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The Textual Nonhumans of Italian Humanism

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### **Journal**

California Italian Studies, 10(1)

### **Author**

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### **Publication Date**

2020

### **DOI**

10.5070/C3101048974

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# The Textual Nonhumans of Italian Humanism<sup>1</sup>

Arielle Saiber

*Ex bello pax*, says the motto accompanying an emblem of Andrea Alciato's wildly successful *Emblematum liber* of 1531. Etched inside a rectangular frame is a soldier's helmet, visor shut, surrounded by bees (Fig. 1). A series of verses offers us a gloss on the image and motto:



Fig. 1: Andrea Alciato, *Emblematum liber* (Augsburg: Heinrich Steyner, 1531), p. C3v.  
University of Glasgow Library: SM18. Permission from the University of Glasgow Library.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on research in preparation for a seminar I taught at UCLA as the visiting Charles Speroni Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature & Culture. I would like to thank the fantastic students in my “Inhumanism” graduate course (Magdalena Blaisdell, Kenny Clarke, Sarah Daly, Jan Delozier, Sarah Hirner, Catherine Illingworth, and Megan Tomlinson) for being thoughtful and insightful co-investigators into the questions this essay discusses, and wonderful colleagues in the Italian Department at UCLA for many stimulating conversations around the nonhuman in the Renaissance and beyond. I would also like to thank others who have acted as generous interlocutors and insightful provocateurs during this early phase of research: Jason Aleksander, Fabian Alfie, Barbara Boyd, Danila Cannamela, Christopher Celenza, Marcello Ciccuto, Dallas Denery, Paula Findlen, Kenneth Gouwens, Olivia Holmes, Wendy Hyman, Jennifer Kosak, David Marsh, Andrea Moudarres, Roberta Morosini, Scott Newstok, Eileen Reeves, Sherry Roush, Andrea Sartori, Deanna Shemek, Robert Sobak, Jessica Wolfe, and the editors and anonymous reviewers of *California Italian Studies*. Any infelicities in this essay are my own.

En galea, intrepidus quam miles gesserat, & quae  
Saepius hostili sparsa cruore fuit:  
Parta pace apibus tenuis concessit in usum,  
Alveoli, atque favos grataque mella gerit.  
Arma procul iaceant, fas sit tunc sumere bellum,  
Quum aliter pacis non potes arte frui.

(See here a helmet, which a fearless soldier previously wore and which was often spattered with enemy blood. After peace was won, it retired to be used as a narrow hive for bees; it holds honey-combs and nice honey. Let weapons lie far off; let it be right to embark on war only when you cannot in any other way enjoy the art of peace.)<sup>2</sup>

Besides serving as symbols (for war and the sweetness of peace that follows, respectively), the way the helmet and bees—as seen through the eyes of the soldier—are depicted indicate empathy. Alciato’s soldier looks at his now-useless helmet and wishes to find it a new purpose. What could something of its material, shape, weight, and size do or become? The soldier settles on a protective space within which bees could build a hive. To arrive at this conclusion, he had to “think like a bee,” seeing the helmet as a safe, amply-sized place for a home; and also to “think like a helmet,” an object made of metal, possessing properties of stability, hollowness, and an ability to shelter what is inside it.

Exploring what it would be like to think like a bee, and what sort of mental acrobatics would be required to think like a helmet, is beyond the scope of my research.<sup>3</sup> But the dual-pronged question of how and why we humans attempt to imagine what it would be like to be something other than human fits squarely in my sights. Alciato and his emblem-creating predecessors,<sup>4</sup> like other quattro- and cinquecento Italian writers who trained in the *studia humanitatis* or who trained in close contact with those who were formed in this curriculum, unequivocally imagined what it was like to be something other than human. Italian Renaissance humanists, I would like to argue, did this not merely to learn more about themselves as humans, but also, via writing about their world, to individuate alternate ways of being in that world: ways that would be less institutionally bound and more open to new modes of thinking.<sup>5</sup> They sought methods—by

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<sup>2</sup> Translation from the Alciato at Glasgow website,  
<http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A31a046>.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars in neuroscience and cognitive science are producing a large and growing body of work on empathy, while literary scholars are bringing new cognitive approaches to reading literature and interacting with the arts. I hope to pursue this research in my future work on the nonhuman in Italian Renaissance humanist writing.

<sup>4</sup> One notable precursor appears in a short piece entitled “Anuli” that is likely attributable to Leon Battista Alberti. There, Alberti describes an emblem with a helmet surrounded by flies. The context and interpretation are different, as the flies of “Anuli” represent critics, and its helmet functions as a means to shield oneself from their irritating buzzes and bites. For an ecocritical reading of Alciato’s emblems, see Lucy Mercer and Laurence Grove, “Emblems and Antiquity: An exploration of Speculative Emblematics,” *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity*, ed. Christopher Schliephake (Lanham: Lexington Books 2017), 243-58.

<sup>5</sup> See Christopher Celenza’s studies on humanism, where he underlines how strongly Renaissance humanists, starting with Petrarch, resisted institutionalized modes of thinking, categorizing, and acting, e.g., *The Lost Italian Renaissance: Humanists, Historians, and Latin’s Legacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); “Humanism and the Classical Tradition,” *Annali d’Italianistica* 26 (2008): 25-49; *The Intellectual World of the Renaissance: Language, Philosophy, and the Search for Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Two other studies that rethink the institutions of Renaissance humanism and later perceptions of the period and its

means of a *paideia* based in languages, literature, rhetoric, history, and ethics—that could, ultimately, inspire humans to be better humans and live better lives in the here and now. As such, many of their texts show empathy with the nonhuman and were, in this crucial sense, far from claiming the superiority of mankind over the natural world, a claim that a large number of modern critics have ascribed to Renaissance thinkers.

