the protagonist to a detailed observation of the bug and to the exercise of a "regard aiguisé"[7]—a sharpened look. Not unlike the exchange of gazes *à la Derrida*, this sharp look brings this insect a little closer to the human, by turning it into a being that deserves attention and observation, bestowing it depth, significance and allowing it to emerge as a potential literary subject.[8] This sharp look is indeed a feature of writers passionate about entomology as it is the case in this essay with Yitzhak Orpaz.[9]

In the following pages, I shall be dealing with insects, more specifically with ants, whose literary career is long and worthy of respect. Yet, the ants I shall be dealing with have less to do with classical literature, myth and folklore and much more to do with the practice of accurate observation, almost bordering on the field of scholarly entomological observation. These ants will not speak a human language, nor will they make an exhibition of their wisdom and prudence. Yet, the images of their pervasive swarming will resurface in the texts I shall discuss, not as the epiphany of a divine power, which has a reason and an explanation from the perspective of mythical imagination, but as the manifestation of a natural power that borders on a metaphysical dimension, while leaving the characters who observe it and have to cope with it puzzled, utterly powerless and in dismay.

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[6] Ibid., 300.

[7] Volpilhac, "Micrographies," 4.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Concerning Orpaz's detailed descriptions as a feature of his writing see Gabriel Moked, "Be-*Tzid ha-tzviyah* rav ha-merumaz min ha-ne'emar" ("In *The Hunting of the Doe* There are More Hints than Clear Words") in *Bi-zeman ha-amiti* (*In Real Time*), Moked (Tel Aviv: Ktav, 2011), 79-80, 79.

What Lies beyond Reality?—Approaches to *The Argentine Ant* and *Ants*

In the following pages, I will propose a comparative analysis of two stories: *La formica argentina* (*The Argentine Ant*, 1952) by the Italian writer Italo Calvino[10] and *Nemalim* (*Ants*, 1968) by the Israeli writer Yitzhak Awerbuch Orpaz.[11] Although no direct influence exists, since Orpaz read Calvino's story much later,[12] the stories share several elements: they are both narrated in the first person, from the point of view of the male characters, and both deal with an interaction between species—a human couple trying to cope with an invasion of ants; both plots revolve around the control of the house, a space conceived and molded by humans for their own habitation.

Calvino's *The Argentine Ant* has been written between August 1949 and April 1952 and published for the first time in 1952, and it is the first story in which the author has set aside subjects related to the Italian Resistance Movement during the Second World War.[13] The plot is simple: a couple with a baby moves into a new house in a new neighborhood on the Riviera ligure, in search of a new life and a

[10] Italo Calvino, *La formica argentina*, in *Botteghe Oscure* 10 (1952): 406-441; the story has been republished in several collections, among them in *I racconti* (Torino: Einaudi, 1958), 407-440; *La nuvola di smog* (Torino: Einaudi, 1965), 85-127; *Gli amori difficili* (Torino: Einaudi, 1970), 113-141; finally included in the edition of novels and stories *Romanzi e racconti*, 3 vols. 1991-1993, I vol. (Milano: Mondadori, 1991), 445-442, the reference text for the current essay. For a detailed editorial history and for the differences between the first and the following editions see Mario Barenghi et al., "Note e notizie sui testi," in Ibid., 1312-1315. English translation *The Argentine Ant* in Italo Calvino, *The Watcher and Other Stories*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun and William Weaver (New York: A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book-Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1971), 138-181, the English quotes will be taken from this edition.

[11] Yitzhak Orpaz, *Nemalim* (*Ants*) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1968). The story has been republished in two different collections: Orpaz, *Shalosh Novellot* (*Three Novellas*) (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1972) and Yitzhak Awerbuch Orpaz, *Laylah be-Santa Paulinah: sippurim hadashim ve- novellah Nemalim* (*A Night in Santa Paulina: New Stories and the Novella Ants*) (Tel Aviv: Gvanim, 1997), 83-159, the reference text for the current essay. English translation *Ants*, translated by David Zaraf and published in *The Iowa Review* 2, no.1 (Winter 1980): 10-57 followed by an interview Frederick Woodard, "An Interview with Yitzhak Orpaz," 57-66. In this article I shall quote the translation recently republished in Yitzhak Orpaz, *The Death of Lysanda: Two Novellas*, trans. Richard Flint and David Zaraf (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2013), 101-192. The English version of the names of the characters is also based on this translation.

[12] Gaio Sciloni, "Le formiche e... la questione ebraica," introduction to *Formiche*, by Yitzhak Orpaz (Viterbo: Edizioni Stampa Alternativa Nuovi Equilibri, 1995), 5-8, 5.

[13] Barenghi, "Note e notizie sui testi," 1312.

new beginning. They rent a house and try to take possession of it only to discover that the house is completely infested by ants, actually by a very strong species of ants that goes under the name of Argentine ant. The wife is absolutely disheartened; the baby suffers too because some ants manage to enter the cradle he is sleeping in; the husband spends the following days visiting the neighbors to try and figure out a solution to the problem. Every neighbor suggests some insecticides or traps, but nobody has an effective solution at hand, not even the agent of the society for the fight against the Argentine ant, whose remedy appears to be a failure too. Apparently, the husband discovers, the ants infest all the houses in the zone, nobody knows where they come from, nor how to get rid of them. His landlady points out that he and his family decided to rent the house at the very last minute, thus they did not give her the time to do the disinfestation. After two days, at sunset, husband and wife, faced with the impossibility to find a solution, decide to go out for a walk. Their desperation attenuates when they stop in front of the sea to admire the landscape.

The plot of Orpaz's *Ants*, written between 1964-65[14] and first published in 1968 starts with a sketch of everyday life: Jacob and Rachel have been married for some time and they live in a small flat. The smallness of the space makes them bump into each other ceaselessly, causing awkward feelings for both of them and especially for the husband. Actually, the couple is falling apart: Jacob admits that his wife avoids every contact with him. Finally, they agree to divorce. They go to see a Rabbi in order to start the procedure, but the Rabbi advises them to take some more time to reflect. In the meanwhile, they can start looking for a new house—change of place change of fortune, as the Rabbi puts it. Jacob is a construction worker and decides to build a new house and Rachel seems happy with this idea. Suddenly, he spots the first explorer ant. From then on, the invasion unfolds relentlessly. Jacob looks at the ants with mixed feelings, he admires them but at the same time he wants to fight them off. Rachel on the other side is the silent partner, almost a fifth column, in league with the ants. While the invasion is completed and the house is destroyed, Jacob and Rachel succeed in reviving their intimacy, which becomes complete precisely at the moment the house crumbles down.

[14] The dates are given by the author, see Woodard, "An Interview with Yitzhak Orpaz," 60.

