

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CITY. THE BECOMING- WORLD OF THE *CITTÀ* *VECCHIA* OF COSENZA

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THE PHILOSOPHICAL CITY

Bernardino Telesio opens his major work *De natura iuxta propria principia* (1570) with a statement that obviously applies to nature, but perhaps even to the way we (believe to) perceive a city:

those who before me have scrutinized the structure of this world and the nature of things seem to have investigated them [...] without having succeeded in truly observing them. [...] It seems, in fact that, having perhaps too much confidence in themselves, when they examined things and their forces, they did not ascribe to them that nature and those faculties [rebus ingenium easque facultates] with which they appear to be endowed, [...] but imagined the world at their own will (Telesio 2009, p. 3)✠.

Bernardino Telesio (1509 -1588) is perhaps the most important philosopher of Italian Renaissance Naturalism, but he is also, and in this case especially, the philosopher of a quite particular city, Cosenza, located in the still (luckily) unknown south of Italy. In fact, if there is still a city, in Italy, that shows quite clearly the ties that bind itself (in the case of the old city of Cosenza, to the point of suffocating it) to the ‘natural’ territory on which it stands, this is the old city of Cosenza. By historical contingencies the old city of Cosenza is intact (to give just one example, while the ‘new’ Cosenza is a triumph of reinforced concrete, in the historic city there is almost no trace of it), and precisely because it is intact the ‘historic’ city is slowly unraveling (following the fate of so many other Calabrian cities; cf. Teti 2022). The triangle bordered by the Pancrazio hill and the Crati and Busento rivers, on which the historic city of Cosenza stands, seems set to return to what it was before the settlement (around the eighth century B.C.) of the Bruzi communities that originally settled there (Rubino, Teti 1997). In this sense, Cosenza is a philosophical city ✠, because if we try to follow Telesio’s implicit indications - and not what we already think we know about the city or even what we believe that a city should be - the link that binds it to the natural world is revealed in an absolutely unequivocal manner. The city is not opposed to the so-called extra-urban world; the world gives itself through the city, which, sooner or later, will become the world again. This means that the proper sense of Telesio’s statement is that the city has never been separated from the natural world. The world and nature have never ceased to be there.

URBAN BIOME

As Ladislav Mucina writes, “plants form and dominate biotic communities. These communities are structured along

La città vecchia dal Crati
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spatial and temporal scales. At very large scales, we call these biotic communities and their environments form biomes” (Mucina 2019, p. 97). According to such a definition, a biome is first and foremost a spatiotemporal living entity. This means that a biome is not a particular habitat, but rather a complex dynamic network of relationships between animal and plant life; however, from a broader and less bio-centric perspective, a biome is also a kind of ‘community’ of living and non-living entities. It is worth stressing that the biome is primarily a temporal relation: a biome is time developing and insisting on a more or less precisely delimited portion of space. That is, that of biome is somewhat a historical notion: “form is simply a short time-slice of a single spatio-temporal entity [...] and this spatio-temporal structure is the activity itself” (Needham 1936, p. 6) of this same form. From this point of view, the very notion of ‘biome’ renders the traditional metaphysical division between the living (and humans at the head of the living) and the non-living useless. Indeed, since the non-living plays such a relevant role in relation to the living, a biome is neither properly living nor non-living.

Understood as a multifaceted entity in its own right, the biome can be considered as a distinct form of life, even if it is not a living (neither non-living) entity in the strict sense.

What defines a biome is, above all, the radical, dynamic interconnectedness of all the entities involved. Take the case of the vegetation of a biome:

vegetation is not a passive entity under the control of the environment. Across spatial scales, feedbacks between vegetation and climate, soils and disturbance regimes create new environments (Mucina 2019, p. 102).