Humans throughout time and across cultures—even those who have claimed a position of preeminence over all other creatures and things of this planet (Genesis 1:26 does not help matters)—have long known of our limitations vis-à-vis nonhuman things, be they natural or artificial, material or immaterial. Human bodies and minds can be quite feeble in the face of nature, from earthquakes to lions (as the myth in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, among numerous other texts ancient and modern, so eloquently recalls), or when wrestling with intangibles such as fear, hate, time, and death. Some Renaissance humanists, like Pico della Mirandola, placed humans virtually on par with angels and even considered us more remarkable than them in our ability to choose the kind of humans we would like to be. And some extrapolated on Cicero’s (and Aristotle’s, among others’) celebration of the human capacity for language as an indication of our intellectual superiority. Yet there were humanists who saw the human as far beneath the pinnacle of what God created. Greek naturalistic, “elemental” thought (e.g., Thales’ “all is water”) flowed into humanist studies. Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Skepticism invited reflection on human imperfection and weakness, augmenting a strain of pessimism on the one hand, and active engagement in civic duty on the other. Both responses, in different ways, expanded on their contemplations of the human as part of humanity, what it means to be humane, and what could be learned about the human from that which we are not. Ultimately, they saw what many of us have thought before and after them: that *thinking what it would be like to be* a given nonhuman brings us into closer relationship with what is outside us, and what lies within.

Thomas Nagel’s renowned 1974 essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”<sup>6</sup>—like numerous other past and present philosophical, anthropological, sociological, psychological, scientific, artistic, and spiritual studies—showed just how difficult it is to think like (much less be) a nonhuman. That difficulty notwithstanding, attempting *to think* the nonhuman—to think its *ousia*, its it-ness—is a worthy exercise in cultivating sensitivity to the differences between humans and nonhumans of this world, and ideally, also to the differences between humans and other humans. Renaissance humanists knew this.

The nonhuman, posthuman, transhuman, inhuman, unhuman, infrahuman, ahuman, anti-human, and other past and present theories of the human in relation (or not) to that-which-we-are-not (or are not currently, or were not before, or should not continue to be, or should become)—from Donna Haraway’s interspecies companionship to Graham Harman’s immaterialism, Timothy Morton’s hyperobjects to the “thing power” of Jane Bennett’s vital materialities—are flourishing today in the critical debate on the dangers of thinking from a position of human superiority and exceptionalism.<sup>7</sup> Arguments in favor of anthropo-*de*-centrism

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protagonists that have informed my project are William Caferro, *Contesting the Renaissance* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) and Rocco Rubini, *The Other Renaissance: Italian Humanism between Hegel and Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435-50.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Graham Harman, *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) and *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017); and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Besides the above, texts from the last two

have been coaxing us away from the illusion of central position, from our belief that we are the only “real” subjects observing and acting upon the world, from correlationist notions that make anything that is not us exist only in relation to us, from the belief that only we humans are endowed with access to higher cognitive functions, and from the thoughtlessness with which we interact not only with one another, but with the natural and human-made things of this world.

The “nonhuman turn,” that is, critical theory’s turn away from focusing solely on conceptions of the human (often in a vacuum), and towards the dynamics between the human and the nonhuman (via ecocriticism, animal studies, speculative realism, cognitive research into the nonhuman, empathy studies, and more) is rich with new epistemologies, new ontologies, new materialisms, new vitalisms, new speculative realisms.<sup>8</sup> Many of these approaches to thinking

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decades that have been central to my thinking about the nature of human-nonhuman relations include: N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Giorgio Agamben, *L’aperto: L’uomo e l’animale* (Turin: Boringhieri, 2002); Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2002); John Gray, *Straw Dogs. Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2002); Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousely, *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003); Remo Bodei, *La vita delle cose* (Rome: Laterza, 2009); Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Sherryl Vint, *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010); Levi Bryant, Nick Srnieck, and Graham Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2011); Dominic Pettman, *Human Error: Species-being and Media Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); Stephen T. Newmyer, “Being the One and Becoming the Other: Animals in Ancient Philosophical Schools,” *Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, ed. Gordon Lindsay Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Roberto Esposito, *Le persone e le cose* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014); Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stones: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017); Andrew Pilsch, *Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Megan H. Glick, *Infrahumanisms: Science, Culture, and the Making of Modern Non/Personhood* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); and Giulia Maria Chesi and Francesca Spiegel, eds., *Classical Literature and Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). A helpful resource for orienting oneself in relation to the expanding landscape of “humanisms” is the massive *Posthuman Glossary*, edited by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). Although more than a decade has passed since its publication, an excellent resource on this topic for Italianists is a special issue of *Annali d’italianistica* 26 (2008) edited by Massimo Lollini on “humanisms, posthumanism, and neohumanisms.”

<sup>8</sup> In addition to works by early scholars of modern phenomenology, Graham Harman and Timothy Morton’s approaches to object-oriented ontology have been the major inspirations for my thinking about the relationship of the human to the nonhuman, particularly to everyday objects. Also guiding my investigation are Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Daniel Miller, *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Mark Blackwell, ed., *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008); Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012); Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Paula Findlen, ed., *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories 1500-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2012); and Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Katherine Behar, ed., *Object-Oriented Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); and Paul J. Narkunas, *Reified Life: Speculative Capital and the Ahuman Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). Also influencing my thinking about nonhuman “things” are studies that explore ways of imagining *what it is like to be* something other

about humans vis-à-vis the world are not, in fact, “new”; some are ancient, and some are rooted in indigenous practices. What they most certainly are, however, is urgent. From clouds to algae, hawks to fault lines, oil to water, icecaps to microbes: in the Anthropocene, we are being forced to acknowledge the impact of our human-centrism on nonhuman entities, the earth as a whole, and our own species, present and future. Whether inspired by a fear of our own extinction or by altruism, we need to find ways to alter our thinking about, and interaction with, the nonhumans—and the other humans—that comprise our late-capitalist, technology-driven world. As Rosi Braidotti proposes, we need to create an egalitarian, relational community that joins all of us together with *zoe* (all of *nature*) and with technology, which shows no signs of slowing down its proliferation of contact with all aspects of life.<sup>9</sup>

Radical as this vision for a pan-species-nature-techno-collective may be, it is not as remote from Renaissance humanism as scholars of nonhuman studies focused on more modern literature have tended to assume. Often, the Renaissance is characterized as a time that celebrated “man at the center” of the world and human “dignity” above all earthly beings. Often, Renaissance humanism is thought to have been a philosophy (it was not) in which “man” (a white, able-bodied, Christian, educated, free, heterosexual man, that is) was considered the ideal “measure of all things” (a misreading of the sophist Protagoras’ adage reported in the *Theaetetus*), perfectly proportioned (like Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man), his soul perfectly mirroring God’s image (Genesis), and his morality perfectly in line with Christian mores. In talking about the human and nonhuman, many modern studies have pointed to Italian Renaissance humanism as a model of human subjectivity that has been rightly surpassed, or that still informs thinking around human exceptionalism and supremacy and should be rejected.