The critical approaches to both *The Argentine Ant* and *Ants* in Italy and in Israel, share one point: they display a tendency to overlook the ants as such and their interaction with the human characters, and they do so precisely by stating that the descriptions of their behavior are realistic but they have a non-realistic significance that turns them into symbols or metaphors of the social, political and cultural context and problems of the time. Both stories are indeed suspended between realistic descriptions, and a more general abstract dimension involving human situations and relationships: this is the case with the misery of the family in *The Argentine Ant*, the estrangement and the distance between husband and wife in both novels, possibly a consequence of a difficult life in *The Argentine Ant*, while in *Ants* the falling apart of the couple is at the origin of the story and underlies the whole plot. Both stories lack a precise time and space framework: all the reader knows about *The Argentine Ant* is that the couple moved to a new place near the sea, the year or the period are left unsaid. As for *Ants*, there is no reference to any aspect of reality to be found outside of Jacob and Rachel's apartment. The name of the city they live in is never mentioned, the reader can imply that it is Tel Aviv; some scanty references to Jewish tradition—the Rabbi that is supposed to deal with the divorce procedure, the names of the characters and some inter-textual references to the *Bible*—reveal the Jewish identity of the protagonists.
Calvino very soon replied to his interpreters by pointing out the realistic background of the story:

> Whoever has been in the Riviera knows that there is no exaggeration in my story: the events, characters, systems for fighting against it, different attitudes toward ants, your life dominated by the ants, form part of the regular experience of my childhood. [...] So it is a realistic story, then.[15]

Indeed, the Argentine ant, whose scientific name is Linepithema humile, is a real invasive species and is listed among the household pests. It stems from the region

[15] Calvino's answer to Cesare Cases' interpretation of *The Argentine Ant* as an allegory of capitalism that pervades the life of individuals and to some British critics who "talk about Kafka." Calvino's letter to Cesare Cases is dated December 20, 1958, in Italo Calvino, *Letters 1941-1985*, selected with an introduction by Michael Wood, trans. Martin McLaughlin (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 170-171.

of the Paranà River basin, but human travels have spread it all over the world: in Europe, in a colony that extends from Liguria to Portugal, in California and in Japan. Recent research has shown that these three ant colonies are interrelated in such a way as they can be apprehended as a single super-colony.[16] These scientific findings give further substance to the argument Calvino reiterated about the story thirty years later:

> *The Argentine Ant* is not a Kafkian-oneiric story, as all the critics have always said. It is the most realistic story I have written in my life; it describes with absolute exactness the situation that came about because of the invasion of the Argentine ants into the cultivated areas of San Remo and a large swathe of the Western Riviera during my childhood, in the twenties and thirties.[17]

A real fact is, therefore, at the origin of the plot and realism is the principle that governs the narration.

However, since the novel has been published immediately after the Six Days War, it has been first ascribed political and ideological implications. The ants, specifically, have been considered a hint at the author's involvement in Israeli life after the war,[18] and a symbol or even the embodiment of the nightmare of the war and of the feeling of being under siege.[19] Afterwards, the novel has been

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[16] Alexander Wild, "Taxonomy and Distribution of the Argentine Ant, Linepithema humile," in *Annals of the Entomological Society of America* 97, no. 6 (November 2004): 1204-1215; Sunamura et al., "Intercontinental Union of Argentine Ants: Behavioral Relationships among Introduced Populations in Europe," *Insectes Sociaux* 2 (July 2009): 143-147.

[17] Italo Calvino, *Letters 1941-1985,* 529. See also Mario Barenghi, "Italo Calvino e i sentieri che s'interrompono," *Quaderni Piacentini* 15 (1984): 127-150, 131: "*La formica argentina* è il resoconto, fra scherzoso e tragico, di un'avventura onirica di sapore kafkiano."

[18] Hayyim Nagid, "The Destroyers Ants," *Masa*, May 24, 1968.

[19] Ehud Ben Ezer, "A Narrow Step," *'Al ha-Mishmar*, April 28, 1972. Yet, Orpaz rejected the interpretation of the story as a political allegory *tout court*, although he did not deny that when he wrote it there was a strong feeling of siege in Israel, see Woodard, "An Interview with Yitzhak Orpaz," 60. For further and more recent political interpretations of the story see Shimrit Peled, " 'Mastery Regained': Israeli Jewish Sovereignty and Space in three Israeli Novels 1967-1973," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 10, no. 2 (July 2011): 263-284, 273-274; Ariel Pridan, "Beyond Conflict: The Non-adversarial Aspect of Yitzhak Averbuch Orpaz's Prose Fiction," *Hebrew Studies* 62 (2021): 265-289, 270-278.

interpreted as surrealistic, with the ants considered as a trivial part of reality penetrated with a symbolic demonic force aiming at destroying the protagonist's bourgeois life[20]; it has been apprehended as a meta-realistic work, like Orpaz's fiction in general, and therefore featured by the cracking and breaking of the borders of the connections and relationships that order reality and especially by "the abolition of the usual borders separating man from animal"[21]; as a piece of experimental writing in search of new possibilities of expression with realistic descriptions of trivial matters and tiny things, ants included, that only hint at the tension between the world of sorrow and regret of the modern protagonist of a story and the careful description of meaningless things[22]; as an existentialist work with a dialectical tendency toward the fantastic as well as a tension between the realistic, detailed descriptions of reality and the search for the deep inner meaning of the same reality[23]; as an allegory of the way of a man with a virgin and at the same time of the existence of the Jewish people in the Diaspora.[24] Finally, the ants have also lent themselves to a psychoanalytic interpretation apprehending them as

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[20] Gershon Shaked, *Ha-sipporet ha-'ivrit 1880-1980* (*Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880-1980*), 5 vols. Vol. V, *Be-harbeh ashnavim be-kenisot tzdadiyot* (*Through Many Rear Doors through the Side Entrances*) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and Keter Publishing House 1998), 152, where the author comes back to this interpretation. For the bibliography of the previous interpretations underscoring this issue see Ibid., 513 n. 19. For a general evaluation of surrealism in Orpaz's works see Shaked, *Hebrew Narrative Fiction*, V, 45-53; Giulia Miller, *Reconfiguring Surrealism in Modern Hebrew Literature: Menashe Levin, Yitzhak Oren and Yitzhak Orpaz* (London-Portland: Vallentine Mitchell 2013), 1-19. Concerning surrealism and *Ants* see Giora Leshem, "Surrealizm heraqi anoshi" ("Human-Insect Surrealism"), *Moznayim* 6 (May 1982): 45-46. See also Ran Yagil, *Sefer le-'adam eḥad: Monographiyah ḥufshit* (Orpaz: A One Man Book – Free Monograph) (Tel Aviv-Yafo: Emdah, 2018).

[21] Hillel Barzel, *Sipporet 'Ivrit Metarealiztit* (*Metarealistic Hebrew Fiction*) (Ramat Gan: Masada, 1974), 100. Barzel also writes that in *Ants* Orpaz inclined toward allegory (p. 99).

[22] Gabriel Moked, "Mi-nemalim 'ad garger ha-hol" ("From the Ants up to a Grain of Sand") in *In Real Time*, Moked, 165-166.

[23] Ortzion Bartana, *Ha-fantasiah ba-sipporet dor ha-medinah* (*Fantasy in Israeli Literature in the Last Thirty Years*) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1989), 49, for an in-depth analysis of *Ants* see 162-171. See also Giora Leshem, "Lihiyot hereq lihiyot 'adam" ("To be an Insect to be a Man"), *Makor Rishon*, April 26, 2011. Accessed June 4, 2023, https://www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/app/index.php?do=blog&encr_id=7b710fc4596b25648b444722262adc013&id=1166.