As a result, each biome has a distinctive and specific “physiognomy” (*ibid.*, p. 101), i.e. it presents itself in a clearly recognizable form. In this sense, it can be said that each biome is not just a place, but rather a ‘someone’ which is inseparable from the place or the places where it ‘lives.’ This means that a biome - even if, as we have seen, it is neither a living nor a non-living entity in the strict sense of the word - feels and does something. What is at stake in the notion of a biome is the possibility of an ‘entity’ - the existence of which the metaphysical tradition considered impossible - that feels and does, even though it is not part of either the living or the non-living:

A biome is generally characterized by a typical physiognomy (combination of plant and animal life forms), yet ecological feedback processes and disturbance may produce multiple stable states coexisting in the same geographic

space. [...] A biome undergoes assembly (and disassembly) at both ecological and evolutionary timescales; the processes underpinning the assembly shape the functionality of the biome by selecting for the biota equipped by the best-fitting set of traits matching the challenges of the environment (*ibid.*, p. 110).

In this paper, a specific urban biome (Pinceti 2015) is analyzed. The idea is to consider a particular city, the ancient and quite abandoned part of Cosenza, as a peculiar biome. The *città vecchia* (old city), as it is commonly called by the inhabitants of the ‘modern’ city, presents itself as a coalescence of multiple agents where human and non-human, living and non-living, historical and natural elements blend together to form a ‘new’ form of life, the urban biome. Moreover, by using the suggestion that the ancient part of Cosenza is one of the very few cities which dedicates its main street – the current Corso Telesio, which runs from the confluence of the Crati and Busento rivers, across the city’s Cathedral Square ending at the Government Building and Rendano Theatre at the city’s southern end - to a philosopher, the aforementioned Bernardino Telesio (Cosenza 1509–1588), the idea is to consider such a peculiar city as a true philosophical city. In particular, Cosenza seems to perfectly exemplify Telesio’s ideas about nature. Therefore, a city is not philosophical when is the result of an *a priori* design (as in many philosophical utopias), quite the contrary, the *città vecchia* is a philosophical city just because a) it is not a city planned by design (starting from a blank sheet of paper), and b) it is a city where the borders between the natural and the human not only are not neatly traced but, on the contrary, are porous and quite indistinguishable. In this sense a philosophical city, following the ideas of Telesio, is not a place designed for and populated by human beings, an exclusively human habitat; quite the contrary, in a philosophical city like the *città vecchia* of Cosenza, the human trace on the surface of the planet is always on the verge of coming back to the same earth from which its construction materials (mainly stones and timber) have been taken away. That is, the *città vecchia* is re-becoming world and simply nature.

The philosophical city as the post-anthropocentric and anthropocenic city. It is a city that, by its own intrinsic decadence, unintentionally shows the temporal, and therefore contingent, character of any *a priori* project.

A city is philosophical when it stops believing to be exclusively a spatial entity - that is, a dead entity - and ‘accepts’ its own intrinsic temporal nature (as many other Calabrian cities; Placanica, 1999).



In the same vein a city can be considered a “urban biome” only when it ceases to resist time, that is, the ‘life’ of the world.

A ‘life,’ as the case of any biome clearly shows, that places itself beyond the living-non-living divide.

This is the most difficult aspect posed by the notion of “biome” because in our metaphysical perspective it is extremely difficult to even imagine that a ‘thing’ could feel anything. Indeed, the distinction between person and thing (Esposito 2014) lies at the heart of our metaphysical tradition, and it does not stop at speaking unconsciously through ‘our’ voices.

It is such a tradition – which is the stronger the less we are aware of being spoken by such an impersonal voice – that makes us consider it impossible that a set of non-living entities could be somehow alive.

In fact, according to Telesio such an impossibility is not so much a problem of unquestioned metaphysics but a problem of lack of imagination:

it seems that they [those who do not question the metaphysical tradition] did this because, perhaps having too much confidence in themselves [which means they did not try to think of the world in other than traditional metaphysical terms], when they examined things and their power, they did not ascribe to them that nature and those power with which they appear to be endowed (as it was necessary to do), but [...] they imagined the world according to their own will [actually, according to the traditional patterns of metaphysics, which those philosophers could not even remotely imagine to change]. And to the bodies – which seem to compose the world - the philosophers did not attribute that greatness, dignity and power with which they proved to be endowed, but with the features that they should be endowed with according to the philosopher’s reason [*propria ratio*] (Telesio 2009, pp. 3-5).