Yes, there were men of the Renaissance who believed themselves superior to other kinds of humans (women, slaves, foreign “barbarians,” the disabled) and to all other animate and inanimate things; and yes, this highly problematic stance is indubitably worthy of our critique. The problem is, however, that when these summations of Renaissance thought appear in contemporary criticism or in popular culture, they perpetuate a misunderstanding of what being “in the center” meant in the Renaissance, and of the nuanced meanings within humanist notions of “human dignity,” “measure,” “ideal proportions,” and being made in God’s image.

Those who have studied Italian Renaissance humanism know that 1) “humanism” is a late eighteenth-century term that describes an inclination (not a well-defined philosophical school) to look back to antiquity for its wisdom on the value of the *human arts* of grammar, literature, rhetoric, and ethics, and to build on those thoughts within a Christian world; 2) not all who were trained in the *studia humanitatis* participated in the search for ancient texts, translation of those texts, philological commentary, and the active study of the abovementioned areas; 3) not all who pursued humanist ideals were formally trained in that *curriculum studiorum* (Leonardo da Vinci and the mathematician Niccolò Tartaglia are two such examples); and 4) while in the fifteenth-century there was increasing room for self-fashioning and social mobility, and while the intelligentsia did focus a keen interest on human power, responsibility, and free will as a result of the revival of classical thought, humanist notions of the human were as complex as any to be

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than a human. See, for example, the already-mentioned essay by Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” and Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology*; Paul Stamets, *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2005); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); and Erica Fudge, “What Was It Like to Be a Cow? History and Animal Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*. ed. Linda Kalof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-24.

<sup>9</sup> See Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.

found over the course of human history. How, in fact, could thinkers who were so highly attuned, by their Classical sources, to the critiques of the human character and human institutions, and by Christian doctrine, to the notion of fallen man, not have questioned the impulse to exalt humanity?

Fortunately, over the last decade, we have seen an increasing number of Renaissance-focused nonhuman studies publications that reveal how favorably some Renaissance authors looked upon the nonhuman, and how ambivalent they were about the primacy of the human. These monographs, collections of essays, and articles offer new readings of the religious, legal, political, philosophical, scientific, and cultural production of the period through animal studies, ecocriticism, posthumanism, and various critical theory approaches.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately for Italianists, however, these studies are often focused on writing produced in Renaissance England and France. Kenneth Gouwens' 2016 essay "What Renaissance Posthumanism Isn't"<sup>11</sup> is an excellent exception, tracing out the reasons why and how man was *not* always seen as the measure of all things in the Renaissance; other fine contributions have been made by a small, but growing, cohort of scholars bringing a nonhuman lens to the analysis of Italian Renaissance thought and production.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Besides the studies on Michel de Montaigne's defense of animals in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, see the following works, among others, on nonhuman theory in the Renaissance generally (not specifically Italian): Erica Fudge, ed., *Renaissance Beasts. Of Animals, Humans, and Other Wonderful Creatures* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Kenneth Gouwens, "Human Exceptionalism," *The Renaissance World*, ed. John Jeffries Martin (London: Routledge, 2007), 415-34; Bruce Boehrer, *Animal Characters: Nonhuman Beings in Early Modern Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano, eds., *Renaissance Posthumanism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); and Sarah Cockram and A. Wells, eds., *Interspecies Interactions: Animals and Humans between the Middle Ages and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Gouwens, "What Posthumanism Isn't: On Humanism and Human Exceptionalism in the Renaissance," in *Renaissance Posthumanism*, eds. J. Campana and S. Maisano (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 1-30.

<sup>12</sup> On the nonhuman in the Italian Middle Ages and Renaissance, see for example, Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry, 750-1150* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Jessica Wolfe, *Humanism, Machinery, and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ingrid Saelid Gilhus, *Animals, Gods, and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman, and Early Christian Ideas*. London: Routledge, 2006); Bruce Boehrer, *Animal Characters: Nonhuman Beings in Early Modern Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Juliana Schiesari, *Beasts and Beauties: Animals, Gender, and Domestication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); Kenneth Gouwens, "Erasmus, 'Apes of Cicero' and Conceptual Blending," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no. 4 (2010): 523-545; Brenda Deen Schildgen, "Reception, Elegy, and Eco-Awareness: Trees in Statius, Boccaccio, and Chaucer," *Comparative Literature* 65, no.1 (2013): 85-100; Eleonora Stoppino, "Contamination, Contagion and the Animal Function in Boccaccio's *Decameron*," *Contaminazione/Contaminazioni* 17, no. 3 (2014): 93-114; Elizabeth MacKenzie Tobey, introduction to *Federico Grisone: The Rules of Riding*, ed. Elizabeth M. Tobey, trans. Elizabeth M. Tobey and Federica Deigan (Tempe: ACMRS, 2014); Kenneth Gouwens, "Emasculation as empowerment: Lessons of Beaver Lore for Two Italian Humanists," *European Review of History* 22, no. 4 (2015): 536-62; Ayesha Ramachandran, "Humanism and Its Discontents," *Spenser Studies* 30 (2015): 3-18; Sarah Cockram and Stephen Bowd's special issue on "The Animal in the Renaissance Italy," *Renaissance Studies* 31, no. 2 (2017); Enrico Cesaretti, Serenella Iovino, and Elena Past, eds., *Italy and the Environmental Humanities: Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018); Jodie Cranston, *Green Worlds of Renaissance Venice* (State College: Penn State Press, 2019); Eleonora Stoppino, "Lacte ferino: Donna guerriera e immaginario animale nella letteratura epico-cavalleresca italiana," *Letteratura cavalleresca italiana* 2 (2020): 25-35 and Stoppino's forthcoming work on contagion and prophylaxis in medieval and early modern European literature. See also the previously-mentioned special issue in *Annali d'italianistica* 26 (2008) on "humanisms, posthumanism, and neohumanisms."