[24] Yedidiah Yitzhaky, "Yizhaq Orpaz rishon le-sofre 'Dor ha-Medinah' - heleq rishon mi-tokh massah ha-maqifah 'et qol ha-sipporet shel Yitzhak Orpaz" ("Yitzhak Orpaz the First Writer of the Generation of the State: First Part of an Essay about all the Narrative Works of Yitzhak Orpaz") *Gag* 42 (2017): 50-64, 59.

an erotic symbol, because they rebuild the mutual erotic attraction between the Jacob and Rachel.[25]

A reading of both stories from the perspective of animal studies, integrated by Edward O. Wilson's idea of consilience between science and humanities,[26] can open the way to interpretations that will look at the (lack of definite) boundaries between human and animal, where species meet and even mix. with the awareness that these are also stories of the Anthropocene. Taking this consilient approach, I shall focus on the interaction between the two species, humans and ants, concerning the issue of territory or space. They are both in competition for the defense of the territory. In fact, according to basic evolutionary theories, all living organisms compete in order to survive. Survival includes mating, reproduction in the specific case of the ants, access to the resources and defense of the territory. Competition may also include conflict. Culture intervenes in the way human groups or individuals live and choose to come to terms with competition, turning it into a moderate or extreme conflict, and solving it with a mediation or with the destruction of the competitor.

The resort to the interactionist, consilient approach complements the animal studies perspective, because this Other under the form of ants is "eusocial."[27] Furthermore, from a biological point of view eusociality has proved itself a very successful survival strategy because it has given life to what has been labeled superorganisms.[28] This eusociality comes to discard the assumption that man is

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[25] Nitza Abarbanell, *Hawah we-Lilit* (*Eve and Lilith*) (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University 1994), 135-150.

[26] Lissa, "Introduction," xxi-xxii.

[27] Eusociality implies that "(1) individuals of the same species cooperate in caring for the young; (2) there is a reproductive division of labor, with more or less sterile individuals working on behalf of fecund nestmates; (3) and there is an overlap of at least two generations in life stages capable of contributing to colony labor, so that offspring assist parents during some period of their life." Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 398.

[28] Among the most detailed works concerning the superorganism there is Bert Hölldobler and Edward O. Wilson, *The Superorganism: The Beauty, Elegance, and Strangeness of Insect Societies* (New York-London: W. W. Norton-Company, 2009), whose many learned and in-depth arguments may appear a little impervious to some Humanities scholars. Thus, concerning eusociality and its success see also the more enjoyable Bert Hölldobler and Edward O. Wilson, *Journey to the Ants: A Story of Scientific Exploration* (Cambridge-Massachusetts-London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

the social animal,[29] and makes it so that characters of *The Argentine Ant* and *Ants* are not simply confronted with tiny, fragile individual ants but with a superorganism thoroughly organized and painstakingly efficient:

> The ants organize their colonies with many chemical systems like those used to transmit alarm. Their bodies, [...], are walking batteries of glands filled with semiotic compounds. When ants dispense their pheromones, singly or in combination and in varying amounts, they say to other ants, in effect: *danger, come quickly*; or *danger, disperse*; or *food, follow me*; or *there is a better nest site, follow me*; or *I am a nestmate, not an alien*; or *I am a larva*; and through a repertory of ten twenty messages, with the number differing according to caste (such as soldier or minor worker) and species. So pervasive and powerful are these codes of taste and smell that all together they bind ant colonies into a single operational unit. As a result each colony can be viewed as a superorganism, a congeries of conventional organisms acting like a single and much larger organism. The colony is a primitive semiotic web that crudely resembles a nerve net, a hundred mouthed hydra writ large.[30]

As a superorganism, the ants are endowed with an agency that allows them to destabilize and transgress "human orderings, including spatial ones."[31] As I will show below, the ants are endowed with even more agency than the human characters. As such, they can confront human beings *vis à vis* and as equals, if not as superiors in might, determination and organization.

Finally, *The Argentine Ant* and *Ants* are stories of the Anthropocene, understood as a "human-dominated, geological epoch."[32] Both plots are based on the ants invading a human-shaped space not only to (re)turn it into a natural space but also and especially to shed doubt on the real nature of this space, and in so doing they

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[29] Paul Waldau, *Animal Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 194-196.

[30] Wilson, *Consilience*, 76.

[31] Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, "Animal Spaces, Beastly Places An Introduction," in *Animal Spaces Beastly Places New Geographies of Human-animal Relations*, eds. Philo and Wilbert (London-New York: Routledge 2005 [1st edition 2000]), 1-35, 5.

[32] Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415 (January 2002): 23.

come to discard precisely the extent if not the very idea of human dominion. As for *The Argentine Ant*, it is eminently an Anthropocene story, since, as Serenella Iovino puts it, "species such as the Argentine ant are very good ambassadors for the biosphere of the Anthropocene."[33] In fact, the Argentine ants' invasion is the result of human travels and commerce.[34] Thus, Iovino reads the story as an anticipatory critique of human contamination and pollution of the environment[35] affecting the biosphere's balance, while the ants' sophisticated organization and behavior "prompts us to rethink the borders of nature and culture (and the scale of these very borders) in unprecedented ways."[36]

Defining and Circumscribing the Territory

Biology usually defines territory as "an area occupied more or less exclusively by an animal or a group of animals by means of repulsion through overt defense or advertisement."[37] Accordingly, the diagnostic feature of territory is defense of its boundaries and not its usage.[38] Territory can coincide with the home-range, "the area that an animal learns thoroughly and habitually patrols."[39] Within the home-range there can be the core-area that is the area "of heaviest regular usage."[40] In the stories I am going to discuss, the territory includes the home-range, with the kitchen and the bedroom as a core-area. In *The Argentine Ant* territory also includes a small garden annexed to the house; in *Ants* territory also includes the roof where Rachel uses to have her suntan hours.

In both stories, the issue of territory/space/house is related to the hope of a new beginning in life. The protagonist couple of *The Argentine Ant* moves to the

[33] Serenella Iovino, *Italo Calvino's Animals: Anthropocene Stories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 8. For a general approach to the issue see Jody Frawley and Iain McCalman, *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies from the Environmental Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[34] Ibid., 10-11.

[35] Ibid., 13 and 16.

[36] Ibid., 16.

[37] Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 256.

[38] Ibid., 261.

[39] Ibid., 256.

[40] Ibid.

Riviera ligure and to a new house after their baby has recovered from an unspecified illness. The husband must look for a job, but first of all the family must take possession of the house they have just rented:

> When Signora Mauro had gone, I carried the mattresses inside. My wife wasn't able to move the cupboard by herself and called me to help. Then she wanted to begin cleaning out the little kitchen at once and got down on her knees to start, but I said: "What's the point, at this hour? We'll see to that tomorrow; let's just arrange things as best we can for tonight." The baby was whimpering and very sleepy, and the first thing to do was get his basket ready and put him to bed. At home we use a long basket for babies, and had brought one with us here; we emptied out the linen with which we'd filled it, and found a good place on a shelf, where it wasn't damp or too far off the ground should it fall.
>
> Our son went to sleep, and my wife and I began looking over our new home (one room divided in two by a partition—four walls and a roof), which was already showing signs of our occupation.[41]

The process of the appropriation of the territory has started. The lady's decision to start cleaning the kitchen and the search for a proper place for the baby are signs that the core-area of the territory has been defined. Order is imposed upon this territory to turn it into an anthropized space, namely into a proper home fit for human living. The process continues with the garden:

> I wanted to take a turn over the surrounding plot; for *our house* [emphasis mine] stood on a piece of land consisting of two large flower, o rather rough seed beds, with a path down the middle covered with an iron trellis, [...]. Signora Mauro had said she would let me have this plot to cultivate as a kitchen garden, [...].
>
> My intention now, by this first evening's walk of ours around the plot, was to acquire a sense of familiarity with the place, *even of ownership in a*

[41] Calvino, *The Argentine Ant*, 83. In the Italian text there is no mention of a "window ledge," I have thus replaced it with shelf.