What does it mean not to “attribute” to those form of ‘life’ “that greatness, dignity and power with which they proved to be endowed” if not being completely entrapped into the traditional metaphysical view that explicitly excludes the possibility of a non-living ‘life’? Telesio, on the contrary, proposes a vision of nature as intrinsically endowed by agency, affects, and passions (Bennett, 2010):

as a consequence he breaks away from the traditional metaphysical divide – a divide that is still operative in our modern scientific time – and proposes to investigate the world and its parts, and the passions, actions, and

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operations of the parts and the things in it; each part, if rightly examined, will reveal its own greatness and form, while those passions, actions and operations will reveal character, power, and nature (Telesio 2009, p. 5).

HEAT, COLD AND MATTER

Three, then, are the principles of things: matter, which seems to suffer because it assumes different dispositions and different forms; and its opposites [heat and cold], which act upon it and are received by it. Therefore, matter is one. The opposites are no more than two ↓.

In order to understand what a philosophical city could be one has to begin from such a simple foundation: the matter is at the bottom, and two principles, heat and cold, put it into motion, and together they produce all the entities, their effects, and their passions. Why just heat and cold? If one considers the actual geographical collocation of Cosenza the answer to this question is pretty straightforward. In summer the temperatures in Cosenza easily reach over forty degrees Celsius during the daytime, without varying too much at night; on the contrary in winter the cold air blowing from the frosty and snowy plateau of Sila is extremely rigid. These two poles rule life in the city and in the nature surrounding it. At the same time, one must not forget that when Telesio, who had a good knowledge of Greek philosophy, writes about matter (*materia* in Latin) cannot forget that the name 'Sila' comes from the Roman name *Silva Brutia*, which means 'forest of the Bruzi' and that one possible origin of this name is the Greek *ῥλη* [*yle*], with the same meaning of 'forest,' and in general of 'things,' and above all 'matter.' The matter of the *città vecchia* is of such a nature – at the same time living and non-living – that is alternatively put into motion by heat and cold.

Therefore, if exposed to an extremely intense heat, all very solid and hard things, such as stones, iron, and even the earth itself, eventually melt into water and ultimately turn into vapour and smoke; on the contrary, one sees them thickening or at least freezing and compacting, in short, becoming harder and more corporeal, when all things are occupied by the cold; and therefore, very slight vapours condense into water and snow, and water, even seawater, condenses into ice, into crystal, and finally into the earth, when there is an extremely intense cold (*ibid.*, pp. 27-29). As a consequence, the *città vecchia* is the dynamic result of a peculiar matter: stone and timber from which all its buildings are constructed, and which is constantly

affected by hot summers on the one hand and cold winters on the other.

In this sense, the "biome" of the ancient city breathes and changes according to the seasons and the mutations of nature. This city is the direct transformation of the materials that are naturally present on the ground (if one takes a comprehensive look at the city, one can perceive how the colours of the walls and roofs are similar to those of the surroundings) and it cannot stop changing. It is a city that has never ceased to be linked to its 'original' material.

In this sense, it is important to note that the city seems to have never been surrounded by protective walls. This means that the *città vecchia* has never tired of severing its links with its non-human roots. For this reason, it can be considered a philosophical city – that is, a truly Telesian city – because it has never fallen into the overly humanistic and anthropocentric dream of becoming an exclusively human entity.

The main characteristic of such a city is not only that it does not resist change, but that it makes its own features out of these changes. In this sense, Cosenza has always been both an ancient and a modern city. In fact, the non-human history of the material it is made of is an integral part of the human history of the city itself.

At the same time, because it has never ceased to be a natural-unnatural city, Cosenza is always on the verge of becoming inhuman or posthuman, that is, of returning to be a "natural" place. In this case, 'natural' means a part of a space-time continuum in which the presence of the human has never caused the presence of the non-human to cease.

For this reason, which is apparent for all those who live in Cosenza, Telesio states:

And it must be held that the heavens and the Earth have the power to act on each other, that is, both can change the other's substance, and that neither the Earth nor the heavens themselves, or the Sun itself, or any other being, despite appearing to be in the highest degree homogeneous, simple, and unique, are really simple and unique but that they are all composed of a dual nature [*duplici natura*], that is, of a nature that remains and of one that goes. As it appears, neither the Sun nor any other agent creates anything from non-being, but everything comes from another entity, and the things that are corrupted are not corrupted at all into non-being, but all in another entity; so that the generation or corruption of any entity cannot be held to be real generation or corruption of the whole

entity, but to be a transformation of it.