Among Italianist works on the nonhuman and posthuman in modern Italian literature and other media, see Elena Past and Deborah Amberson, eds., *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Italian Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Serenella Iovino, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Elena Past, *Italian Ecocinema Beyond the Human* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019); Danila Cannamela, *The Quiet Avant-Garde: Crepuscular Poetry and the Twilight of*

Italianist scholars are beginning to rethink Italian humanism's relationship to the nonhuman in light of these approaches, and assessment of humanism's supposed insensitivity to the nonhuman is being recalibrated. One path we can take to explore this rethinking, and the path I will now follow, leads us to ways that humanist writers used strategies of anthropomorphization and what I will be calling *allomorphization* to engage the nonhuman. While these strategies have been *de rigueur* since we humans began naming the items and phenomena of the world around us, the ways we speak of the nonhuman, to the nonhuman, and have it speak back to us, vary widely over time and by culture; they also vary in the degree to which they reveal empathic thought. How, in reflecting on an individual human's place in the here-and-now (not just the eternal afterlife), did Italian humanists *think* the nonhuman in their writing? What does their writing about the nonhuman reveal about their relationships to the nonhuman? By looking at how Italian humanists wrote about nonhuman things, be they material (natural or artificial) or immaterial (supernatural, spiritual, fantastical, or metaphorical), we can begin to see the ways in which these writers not only thoughtfully perceived the nonhuman but were altered by thinking the nonhuman—and could, and did, conceive of a world in which humans were *not* at the center.

Thinking the nonhuman can, in fact, be done in a variety of ways. One way is for the human thinker to project the human self onto the nonhuman and then, in writing (or speaking), make it act, speak, and/or look like a human. This is anthropomorphization, and what we commonly see in texts such as fables. Another, more complex way of thinking the nonhuman happens when the human makes space for the nonhuman in his or her mind in order to better understand its nature and properties. This can be done with detached observation and empirical study, but it can also be done with a desire to imagine *what it is like to be* that nonhuman. When inviting the nonhuman into our minds, we, as *anthropoi*, open ourselves to the *allo* (ἄλλο), the other; we welcome whatever impact this nonhuman presence will have on us, and on how we write about it. This is what I would call *allomorphization*. With due respect to the long history of defining the “other” in critical theory, as well as to the use of the term *allomorph* in linguistics and chemistry (both fields use it to refer to something that changes only in part), by *allo* I here refer to anything natural or artificial of this world that is not human—an animal, a plant, a meteorological phenomenon, a building—as well as to immaterial things—sounds, ideas, mythological creatures, angels. Anything that is not us. When thinking the *allo*, the human is not, of course, *turned into* the nonhuman entity, just as when we anthropomorphize, the nonhuman is never actually *turned into* a human. The human is, however, enriched and altered somewhat. When I think of how trees communicate and exchange resources through their roots, I am not becoming a tree, but I am inspired to imagine what that might feel like, what the challenges, joys, and benefits of standing still and being part of an arboreal network might be. I am also inclined to think how humans might benefit, and benefit the planet, from being more like trees.

When humans anthropomorphize, the nonhuman that results (in speech, on a page) is changed to be somewhat like us. When we allomorphize, the nonhuman that results (in speech, on a page) shows signs of it having changed us. Both kinds of “morphizing” create new entities, hybrids that are neither totally human nor totally nonhuman. They are something we could call “textual nonhumans.” Textual nonhumans can take various forms. They can consist of a simple catalogue of parts, properties, processes. They can be described positively or negatively, judged,

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*Modern Humanism* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2019); Enrico Cesaretti, *Elemental Narratives: Reading Environmental Entanglements in Modern Italy* (State College: Penn State University Press, 2020); Matteo Gilebbi, “Posthuman Sorrentino,” *Journal of Italian and Media Studies* 7, no. 3 (2019); and the essays in *The Italianist* 40 (2020) on Italian ecocinema and ecomedia curated by Danielle Hipkins, Elena Past, and Monica Seger.



labeled, valued, adopted, rejected, made into symbols or signs. They may be, or come to be, gendered, sexualized, idealized, demonized, racialized, satirized, fetishized, radicalized, commercialized, or otherwise named and manipulated. They can dwell in any kind of writing, genre, mode, or style, for readers ranging from the scholar to the child beginning to read, and for audiences listening to crafted speeches, tales orally transmitted, or any work read aloud. Certain textual nonhumans—those that are sentient (a cat) or living organisms (a snap dragon) and to which we can more readily relate—are often more easily *thought* and textualized, as are “in-animate” things of the natural world (a river, a patch of snow).<sup>13</sup> But those nonhumans that are at a greater remove from what we consider “alive” (a stone, a flashlight, a shadow) or that we dread or disdain, are even more open to our projections, as they have fewer obvious ways to hook our empathy; they can have quite surprising and compelling things to teach us. In all cases, however, textual nonhumans—even the ones we create in our minds (gods, monsters, the square root of a negative number), and even the ones that are products of fear and loathing—show their human author more about who he or she is. The human, having accommodated the nonhuman, is now more than human.

Many humanists recognized this potential for mutual enrichment and thus welcomed nonhumans into their minds and writing. Leonardo da Vinci—not formally trained in the *studia humanitatis* but in close contact with humanist scholars in Florence, Milan, and France—was highly attuned to the properties and powers of the nonhuman, as well as animal suffering. Throughout his notebooks he exalted nonhumans—especially animals—that displayed characteristics quite superior to humans (stronger muscles, sharper teeth, greater speed, wings), perhaps aware of the creation myth in Plato’s *Protagoras* (320ff) where humans were gifted with reason and language as compensation for what they lacked in body. While he may or may not have been vegetarian, he was clearly pained to think of the harm we do to animals who serve, entertain, and nourish us, the last group rotting in the tomb that is the human stomach.<sup>14</sup> And when he wrote about the Earth, he often considered it to be on par with, or even superior to, the human. Leonardo began his “Treatise on Water” in these terms:

L’omo è detto da li antiqui mondo minore, e cierto la ditione d’esso nome è bene collocata, impero chè, siccome l’omo è composto di terra, acqua, aria e foco, questo corpo della terra è il simigliante; se l’omo à in se ossi, sostenitori e armadura della carne, il mondo à i sassi, sostenitori della terra; se l’omo à in se il lago del sangue, dove cresce e discesce il pomone nello alitare, il corpo della terra à il suo oceano mare, il quale ancora lui cresce e discesce ogni sei ore per lo alitare del mondo; se dal detto lago di sangue dirivano vene, che si vanno ramificando per lo corpo umano, similmente il mare oceano enpie il corpo della terra d’infinite vene d’acqua; mancano al corpo della terra i nervi, i quali non vi sono, perché i nervi sono fatti al proposito del movimento, e il mondo sendo di

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<sup>13</sup> The question of what is “alive” has been long discussed within disciplines and thoughts of all kinds. Recently, Karen Raber and Steven Swarbrick have edited a superb special issue of the journal *Criticism* on the topic in Renaissance Studies. See their Introduction, “Renaissance Posthumanism and Its Afterlives,” *Criticism* 62, no. 3 (2020): 313-28, and the issue’s contributions.

<sup>14</sup> On Leonardo as a possible vegetarian, see Arielle Saiber, “Leonardo da Vinci Saw in Animals ‘the image of the world,’” *The Conversation*. April 12, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/leonardo-da-vinci-saw-in-animals-the-image-of-the-world-113344>. For Leonardo on man’s stomach as a “sepultura di tutti li animali” (“sepulcher for all animals”) see §844, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. J. P. Richter, vol. II (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1883), 130.

perpetua stabilità, non accade movimento e, non accadendo movimento, i nervi non vi sono necessari; Ma in tutte l'altre cose sono molto simili.

(Man has been called by the ancients a lesser world, and indeed the term is rightly applied, seeing that if man is compounded of earth, water, air and fire, this body of the earth is the same; and as man has within himself bones as a stay and framework for the flesh, so the world has the rocks which are the supports of the earth; as man has within him a pool of blood wherein the lungs as he breathes expand and contract, so the body of the earth has its ocean, which also rises and falls every six hours with the breathing of the world; as from the said pool of blood proceed the veins which spread out their branches throughout the human body, in just the same manner the ocean fills the body of the earth with an infinite number of veins of water. In this body of the earth there is lacking, however, the sinews, and these are absent because sinews are created for the purpose of movement, and as the world is perpetually stable within itself no movement ever takes place there, and in the absence of any movement the sinews are not necessary; but in all other things man and the world show a great resemblance.)<sup>15</sup>

In line with Neoplatonic thought, he presents the human body as a reduced-size copy of the world, that is, a micro-Earth. Our bones, Leonardo wrote, are like Earth's rocks; our heart, lungs, and circulatory system like the earth's oceans, tides, and rivers. The human body, to use Dante's terminology from *Paradiso* 28.55-56, is the "esemplare" ("copy") not the esemplo ("original").

Leonardo, far from projecting a sense of human superiority over the Earth, labors to find commonalities between our bodies and its. His description is a beautiful example of both anthropomorphization and allomorphization, of imagining how the Earth is like a human body and what it is like to be the Earth. In anthropomorphizing the Earth, he terramorphizes himself (the human). He sees the Earth as a living entity (a Gaia), bringing the human and Earth in intimate relation to one another. He shows the connective tissue between human and nonhuman, and the uniqueness—strengths, beauties, utilities—of the nonhuman as nonhuman, and human as human, and both together. I hear an echo of Leonardo when Swedish artist Marja Ahti quotes René Daumal in the liner notes to her 2019 album *Vegetal Negatives*, "Let us unfold the animal outward: the bronchia will become a thick foliage ... the digestive system will become roots. ... for each animal form there exists a corresponding vegetal form. The man who would find his vegetal negative and unite with it would restore the integrity of the cosmos."<sup>16</sup>

The more one reads descriptions and discussions of nonhuman things in Renaissance humanist writing—particularly in fables, apologues, poetry, emblem books, and some philosophical and scientific treatises—the more one sees how often these textual nonhumans were participants in a sort of "immaterial symbiosis," as Harman would call it, or in a Latourian "actor-network" relationship with their human authors.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the nonhumans that are catalogued in medieval bestiaries, lapidaries, and herbals—texts that fused natural philosophy

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<sup>15</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, "The Beginning of the Treatise on Water" in *Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Edward McCurdy, Book II: *Nature* (New York: Scribner's, 1906), 93-94, Codex A 55 v. The Italian text is from *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. J. P. Richter, vol. II (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1883), 179.

<sup>16</sup> Excerpt from René Daumal, "On pataphotograms," in *Pataphysical Essays*, trans. Thomas Vosteen (Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2012), as cited by Marja Ahti on her bandcamp site for her album *Vegetal Negatives* (2019; Lucerne, Switzerland: Hallow Ground), <https://hallowground.bandcamp.com/album/marja-ahti-vegetal-negatives>.

<sup>17</sup> See Harman, *Immaterialism* and Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

and morality, where one would imagine the greatest human-nonhuman conversation—show less empathy toward the nonhuman, that is, less allomorphization and more straight anthropomorphization. This is not to say that the writers of these texts did not experience the subtle change of bringing a nonhuman into their mind and onto the page, and even some empathy for those nonhumans, but rather that their textual nonhumans do not appear to be a product of a “what would it be like to be X” contemplation like the textual nonhumans featured in the genres mentioned above. The natural philosophy texts tend more toward an us-them distinction, rather than articulating a continuum, or integration, between the writer and the written. The more allomorphized textual nonhumans—like Alciato’s helmet and bees, or Leonardo’s Earth—indicate how openly and caringly a writer held them in his or her mind before writing them.

When a writer allomorphically writes a nonhuman, the textual nonhuman reveals glimmers of the nonhuman’s unique being (what Heidegger might call *das Ding*) or its “vibrant matter” (as Bennett calls it).<sup>18</sup> In attempting to see/hear/feel the nonhuman, the writer becomes more than he or she was before. The nonhuman—while unaware of its textual version—has become more seen, heard, felt by humans, and hopefully more respected and protected from the consequences of human disregard or disdain. The textual nonhuman is like Deleuze and Guattari’s nomadic entity, or Braidotti’s posthuman: an alive, dynamic, generative, composite being.<sup>19</sup> It is not passive, it is not stable; the nonhuman’s true essence is in a dance with the author who textualizes it. The author is never just an actor, the nonhuman never just an actant.