> *way* [emphasis mine]; for the first time in our lives the idea of continuity seemed possible, of walking evening after evening among beds of seed *as our circumstances gradually improved* [emphasis mine].[42]

For the first time, the husband calls the house "our house." The process of taking possession of the territory continues and the stroll in the garden can be paralleled with the patrolling of the territory.

In Orpaz's novel, the house is already fit for human living. The home-range, the apartment, the core-area, kitchen and bedroom, and the roof as the rest of the territory are already defined:

> Our apartment was small, on the top floor of an old house, with a small living room and a hall. The hall led into the main room, the main room lead into a tiny kitchen, the tiny kitchen into a very small washroom, where the shower—there is no bathtub—and the toilet stand close together. All the doors run in a straight line from the door to the roof.[43]

Apartments under the roof are usual in Orpaz's literary production, stressing the search for a detachment from everyday reality and the will to keep moderately in touch with this very same reality.[44] Jacob and Rachel must live together in this small space although the enterprise is proving itself difficult:

> We can't help bumping into each other again and again. It's embarrassing. When we were first married Rachel would giggle and then escape. Now she scratches, not ungracefully, under her arm, between her breasts, or just above her belly.[45]

Jacob and Rachel try to keep what the biologists call individual distance "the compromise struck by animals that are both attracted to other members of their

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[42] Ibid., 144.
[43] Orpaz, *Ants*, 105.
[44] Moked, "Triptiqon hadshani shel Yitzhaq Orpaz" ("An Innovative Tripticon of Yitzhak Orpaz"), in *Moked, In Real Time*, 127-130, 127.
[45] Orpaz, *Ants*, 105.

own species and repelled by them at short distance."[46] The concept can be applied to humans too and it is culturally defined, for example Mediterranean people can stand shorter individual distances than northern-European peoples.[47] Rachel, anyway, seems to be an exception for she cannot stand being too near to her husband in their own apartment. The smallness of the flat and the short distances are among the reasons that have brought Jacob and Rachel on the verge of divorce. The stability of the couple is somehow connected to the flat. Thus, they both accept the Rabbi's suggestion to build a new house.
In both novels, the couples seem to be at the start of a pathway that should bring them into a new life. All of a sudden, the programs are subverted.

...And Then Come the Ants

The ants are mentioned in the very first lines of *The Argentine Ant*. Nonetheless, the husband and the wife do not pay attention to their mention, nor do they worry when the first evening by having their first stroll in their garden they notice that one of their neighbors is pouring insecticide out in his garden. In *Ants*, the ants are a disembodied presage materializing on Rachel's body from the very first pages of the novel:

> While she was answering the rabbi, she rubbed under her breast, with her long, beautiful fingers, as though she had an itch. After we left the rabbi's office, I asked her why she had made such a rude gesture in his presence. She had felt, she said, as though ants were crawling over her body.[48]

In both stories, the husbands act in order to protect the wives and in fact their whole family: Jacob wants to rebuild his connection to the estranged Rachel and the husband wants to protect his wife and baby from the ants. This is not an unusual behavior because in the animal kingdom there exist "close connections

[46] Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 257.
[47] Ibid., 259.
[48] Orpaz, *Ants*, 104.

[...] between territorial aggressive display and courtship."[49] In *Ants*, Rachel, the flat and the ants form a triangle: she first feels them on her body, then she says that "the house is crawling,"[50] later on Jacob himself states that he has "eradicated the enemy from inside it [the flat]."[51] To confirm the connection between the flat and his wife, he ultimately admits: "Any foreign body between my wife and myself was hateful to me. Inside me, in my mind, I always spilled their blood out of jealousy. Surely it was this that had made me rise to wage war so uncompromisingly against the black ant?"[52]

In both stories, the ants appear at night. In *The Argentine Ant*, they reveal themselves in the core area of the house, when the wife goes to the kitchen to get a glass of water and she first sees them in the kitchen sink:

> My wife went to the washbasin for a glass of water. "Bring me one too," I called, [...].
> "Oh!" she screamed. "Come here!" She had seen ants on the faucet and a stream of them coming up the wall."
> We put on the light, a single bulb for the two rooms. The stream of ants on the wall was very thick; they were coming from the top of the door, and might originate anywhere.[53]

Immediately after having seen the ants, the husband tries to calm his wife down and to protect their baby, who had been attacked that very night:

> But in the middle of the night the baby cried; [...] we began asking ourselves: "What can be the matter? What's wrong with him?" [...].
> "He's covered with ants!" cried my wife, who had gone and taken him in her arms. [...]. We turned the whole basket upside down and undressed the baby completely. To get enough light for picking the ants off. [...]. It

[49] Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 261.
[50] Orpaz, *Ants*, 105.
[51] Orpaz, *Nemalim*, 102 (my own translation from Hebrew).
[52] Orpaz, *Ants*, 144.
[53] Calvino, *The Argentine Ant*, 146.

> was pitiable looking for ants on that skin which reddened as soon as it was rubbed.[54]

In *Ants*, the grey ants also appear at night for the first time and, consistent with the first presage, on Rachel's body:

> Behind me, from the bed, there came noises of rustling and creaking. I turned my head and what did I see? My wife Rachel, with her eyes closed, throwing her head from side to side, her nostrils trembling, her thighs twitching, and her feet kicking. What has shaken her body so, what has taken it out of its glorious iciness?
> A little ant, it seems, but full of energy; it had emerged from a fold in the sheet and onto the lower end of the curve of my wife Rachel's thigh. It climbed fast along the delicate curve and stopped there for a moment to raise its head and rub its antennae one against the other. I looked at the uncovered, sleeping bit of thigh where the ant had crossed, and an evil feeling welled up in my eyes and heart. For thirteen years I have constructed houses, hundreds of floors, thousands of tons of building material, and I have never succeeded in exciting my wife the way a little ant can.[55]

Both passages deserve to be read in parallel, because they show how the attack is immediately and tactically brought against the most precious and defenseless beings especially in the case of the baby. Furthermore, the attack is not directed to the (re)conquest of the space but it is first and foremost brought on the bodies of the characters, immediately blurring the basic boundaries between human and animal: "Our hands were now covered with them, and we held them out open in front of our eyes, trying to see exactly what they were like, these ants, moving our wrists all the time to prevent them from crawling up our arms."[56]
In both stories. the protagonists are puzzled about where the ants come from. The very night he has discovered the tiny ant on Rachel's body, Jacob notices a trail of

[54] Ibid., 147-148.
[55] Orpaz, *Ants*, 107-108.
[56] Calvino, *The Argentine Ant*, 146.

grey ants on the roof of his flat "marching in slow procession to the front door."[57] In *The Argentine Ant*, they are already everywhere, and the husband reflects *en passant* on a substantial fact: " *They were there before*, too, and *we didn't see them*! [emphasis mine]"—as if things would have been very different if we had seen them before."[58]

This statement expresses a natural fact entomologists are familiar with, since the first fossils of ur-ants date back between 112 to 90 millions of years ago, that is the middle Cretaceous.[59] In this sense, it also makes an essential point clear: however anthropized the house, or the flat, they will never fully belong to humans as much as they belonged, belong and will belong to nature and therefore the ants. Finally, the fact of existing in the past and in the future also reminds Derrida's meditation about the animals were with the humans.[60] Having been there long before, the ants in *The Argentine Ant* the ants destroy the hope in a better future: "We hadn't the pleasure now of feeling we were starting a new life, only a sense of dragging on into a future full of new troubles."[61] In *Ants*, the ants *are* the future, as Rachel implies, after Jacob announces his tactical victory:

> In light of my achievement there was, to say the least, something odd about my wife's reaction, she who had been dozing in the sun most of the day:
> "Are you absolutely sure there aren't any left?" [...].
> After all, it was obvious that they would seek new burrows after I had uprooted them from their old homes. That, at any rate, was something I could count as a success. A definite tactical victory.
> I told Rachel so; she only nodded.[62]

[57] Ibid., 108.
[58] Ibid., 147.
[59] In chapter 6 of Hölldobler and Wilson, *Journey to the Ants*, "The Ur-Ants,", 75-84, 77, 79 and 205; "Ants have lived on Earth for more than ten million of their generations; we have existed for no more than a hundred thousand human generations."
[60] Lissa, "Introduction," viii.
[61] Calvino, *The Argentine Ant*, 147.
[62] Orpaz, *Ants*, 118.

In *The Argentine Ant*, the struggle in the name of the defense of the territory starts in the morning after their discovery: "We were very soon up, nagged by the thought of [...] having to start an immediate battle against the persistent imperceptible enemy which had taken over our home."[63] In *Ants*, the phases of the battle go on in a kind of crescendo: the day after the sighting of the first ant remains uneventful. The night after, however, Jacob wakes up because of a strange noise coming from inside the walls: "A kind of growling or dripping from deep down, but drier, like stones rolling, but duller." [64] He gets up, goes to the bathroom, and spots the grey ants dismembering a half-dead cockroach, and yet the ants "are careful about cleaning up the battlefield. By tomorrow, nothing will be left of them nor of that glorious creature they have dismembered."[65] The day after, coming back from work Jacob finds Rachel crying in the kitchen:

> A long, dense stream of ants stretched from the cup to the tiled part of the wall—with barely an opening in the wall to be seen. They marched in multi-lane processions, an army of stippled lines, and they filled the bottom of the cup.[66]

The morning after, Jacob does not go to work and begins the fight by trying to exterminate the ants with boiling water. During this first battle he cannot help but admiring the power, the organization and the extreme sense of duty of the single parts of the superorganism: "I cannot help but confess that here and there my higher order of intelligence was impressed by their lower."[67] He spends also the next two days in battling the ants with poisons and by filling gaps and cracks so that any access to their nest would be blocked. The day after, the fight begins once again and since the ants seem to like the honey Rachel has a sweet tooth for, Jacob prepares traps with honey jars encircled by water, so that "the formic launching pad [would be] thus confined to the ceiling only." Futhermore "the indirect route was daring (a jump into space) and clever (circumventing an obstacle), which—

[63] Calvino, *The Argentine Ant*, 149.
[64] Orpaz, *Ants*, 111.
[65] Ibid., 115.
[66] Ibid., 116.
[67] Ibid., 117.

probably—only the strong would attempt, so that the elite of the race would be annihilated."[68] The battle against the tiny, grey ants is won, they all lie dead in the honey jars, but a few minutes afterwards:

> My wife's laughter turned to silence. She withdrew her feet from me, withdrew them and enfolded them within her gown, and her pure white gown danced where her feet had been kicking in excitement. What had excited her feet?
> "Ants." I heard my own frightened answer, and I looked around.
> The honey jars were again crawling with life. Bridges of live ants spanned the moats, a raft of live ants holding each other by means of their mandibles. And black, very quick ants, the likes of which I had not yet seen in our house, were galloping across.[69]

This is a new race of very powerful ants—Jacob labels them "the bronze ant"[70]—that will prove to be unstoppable. Nonetheless, Jacob will find a connection to these ants, while for the gray ants he felt nothing but disgust. While the plot unfolds, the flat is progressively turned into a sort of anthill with a lot of cracks in the walls and Rachel starts decorating them:

> What decorating means in a building where the walls are cracked and crumbling and fine dust sifts from them all over the place is hard to say. Perhaps we had better call it *rearranging* of the house [in the original *siddur ha-bayit*]—an attempt to make it look suitable for its new state of being, the reality of the ants.[71]

At this almost final stage, the flat is not a flat anymore nor is it simply an anthill. The change the black ants bring about in Orpaz's novel is more radical than in *The Argentine Ant*, because they change the ontological reality of the flat, while Rachel

[68] Ibid., 123.
[69] Ibid., 127.
[70] Ibid., 128.
[71] Orpaz, *Ants*, 133.

and Jacob plunge progressively in a kind of liminal dimension that stands between dream and wakefulness outside of time, where human and animal mix and mingle. In *The Argentine Ant*, it becomes progressively clear that the territory does not really belong to its legal human tenant or landlady, nor will it be easily turned into a human space fit to live in. In fact, later, in broad daylight the house and the garden reveal their real nature:

> The more I looked, the more new ways I discovered by which the ants came and went. Our new home, although it looked so smooth and solid on the surface, was in fact porous and honeycombed with cracks and holes.[72]

As a matter of fact, the house has the appearance of an anthill. While examining the garden in full daylight, the husband discovers that in the whole "piece of ground, which had seemed so small yesterday but now appeared enormous in relation to the ants, the insects formed an uninterrupted veil, issuing from what must be thousands of underground nests and feeding on the thick sticky soil and the low vegetation"[73] The ants are part and parcel of the territory that resists every human attempt of transformation. Furthermore, the husband perceives them as different from the other sorts of ants:

> If he had mentioned ants, as perhaps he had [...] we would have imagined ourselves up against a concrete enemy that could be numbered, weighed, crushed. Actually, now I think about the ants in our own parts, I remember them as reasonable little creatures, which could be touched and moved like cats or rabbits. Here we were face to face with an enemy like fog or sand, against which force was useless.[74]

The Argentine ant is thus a peculiar species through which all the potentiality of the superorganism materialize themselves. There can be no communication whatsoever, no exchange of gazes, between the human characters and this

[72] Calvino, *The Argentine Ant*, 149-150.
[73] Ibid., 150.
[74] Ibid., 151.

disembodied enemy. The otherness of the ants is transmitted to the territory they inhabit, which is apparently a human space with houses and gardens but as a matter of fact, human presence is only superficial because the whole territory, houses included, is an enormous anthill. From then on, the whole perspective of the novel is turned upside down, legitimating the reader to think that the humans are in the process of being turned into the actual invaders.

The husband describes the various strategies his neighbors are adopting against the ants, not without an ironic tone. Ostensibly, poisons and traps are useless.[75] In the evening, however, he observes his neighbors having their dinner or enjoying a cup of coffee after dinner while placidly ignoring, or feigning to ignore, the ants. The husband appears very dispirited by this attitude, that stands somewhere halfway between some sort of ancestral Mediterranean fatalism and adaptation.

The Reversal of Perspectives: Between Symbiosis and Hybridity

Faced with the perspective of living in an anthill, or in a flat whose ontological reality has been altered, the protagonists are confronted with different possibilities of getting along with their lives. In *The Argentine Ant*, Signora Mauro and Signor Baudino embody two different alternatives: feigning to ignore the ants while living in some kind of symbiosis with them or becoming an ant, that is hybridity. While dealing with Signora Mauro, the husband catches a glimpse of a life in symbiosis with the ants and gets an idea of the surrealistic implications. Biology defines symbiosis "as the prolonged and intimate relationship of organisms belonging to different species,"[76] a relationship that can involve even two societies and that has not necessarily only negative outcomes, in fact it may even result in mutual advantages, although this is not the case in *The Argentine Ant*.