That is to say, the entity that is generated is not generated and is not born as a whole, being nothing previously, but, existing from before, it takes on a new form, and the entity that is corrupted does not fully die, but only its form and nature, while its mass and body remain (Telesio 2009, pp. 15-17).

AN HAPTIC CITY

The key characteristic of a philosophical city, according to Telesio's radical naturalism, is that it is a city "at hand", that is, a city in which all presences - human and non-human, living and non-living, water trees and stones - are always in contact with each other. In this sense, the *città vecchia* is a haptic city, because in it there is no entity that is completely separated from the others. Take the case of a modern, designed city, where there are residential and working areas, cultural spaces and communication routes, green spaces and built-up areas. And above all, there is a distinction - at least in principle - between the city and its own periphery. Such divisions do not exist in the *città vecchia*, where, on the contrary, one can walk without noticing any change from one functional space to another. In this sense it is a haptic city, because it is the direct relationship among the different presences that populate it that makes it a peculiar "urban biome". In the *città vecchia*, the periphery is in the "centre", namely the square of the Cathedral, which at night is crossed by stray dogs that spend the day in the woods surrounding the built-up area. At the same time, the "centre", the Government Building, is on the edge of the old town, close to the woods that extend towards the southern part of the city. In fact:

nature rejects emptiness in the highest degree, it indeed cannot tolerate emptiness at all, it means that entities delight in touching each other and benefit from each other's contact, while hate and reject being separated in the highest degree (*ibid.*, pp. 5-7).

What is a haptic city, after all? It is a city that is not separated from the environment in which it is built; to be more precise, and more faithful to Telesio's idea of nature, a haptic or philosophical city is a city in which the distinction between urban and non-urban space is porous and constantly changing. Such a city is mainly haptic because the entities touch each other, i.e. in a haptic city there are no absolute boundaries or closed spaces, all parts touch all other parts. At the same time, it is a city in which the different life forms of the urban biome merge.



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And what is fusion if not a temporal process? Therefore, the haptic city is not only not afraid of time, but it is also a spatio-temporal process. That is why the philosophical city, despite being human, has always been non-human.

This means that the typical habitat of men, the city, has never ceased to be essentially sun, cold and matter:

all things are created and brought into being through the Earth by the action of all the celestial bodies, and especially of the sun; and they have nothing in the one that is not in the other; but all of them are akin to the celestial bodies and to the Earth. [...] Since it has been seen that they do not act with any other nature than that of heat or cold, and that they only suffer and are changed by heat or cold, it is to be judged that they are all constituted by heat and cold (*ibid.*, p. 39).



The English version of Telesio's quotes are translated by the Author of this paper.



It is worth noting that in a book with a very similar title (Rossi, Viano 2004) dedicated to the cities where the main Italian philosophical traditions were developed in the nineteenth century, all the cities considered - except for Rome and Naples - are cities of northern Italy. On the contrary, in this paper we believe that the peripheral position of Cosenza, today as well as in Telesio's times, represents an opportunity to think in a very inactual way.



This quote is taken from the first edition of the *De rerum Natura*, 1565, quoted in R. Bondi, *Introduzione a Telesio*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1997, p. 23. The Parmenidean origin of such a dualism has been stressed by many commentators. It should be noted, however, that Parmenides of Elea is a philosopher who lived in the same South as Telesio (Elea-Velia is in the region now called Basilicata, less than 200 km North of Cosenza): “[Diog. Laert.] This man (i.e., Parmenides) was the first to declare that the Earth is spherical and is situated at the center; also that there are two elements, fire and earth, of which the former has the rank of creator, the latter that of matter; that [...] the hot and the cold are causes and all things are composed of these”. In A. H. Coxon (ed.) *The Fragments of Parmenides*, Parmenides Publishing, Las Vegas 2009, p. 138.