Much as in the saying “you can never hear the wind itself,” only what the wind passes through—leaves, a tunnel, a crack in a window frame—a textual nonhuman is never entirely itself, and nor are we ever only ourselves. Inside every textual nonhuman a human lurks, and inside every human are innumerable adopted nonhumans, who in turn shape us. By writing/reading/speaking the nonhuman, we have the opportunity not only to anthropomorphize, but to allomorphize, to become a little more nonhuman, and a little more aware of—and hopefully sensitive to—all that which is not us, but which is often woefully impacted by us.

A Renaissance humanist who was highly sensitive to the human impact on the natural world was Leon Battista Alberti. Even his name is a nod to his desire to bring the nonhuman into relationship with the human: Battista Alberti chose “Leon” to precede his given name, intentionally absorbing the lion, with all its powerful nonhuman qualities and symbolic meaning, into his identity. We can see a similar human-nonhuman fusion in his personal emblem, which consists of a wide-open eyeball adorned with bird-like wings. His writing, like that of Leonardo, reveals a love for and fascination with animals: we find a funeral eulogy to his dog, a study of horses, a paradoxical encomium to the innumerable virtues of the common house fly.<sup>20</sup> All sorts of natural nonhumans populate his works, as do artificial nonhumans (made objects), often commanding respect and even claiming superiority over humans. Alberti never minced words when expressing his antipathy for the human race: “Man is the [worst] plague of Man!” (*Momus*)

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<sup>18</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

<sup>19</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) and Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.

<sup>20</sup> On Alberti’s eulogy of his dog, see recent studies such as Martin McLaughlin, “*Canis*: Structure and Sources in the Portrait of the Artist as a Renaissance Dog,” *Albertiana* 14 (2011): 55-83 and Mariangela Regoliosi, “Un’orazione funebre umoristica: Il *Canis* dell’Alberti,” *Albertiana* 23, no. 2 (2020): 161-69. On the fly, see Hartmut Wolfram, “Alberti’s Attacks on Virgil in the *Musca*,” *Albertiana* 23, no. 2 (2020): 171-90; and Arielle Saiber, “Quadrivial Comedy in Alberti’s *Musca*,” *Albertiana* 23, no. 2 (2020): 191-205.

and “the weakest” of all animals (*Theogenius*).<sup>21</sup> Whether in satire or in earnest despair, Alberti’s pessimistic view of human nature and ability fills his work.

A source for a great number of Albertean textual nonhumans is the *Apologi centum* (1437), a collection of Aesopian fable-riddles. While there are animals and plants throughout these apologues, a notable number of the nonhuman characters are everyday, human-made objects. As David Marsh has observed, Alberti used more speaking objects in his apologues than Aesop did.<sup>22</sup> In the complete works of “Aesop” (Aesop himself being a mysterious figure, and “his” works collecting folk tales from Greece, the Middle East, and beyond), the majority of his prosopopoeic characters are animals, a number are gods, a small number are men, a few are plants, and only a very few are things.<sup>23</sup> From an initial survey of Western fables post-Aesop (Babrius, Phaedrus, Avianus, for example), as well as medieval religious tales, it appears that Alberti made more objects speak in his apologues (and lengthier *Intercenales*) than any fabulist or moral tale before him.<sup>24</sup> Why? This is a question I plan to pursue in further study.

Beyond what we find in fables, countless talking animals, plants, gods (and even God), statues, angels, demons, monsters, ghosts, automata, enchanted objects, sacred relics, dream creatures, hallucinations, virtues, vices, emotions, body parts (especially eyes, hearts, hands, and feet), and more have long been given voice in writing.<sup>25</sup> Everyday objects acting as everyday objects (not enchanted with magic or animated by means of a miracle), such as tools and furniture, however, found fewer speaking parts before Alberti. Instead, these objects were more commonly *spoken about* or *spoken to*. Classical and medieval authors, for instance, implored their love poems (even a poem, if we think about it, is a nonhuman thing), often in a *congedo*, to walk/run/fly toward their beloveds and sing their verses; denounced vice-ridden cities;<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Leon Battista Alberti, *Momus*, eds. Virginia Brown and Sarah Knight, trans. Sarah Knight (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), Bk. 2 §109, 185; and “Theogenius,” in *Opere volgari*, ed. Cecil Grayson, vol. 2 (Bari: Laterza, 1966), 18.

<sup>22</sup> David Marsh, Introduction to *Renaissance Fables: Aesopic Prose by Leon Battista Alberti, Bartolomeo Scala, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Bernardino Baldi*, ed. and trans. David Marsh (Tempe: MRTS, 2004), 16. See also the work of Alberti’s contemporaries Leonardo Dati and Gregorio Correr, who also wrote apologues and fables.

<sup>23</sup> Among the few fables of “Aesop” containing speaking objects, see “The Oxen and the Axle” (70), “The Lamp” (232), “The Stake and the Wall” (337), and “The Pots” (354).

<sup>24</sup> See Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1932-1936); Carlo Filosa, *La favola e la letteratura esopiana in Italia dal medioevo ai nostri giorni* (Milan: Vallardi, 1952); Frederic Tubach’s *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia Akademia Scientiarum Fennica, 1969); Joseph Berrigan “The Latin Aesop of the Early Quattrocento: The Metrical Apologues of Leonardo Dati,” *Manuscripta* 26 (1982): 15-23; Caterina Griffante, “Esopo tra medio evo ed umanesimo: Rassegna di studi,” *Lettere Italiane* 46.2 (1994): 315-40; Barbara Bowen, “Renaissance Collections of *facetiae*, 1344-1490: A New Listing,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no.1 (1986): 1-15; and many studies by David Marsh, such as “Aesop and the Humanist Apologue,” *Renaissance Studies* 17, no.1 (2003): 9-26 and “Alberti, Scala, and Ficino: Aesop in Quattrocento Florence,” *Studies on Alberti and Petrarch* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2012): 1-14; B. E. Perry, *Aesopica: A Series of Text Relating to Aesop or Ascribed to Him or Closely Connected with the Literary Tradition that Bears His Name* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> One particularly interesting example of giving voice to the nonhuman—in this case, the dead—is studied by Sherry Roush in her recent study, *Speaking Spirits: Ventriloquizing the Dead in Renaissance Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Dante’s numerous invectives against Florence and Rome throughout his works, as well as his mention of Lucan’s writing, where animate things talk to inanimate things (*Vita nuova*, 16). For the classical period, see for example Michael Roberts, “Rome Personified, Rome Epitomized: Representations of Rome in the Poetry of the Early Fifth Century,” *The American Journal of Philology* 122, no. 4 (2001): 533-65. On Dante’s personification of poetry, see Martin Eisner, “Dante’s *Ballata*: The Personification of Poetry and the Authority of the Vernacular in the *Vita Nuova*,” *Mediaevalia* 39 (2018): 299-318.