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[75] Very acutely Serenella Iovino point out that the names of the poisons "sound like a blend of mythology and hexing rituals." Iovino, *Italo Calvino's Animals*, 12.

[76] For the complete definition see Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 353: "Symbiosis, [...], is conventionally illustrated in the biological literature by interactions of pair of organisms. But many other cases are known of individuals that enter symbiosis with societies, and even symbiosis between entire societies." There are several kinds of symbiosis, the relevant one in the context of this article is "social parasitism: one species benefits, the other suffers. [...]. *Xenobiosis*: one species nests close or within the nests of another and begs food from it." Ibid., 354

Signora Mauro is the rich landlady who has rented the house to the family, she lives in a villa nearby high on a hill, from which one could look at the infested houses from above and from far away, at least apparently:

> And standing up there we could forget that all those places were black with ants; now we could see how they might have been without that menace which none of us could get away from even an instant. At this distance it looked almost like a paradise, but the more we gazed down the more we pitied our life there, as if living in that wretched narrow valley we could never get away from our wretched narrow problems.[77]

There is clearly no hope to get away from the ants that become the materialization of nature's overwhelming and blind power, whose origins remain unaccounted for. Accordingly, Signora Mauro appears as the embodiment of a superior power whose logic remains mysterious and standing on the edge of absurd—one would be tempted to use the word Kafkaesque if Calvino himself had not dismissed this approach.[78] In this capacity, she answers to the wretched couple: "Keep the house clean and dig away the ground. There is no other remedy. Work, just work."[79] If related to the situation in point, the advice is practical and sensible, if interpreted metaphorically it indicates that man's confrontation with nature is ceaseless and Sisyphean. The only viable solution is to try and struggle to survive day by day. Furthermore, the distance gives only an illusion of immunity to the invasion and accordingly Signora Mauro is only apparently immune to ants:

> "Don't they breed up here too?" asked my wife, almost smiling.
> "No, not here!" said Signora Mauro, going pale, then, still holding her right arm against the side of the chair, she began making a little rotating movement of the shoulder and rubbing her elbow against her ribs.
> It occurred to me that the darkness, the ornaments, the size of the room, and her proud spirit were this woman's defenses against the ants, the reason why she was stronger than we were in face of them; but that

[77] Calvino, *The Argentine Ant*, 172.
[78] See above, 68.
[79] Calvino, *The Argentine Ant*, 175.

> everything we saw around us, beginning with her sitting there, was covered with ants even more pitiless than ours; some kind of African termite, perhaps, which destroyed everything and left only the husks, so that all that remained of this house were tapestries and curtains almost in powder, all on the point of crumbling before her eyes.[80]

Denial offers a possibility of survival that is, anyway, embedded with the fact of living in symbiosis with the ants, having them on the body, and while this happens, they are even turned into the more dangerous and invasive African termite. From this perspective, Signora Mauro loses the aura of a superior being to find herself projected in the same restless and endless struggle as the other characters. On the other side, through her denial of living in symbiosis with the ants, Signora Mauro shifts the balance of the story from realism to surrealism, the kind that gives an uncanny feeling to the reader.

In a similar move, with Signor Baudino, Calvino takes another step further away from realism. This character embodies the alternative to symbiosis that is some kind of hybridization, becoming an ant, or something that stands between the human and the ant. Biology currently defines the hybrid as the offspring resulting from the mating of parents (animals and plants) belonging to different species. Hybridization contributes to gene flow that is a factor producing microevolution "which is evolution in its slightest, most elemental form."[81] Although relatively rare, interspecific hybridization can prove itself more effective per generation "because of the larger number of gene differences that normally separate species."[82] This, however, does not fully apply to Signor Baudino: he is "the ant man," [83]—in the original Italian "l'uomo della formica"[84]—as the neighborhood calls him, with the double interpretation of the label as "the man who deals with ants"—he is the representative of the society for the fight against the Argentine ant—or an uncanny hybrid and eventually a potential accomplice, even a "fifth column" of the ants:

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[80] Ibid., 174-175.
[81] Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 64.
[82] Ibid., 66.
[83] Calvino, *La formica argentina*, 167.
[84] Ibid., 464.

> If I describe Signor Baudino in such detail, it's to try to define the strange impression that he made on us; [...]. Watching him like that, I realized why he had made such a strange impression on me at first sight: he looked like an ant. It's difficult to tell exactly why, but he certainly did; perhaps it was because of the dull black of his clothes and hair, perhaps because of the proportions of that squat body of his, or the trembling corners of his mouth corresponding to the continuous quiver of antennae and claws. There was however, one characteristic of the ant which he did not have. And that was their continuous busy movement. Signor Baudino moved slowly and awkwardly.[85]

Like Signora Mauro's symbiosis, Signor Baudino as a hybrid gives the story a turn toward the fantastic, especially if we understand the fantastic as a genre in Tzvetan Todorov's definition: as the hesitation, the doubt felt by someone who only knows natural laws and finds him/herself faced with a fact that apparently has no natural explanation. Hesitation, always in Todorov's formulation, must involve the reader and the character in a way that turns doubt into one of the subjects of the work and that excludes allegorical interpretation.[86] In a review published on August 15, 1970 of the Todorov's essay above mentioned, Calvino made two remarks about the fantastic that are relevant for my analysis. I shall here focus on the first one, and I will discuss the second one below.[87] Calvino pointed out that the fantastic in the twentieth century becomes an intellectual engagement, as a game, irony, hint or even a meditation about the deepest human desires, without seeking an emotional reaction from the reader as nineteenth century fantastic literature used to.[88]

Indeed, in *The Argentine Ant* Signor Baudino's hybridization remains a hint, perhaps only an impression of the husband or a neighborhood's slander. In fact,

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[85] Calvino, *The Argentine Ant*, 169-170.

[86] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated from the French by Richard Howard (Cleveland-London: The Press of Case Western University, 1973 [1st ed. 1970]), 25 and 33.

[87] See below, 92-93.

[88] Italo Calvino, "Definizione di territori: il fantastico," in *Saggi 1945-1985*, Calvino, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1995) 2 vols., I vol., 266-268, 267.

only for a tiny moment the reader has the impression that Signor Baudino's description complies with the definition of fantastic literary hybrids as beings whose bodies are composed of different anatomical parts and whose physical appearance is not normal.[89] Signor Baudino's hybridization is as uncanny as the symbiosis, because it implies a contradiction inherent to his very nature: he shares some physical features with the ants, but he is not endowed with their main virtue, industriousness. At the same time, he is human, and he is supposed to work in order to eradicate the Argentine ant. Actually, the remedy he proposes is the only one that has a real scientific foundation: feeding the ants with a kind of sweet, poisoned syrup the workers bring into the anthill and give to the queen so that the queen herself will die bringing about the extinction of the whole anthill. Nonetheless, the neighborhood accuses him of feeding them in order to keep them healthy and alive.