eulogized a work of art or even something as humble as a suitcase;<sup>27</sup> yelled at obstacles (such as doors in Latin *paraclausithyron*) preventing access to beloveds;<sup>28</sup> and so forth. More rarely, there have been humans *speaking on behalf* of objects, such as the kitchen implements on trial in Aristophanes' *Wasps*<sup>29</sup> and jousting bottle tops in a Burchiello poem.<sup>30</sup> While some objects have, since antiquity, been made to *speak to* us about what they are and/or what they do (e.g. lapidary epigraphs stating to whom they are dedicated; funerary epitaphs and oil lamps calling out to passers-by; “gift” epigrams, such as those by Martial; Nestor’s Cup; victory monuments; statues such as Rome’s famous Pasquino; the Praeneste fibula), rare are the literary examples pre-Alberti of objects speaking *back to us* or *to each other*. Callimachus’ “lock of Berenice” and “the cross” in the Old English *Dream of the Rood* are two early examples, although neither is what I would call an everyday object, and the latter is clearly vivified by divine intervention. Literary examples from the Italian Middle Ages of objects speaking to us or to each other are sparse, but there are some: Guido Cavalcanti’s *penne isbigottite*, Burchiello’s razors, and Giannozzo Sacchetti’s church;<sup>31</sup> and although I have not begun to pursue this, I would imagine there are quite a few in children’s tales and elementary education textbooks.

In the humanist Alberti’s work we begin to see an abundance of textual nonhuman objects coming to life and into their own. As Marsh has shown, authors of apologues and fables—Bartolomeo Scala, Bernardino Baldi, and not surprisingly, Leonardo among them—followed Alberti’s lead.<sup>32</sup> By the eighteenth century, “it narratives” were proliferating, with objects declaring who they are and demanding autonomy from their authors, as Jonathan Lamb has discussed in his 2011 study, *The Things Things Say*. By the nineteenth century, as Bill Brown has demonstrated, things no longer just speak to us, but tyrannize us.<sup>33</sup> In today’s world, literature (and technoscience) is finding ways to *talk back* to the things we have created, the things that dominate us and impact the nonhuman entities alongside which we live.

But back to Alberti. Here, in the very first apologue in his *Apologi*, Alberti uses an anvil and a ball as his protagonists, anthropomorphizing them as he also allomorphizes them.<sup>34</sup>

Aegre ferebat pila caedi alapis pervolvique luto et nullo posse loco consistere;  
incundi contra subsidere continue ictibus acerbum erat. Cum homine iccirco  
egere ut, posteaquam esset eiusmodi rebus veluti deus qui varias posset elargiri  
formas, incudem in pilam pilamque in incudem verteret. “Hae res - inquit homo -

<sup>27</sup> Regarding a writer’s love for his suitcase, see the fourteenth-century Antonio da Ferrara, “E’ me ricorda, cara mia valise” (“I remember, my dear suitcase”).

<sup>28</sup> Thank you to Barbara Boyd for alerting me to these poems, including ones in which a door is the speaker, such as Propertius 1.16, “Quae fueram magnis olim patefacta triumphis” (“I who of old stood open to welcome splendid triumphs”), trans. G. P. Goold, *Propertius: Elegies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 80.

<sup>29</sup> Thank you to Jennifer Kosak for reminding me of the kitchen implements in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*.

<sup>30</sup> See Burchiello’s “Un giuoco d’aliössi in un mortito” (“A game of chess in a stew pot”), in *The Poetry of Burchiello: Deep-fried Nouns, Hunchbacked Pumpkins, and Other Nonsense*, trans. Fabian Alfie and Aileen Feng (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2017), 55.

<sup>31</sup> See Guido Cavalcanti, “Noi sian le triste penne isbigottite” (“We are the sad, despondent quills”); Burchiello, “La poesia contende col rasoio” (“Poetry argues with the razor”); and Giannozzo Sacchetti, “Io fui ferma chiesa” (“I was a steadfast church”). Thank you to Olivia Holmes and Fabian Alfie for our discussions on these poems.

<sup>32</sup> See David Marsh’s introduction to *Renaissance Fables*.

<sup>33</sup> See Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things*.

<sup>34</sup> Thank you to Eileen Reeves for the observation that in Book 8.265-380 of the *Odyssey*, the ball and the anvil occur contiguously in and after the tale in which Aphrodite (linked to the ball) betrays Hephaestus (linked to the anvil)—perhaps Alberti had this passage in mind, when he wrote this apologue.

vobis non conveniunt. Sed, si iuvat, ex incude ligones, rastros, atque bidentes efficiam.” “Malo - inquit illa - pristinam amplitudinem et gravitatem servare ac tibi quidem pilae consulo, malis pervolando atque persiliendo homines in ludo et admiratione tui detinere.”