The tension and the suspects reach their zenith when an ant enters the ear of the baby of the couple, right after the visit of Signor Baudino:

> Even before we reached the house we heard him crying. [...]. An ant had got into his ear; [...]. My wife has said at once: "It must be an ant!" but I could not understand why he went on crying so, as we could find no ants on him or any signs of bites or irritation, and we'd undressed and carefully inspected him. We found some in the basket, however; I'd done my very best to isolate it properly, but we had overlooked the ant man's molasses—one of the clumsy streaks made by Signor Baudino seemed to have been put down on purpose to attract the insects up from the floor to the child's cot.[90]

Signor Baudino's clumsiness reassures the reader with a rational explanation for the cot's invasion being only an accident, but on the other side it also leaves a tiny place to a shadow of doubt. Signora Mauro and Signor Baudino do not fully belong to reality, they are ambiguous characters, useless at best but possibly even

[89] Claude-Claire Kappler, *Monstres, démons et merveilles à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris: Payot, 1999 [1st ed. 1980]), 147.

[90] Ibid., 175. For an interpretation of the scene in relation to the Anthropocene see Iovino, *Italo Calvino's Animals*, 12.

malevolent, unexplained and inexplicable, beyond logical understanding just as the ants' invasion is. There is no escape from the scourge, only a temporary relief on the seashore.

In *Ants*, Jacob manages to find a connection with the "bronze ants" and through them with his wife. These bronze ants stand halfway between the realistic description of their behavior in the destruction of the flat and the Biblical intertextual references through which their features and might are described. What's more, Jacob admires them and is impressed by them.

The Biblical text is implied and even embroidered in the whole plot of the novel, starting from the names of Jacob and Rachel, husband and wife, and Bilha, the neighbor, friend and servant of Rachel.[91] This intertextual relation, crossed with a metaphoric interpretation of the flat as a national metaphor converges toward a political interpretation of the whole text. However, coming back to Orpaz's words the perspective changes:

> All my childhood and youth, I was fascinated with ants ... I remember at least a couple of passages in the Bible: first in a parable in the Old Testament. It says go to the ants, learn her ways and be wise. Now I read the Bible very early—at four, five or six—and those things had a great effect on me. And then I began to see the ants and I began to look at how they live how they work. Then another place in the Bible, I came across the description by one of the prophets of a plague that will come. He describes not the ants but ... [...]. Locusts ... I didn't see the locusts but I saw the ants. And as I worked on the piece when I described the ants, I felt the ants were a kind of locusts, the same tribe.[92]

Through Orpaz's words, the ants themselves appear as a hybrid, they are virtuous and industrious as ants are supposed to be (*Proverbs* 6:6) on the one side, and like locusts plaguing the Land on the other side on the basis of *Joel* 1: 4 and 6,[93] that

[91] *Genesis*: 29-30.

[92] Woodard, "An Interview with Yitzhak Orpaz," 57.

[93] "4. That which the palmer-worm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the canker-worm eaten; and that which the canker-worm hath left hath the caterpillar

parallels locusts and other insects plague to the Assyrian invasion of the Land of Israel. In fact, every Shabbat evening Jacob reads passages from the Book of Books, that is the *Bible*, and the passages Rachel loves the most are taken from *Joel*, especially 1: 6, that expresses the premonition of the ants' invasion. Moreover, the black ants have, in Rachel's phrasing, "dragon's teeth,"[94] a reference to *Proverbs* 30: 14.[95] To this must be added one further parallel, at the peak of the invasion the ants resemble some divine horses:

> Let me try to describe in all its beauty the head of the bronze ant. Its shape is oval. It rises and swells from the place where it is joined to the dorsal segment, in a smooth, strong line, gleaming like hammered, beaten steel, graceful in its broad curve, storing strength in silence, resting in its energy, and suddenly, out of the stillness of the restrained strength, a free flow of slanting lines, convex, severe, bursts forth powerful, and encloses the mandibles. It is a head that stretches in battle like a horse's neck, gleaming in the light like a mane. [...].
> Hell! I meant to describe an ant and have instead described a kind of divine horse.[96]

The horses raging though the land in all their might and fury, are described in *Joel* 2: 4-10, quoted at the end of chapter XIII of the novel.[97] These hybrid ants/locusts/horses appear as the epiphany of a divine power in their unstoppable swarming, a divine power that has his roots in the Biblical text understood in the context of the novel not as the source of the word of the unique God, but as a text delving more deeply in the past, when polytheism was dominant in the Ancient Middle East.

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eaten. [...]. 6. For a people is come up upon my land, mighty, and without number; his teeth are the teeth of a lion, and he hath the jaw-teeth of a lioness." English translation: accessed June 4, 2023, https://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt1401.htm.

[94] Orpaz, *Ants*, 120.

[95] "There is a generation whose teeth are as swords, and their great teeth as knives." English translation: accessed June 4, 2023, https://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt2830.htm.

[96] Orpaz, *Ants*, 181.

[97] Ibid., 186.

The association between hybridity and polytheism also allows us to understand Rachel's character who, as many other Orpaz's female characters, appears as a distant polytheist goddess, more precisely as a goddess of the ants. In fact, she has been in connection with them from the very beginning of the story: her body, the flat with its walls and the black ants make but one thing. The tiny grey ants Jacob destroys in the first part of the novel are but a game to Rachel and a harbinger of the black ants. While the plot unfolds, she transforms herself: she eats honey, and she also feeds the ants with it. She starts wearing a dress made by a black net creating the illusion that her body is ceaselessly covered by swarming ants:

> The white of her skin peeped innocent and pure through the little squares of the black netting that covered her body. [...].
> Even the netting in her skin, which she had pulled on like a stocking from the soles of her feet up to her shoulders, had become a manifesto of insult and treason. Ants by dozen scurried between the threads of the net that barred her so painfully desired body from me, her husband.[98]

The intermingling between Rachel and the ants goes even beyond hybridization: she is the superorganism and the superorganism is her and she feels the changes it makes to the walls of the flat:

> As the walls began to swell, her half-asleep, devout-dreamy mood changed into a kind of strange nightmarish vitality; [...]. Her flesh seemed to awake to life, but not to me. She would bolt without warning, as if she was having a fit, as if she was being stung or tickled by those ants who were strolling through the thousands of gateways of her black netting with a familiarity that made me jealous.[99]

When Jacob joins Rachel in the religious worship of the wooden figure, he has been carving for her—a man at first, then a horse but finally an ant—their intimacy is renewed and cemented:

[98] Ibid., 172.
[99] Ibid., 173.

> "It is an ant," my wife said. And I saw it was truly an ant.
> Her eyes glowed and deepened. The slits of pupils widened and exuded the honey of mercy as she went down on her knees and placed my broad, rough hand, the hand that had worked the wood onto her forehead. Her eyes were on the dark wooden sculpture and she intoned: "Pray!" I murmured something. Rachel slowly rose from her knees, pulled a thread out of the netting she wore, and used it to tie the ant sculpture to the cord of the unlit lamp above her headboard of our bed, so that the proud, magnificent face of the ant would never stop looking aslant the place where we were to celebrate our ultimate union.[100]

It is not only that Rachel is one with the black ants. In fact, the black ants become the connection between Rachel and Jacob. This ultimate union, celebrated in the presence of the ant-idol brings them back to a primeval, Edenic condition—"We were both naked and without any shame"[101]—a prelude to the final scene where Jacob and Rachel are wrapped together while the house breaks down and in a sort of *cupio dissolvi* they find themselves finally happy.

This going back to the Edenic condition deserves a few final remarks, since it also implies going out of history and of anthropized space in order to be projected in a primeval scene to be partaken with plants and animals in equal measure. Indeed, the animals have been with the couple all along because, beyond the invasion of the ants, in the novel each and every character has his/her own animal double or some animal features: Bilha in Jacob's eyes is but a beetle,[102] Rachel and Bilha "would drag out their wailing laughter like cats,"[103] Rachel is "like a tigress that is weaned and suddenly feels the strength of her teeth,"[104] Jacob's contractor is a Mister Kerzenbaum,[105] with a mix of Hebrew *kartzit*, tick, and German *Baum*, tree, that is the tree of ticks. Jacob and Rachel's flat has always been filled with animals, the ants only helped to reveal its authentic nature.

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[100] Ibid., 185.
[101] Ibid., 186. For the Biblical intertextual reference see *Genesis* 2:25.
[102] Ibid., 145.
[103] Ibid., 131. I have emended the English translation "like cars," undoubtedly a misprint, with "like cats," to respect the original Hebrew "*ke-hatulot*," Orpaz, *Nemalim*, 107.
[104] Ibid., 173.
[105] Ibid., 154.

Finally, like in *The Argentine Ant*, outside of the flat, a little far away, there is the sea Jacob and Rachel look at from their windows.

Conclusion: Looking at the Sea

The parallel reading of these two novels, conceived by different authors, who, I repeat, did not know of each other's work, is highly significant. There is no arguing with Gaio Sciloni's remark that Orpaz's ants are so very Jewish,[106] but at the same time approaching both texts from the point of view of animal studies and biology, myrmecology in this specific case, allows a reading that keeps together cultural specificity and a general discussion about what it means to be human, to be Other, to be animal, enhancing the connections between them, stressing the fact that, as the ecologists put it so often, everything is connected. Which brings about a reflection about the idea of nature.

Apparently, Jacob and Rachel can only be happy after, with the help of the ants, they left behind their former selves to go back, or perhaps to move forward—and here Derrida's insight about the animals being there before and after resurfaces again—to a new Edenic condition outside of history but in connection with the animals that therefore they also are, waiting for a disembodied voice, whose origin and sound remain unknown. Orpaz's idea of nature reveals on the one side a disenchanted approach to and description of a natural fact such as a case of ants' invasion and on the other side a narration of the invasion mediated by mixing Biblical intertextuality and the references to polytheism. There remains, however, an in-depth hard core of reality that cannot be explained and at the same time a striving for an undefinable metaphysical dimension. Hence the mysterious disembodied voice, while the other possible escape is the far away sea Jacob and Rachel can see from the windows of their flat. Yet, there is no possibility to get out of the flat and go to the sea.

In a similar way, and yet with deeper implications, the sea appears at the end of *The Argentine Ant*:

[106] Sciloni, "Le formiche e... la questione ebraica," 6.

> The sea rose and fell against the rocks of the mole, making the fishing boats sway, [...]. The water was calm, with just a slight continual change of color, blue and black, darker and farthest away. I thought of the expanses of water like this, of the infinite grains of soft and sand down there at the bottom of the sea where the currents leave white shells washed clean by the waves.[107]

The sea is a possible and yet only temporary escape, just like in Eugenio Montale's poem "Meriggiare pallido e assorto" (1916-1922), "sea scales" "scaglie di mare" throbbing between the branches far-off in a pale and arid afternoon suggest a possible relief from an otherwise unexplained "male di vivere." In the same poem the "male di vivere" is embodied by red ants: "In the cracked earth or in the vetch, / watch the red ants' files/ now breaking up, now meeting/ on top of little piles."[108] While in Orpaz's works there is a striving for a metaphysical dimension that may lay beyond reality and nature, in *The Argentine Ant* Calvino formulates his idea of nature that excludes every metaphysical dimension and is focused on its blind cruelty:

> [*The Argentine Ant*] proposes a definition of *nature* and man's attitude toward it. ... I am interested above all in how we consider nature, which is much more important than any capitalism or other passing epiphenomena; but to our eyes nature presents herself as a mirror of history, in it we find the same cruel, monstrous reality that we find in the times in which we live (capitalism, imperialism, Nazism, the Cold War).[109]

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[107] Calvino, *The Argentine Ant*, 180-181.

[108] English translation: Eugenio Montale, *Collected Poems 1920-1954*, Bilingual edition translated and annotated by Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1998), 41. See also the original Italian: Eugenio Montale, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. Giorgio Zampa (Milano: Mondadori, 2000), 30: "Nelle crepe del suolo o su la veccia/ spiar le file di rosse formiche/ ch'ora si rompono ed ora s'intrecciano/ a sommo di minuscole biche." For the composition years of the poem see "Nota ai testi," in Ibid., 1061-1062.

[109] Calvino, *Letters 1941-1985*, 171. See also Serenella Iovino's discussion about this passage in quoted in Iovino, *Italo Calvino's Animals*, 9-10.

Calvino considers himself as someone who believes "in a relation of man-to-reality (reality understood in its complete sense, **nature** plus history."[110] Both quotes clarify why he considered *The Argentine Ant* a realistic story, since for him realism is a way to reflect about nature and history, whose main feature is cruelty. This brings about Calvino's second remark about the fantastic in his own works[111] and the passage deserves to be quoted in full:

> For me at the centre of narration there is not the explanation of an extraordinary fact, instead there is the *order* that stems from this extraordinary fact in itself and around it, the pattern, the symmetry, the network of images settling around it as it happens in the process of crystal formation.[112]

The ants' invasion and human suffering it brings about cannot be explained in full, but they establish an order, because in the end the whole neighborhood is absorbed in the fight against the ants with different approaches and methodology. Yet, this order remains the result of nature's blind cruelty. Calvino's appraisal of nature and its cruelty cannot but remind the reader of the "Dialogo della natura e di un islandese" from the *Operette morali* of Giacomo Leopardi, and especially Nature's answer to the Icelander's complaint:

> Did you ever think then that the world was made for you? It is time for you to know that in my designs, operations, and decrees, with very few exceptions, I never paid attention to the happiness or unhappiness of man. If in any possible way I make you suffer, I am unaware of the fact, with very few exceptions; in the same way, normally, I do not know whether I give you pleasure or prosperity. Furthermore, I did not do any such things nor actions, as you incline to believe, to please you or to help you. *Finally,*

[110] Ibid., 123.
[111] See above, 85.
[112] Calvino, "Definizione di territori: il fantastico," 267 (my own translation).

> *should I ever by any chance happen to cause the extinction of your species, I would not even notice* [emphasis mine].[113]

A philosophical idea of nature that is indebted to Lucretius *De rerum natura*, but also, nowadays, a warning we should all keep in mind.

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[113] Giacomo Leopardi, "Dialogo della natura e di un islandese," in *Poesie e prose*, ed. Rolando Damiani, vol. 2 (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1988), 76-83, 81 (my own translation): "Immaginavi tu forse che il mondo fosse fatto per causa vostra? Ora sappi che nelle fatture, negli ordini e nelle operazioni mie, trattone pochissime, sempre ebbi ed ho l'intenzione a tutt'altro, che alla felicità degli uomini o all'infelicità. Quando io v'offendo in qualunque modo e con qual si sia mezzo, io non me n'avveggo, se non rarissime volte: come, ordinariamente, se io vi diletto o vi benefico, io non lo so; e non ho fatto, come credete voi, quelle tali cose, o non fo tali azioni, per dilettarvi o giovarvi. *E finalmente anche se mi avvenisse di estinguere tutta la vostra specie, io non me ne avvedrei.*" [emphasis mine].