(A ball was annoyed at being struck and rolled in the mud, and never allowed to rest in one place. And an anvil resented having to sit still and withstand continuous blows. So they asked man, who like a god could give things different forms, to change the ball into an anvil and the anvil into a ball. The man said: “These forms do not suit you. But if you like, I can make hoes, rakes, and pitchforks out of the anvil.” The anvil replied: “I prefer to keep my original size and weight. And I suggest, ball, that you continue to amuse and amaze men by bouncing and flying.”)<sup>35</sup>

Immediately evident is the trope of “the vanity of changing places.” The ball would not make a very good anvil, nor the anvil a ball. Both, in fact, were made by humans to serve specific human uses: the one, entertainment; the other, metalwork. The third character, who enters the fable midway—the man—serves a curious role. As the ball and anvil’s original maker, he is, to them, like a god; someone with the power, they think, to remake them into something else. Unlike the soldier who repurposes his helmet as a home for bees in Alciato’s emblem, the man here disappoints the objects. He merely reveals their misunderstanding of who he actually is, as well as their misconception of who—or rather what—they actually are: what they are made of and for. The anvil recognizes that being made into any of the things that the man proposes would be a downgrade, and it recommends the ball understand this, drop the desire to change, and revel in being the fun, bouncy thing it is.

On one level, Alberti is simply using the ball and anvil anthropomorphically as stand-ins for humans who desire to be something other than they are. On another level, with the inability of the “god-like” man to alter the nature and roles of the ball and the anvil, he seems to be condemning humans, specifically, the notion that humans have unlimited powers. Man cannot do the impossible: he cannot make an anvil fly through the air, or make a ball serve as a proper surface for hammering out a sword. The “moral” is, thus, doubly dark: not only should humans not desire to be other than they are, they should not bother to think that other humans can help them change. Such pessimism (or realism) aside, Alberti’s use of a ball and an anvil as characters, rather than the far more common cast of animals or things of nature, is striking. To imagine what could make a ball and an anvil want to be other than they are, he had to allomorphize: to think what it would be like to be a ball, and what it would be like to be an anvil. What would it feel like to be made of certain materials, crafted into certain shapes, with certain qualities, and to serve certain uses? His textual nonhumans reveal their inherent properties, not just their identity as human property.

It is not a coincidence, I think, that Alberti showed significant intimacy with his textual nonhuman objects, attempting to imagine what it was like to be a solid mass of metal constantly beaten with a hammer, or a spherical thing always covered in mud that can soar. He was an architect, able to think in terms of materials, shapes, proportions, weights, and quantities.<sup>36</sup> He

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<sup>35</sup> Alberti, “Apologue 1,” in Marsh, *Renaissance Fables*, 37.

<sup>36</sup> See my chapter on Alberti’s *De cifris* in *Measured Words: Computation and Writing in Renaissance Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 21-48.

was in regular dialogue with artists and artisans who made things. He was an inventor and an innovator. And he was writing shortly after Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* was rediscovered by the Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini, an event followed by a renewed interest in Democritean and Epicurean materialist atomism, as well as vitalism. Alberti's textual nonhumans, like those of Alciato, Leonardo, and other Renaissance humanists I could name, are the products of human minds that actively welcomed nonhuman life into themselves. The ball and the anvil, the helmet and bees, and the planet Earth as textual nonhumans are more human than they were before being written, and the writers (and we readers) are now a little less so.

Renaissance humanists were not unilaterally human-centric. Much of their writing reveals the care with which they thought about nonhumans *qua* nonhumans, not just what these were with respect to humans, or in service of humans. Their observation of the "lives of things"<sup>37</sup> combined empathy with a desire to learn from the nonhuman. Alberti lowered human power and superiority, bringing us into closer contact with the things (artificial and natural) of this world; Leonardo noted how the human body reflects Earth's body, not the other way around; and Alciato's soldier showed an affective relationship that humans can (and do) have with objects and nature. Man's status vis-à-vis the nonhuman fluctuates in these instances, as both a celebration and a "re-enchantment"<sup>38</sup> of the *allo* ensues.

While no humanist—not even our three examples—would go as far as to say that animals, things of nature, or artificial objects were equal, much less superior in all ways to the human being, many did look closely at the properties of nonhumans, admiring them, learning from them, and even trying to replicate them. Humanist writers did not, on the whole, break the human-nonhuman dichotomy by making all entities equal (although Alberti and Leonardo did, I would argue, at times approach a kind of "flattening"), nor by seeing all things as made of the same matter (unless they were avowed materialists), nor by unilaterally giving nonhumans souls (unless they were animists or vitalists). Few humanists attributed reason or language (symbolic language, that is) to animate nonhumans (animals),<sup>39</sup> and I have seen none who gave consciousness of any sort to inanimate things, natural or artificial (things coming "alive" because of magic or miracles do not count).

Even so, the humanists' textual nonhumans often show themselves to be full of life, networked, symbiotic, hybrid nomads. Like Morton's description of a hyperobject, textual nonhumans "viscously" stick to us, coexist with us, and co-create with us, even when we do not recognize the fullness of their being or presence. They are semiotic, social systems; things born from mental conversations between what we perceive as the anthropic self, and what we consider other. Textual nonhumans exist on the page as both subjects and objects, and together with—or, rather, because of—the human-author's decision to write them. They travel along the nature-culture continuum, being cultural constructs and constructive companions.

Renaissance humanism's search for human dignity, *unitas*, and *charitas*, along with its practitioners' commitment to civic duty—to the life of here and now and things of this world, not

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<sup>37</sup> José Saramago, *The Lives of Things*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: Verso, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> See Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, eds., *Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> See Brian Cummings' essay "Pliny's Literate Elephant and the Idea of Animal Language in Renaissance Thought," in *Renaissance Beasts: Of Animals, Humans, and Other Wonderful Creatures*, ed. Erica Fudge (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 164-85 and Eliezer Segal on classical theories on animal speech in *Beasts that Teach, Birds that Tell: Animal Language in Rabbinic and Classical Literatures* (Calgary: Alberta Judaic Studies, 2019). I thank Kenneth Gouwens for pointing me to Girolamo Rorario and Giambattista Gelli, who attributed forms of language and reason to animals. I will be pursuing their work.

the future human (post, trans, etc.), or the human dwelling in the afterlife (*pace* Dante's *trasumano*)—came from an awareness of *the power of writing* to help us know things, change things, and be changed by them. Just as Renaissance humanists contemplated antiquity's textual nonhumans and then penned their own, we too, by studying their textual nonhumans, can increase our awareness of how the nonhuman has long enchanted us, and re-enchants us with its layers of meaning always and forever enmeshed with our exploration into why we are here, what our responsibilities are, and what it is like to be human.