

ARTICLE

The Irreducible Qfwfq: Rethinking the All-Seeing I

Matthew Reza

University of Oxford, GB
matthew.reza@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk

This essay proposes a framework to consider Calvino's Qfwfq by means of a cosmic 'unit' model. Instead of arguing for Qfwfq as an ever-changing, metamorphosing creature, my argument is that Qfwfq is an unchanging constant and physical 'unit' which passes through all the different organisms into which he appears to transform, during which time he see through new eyes, and experiences the world through new bodies, but always as the same basic unit. I then discuss how this leads to a reconsideration of Qfwfq in terms of postmodernism, and its focus on unstable labels, and in terms of postmodern fantastic literature, where the discussion is based upon slipping signifiers and signifieds. Moreover, I analyse how a unit model reframes the importance of the Roman poet Lucretius to the cosmicomic universe.

1. Introduction

Italo Calvino's cosmicomic universe, which comprises the collections *Le Cosmicomiche* (1965), *Ti con zero* (1967), *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche* (1968) and a few additions in *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove* (1984), has been subject to a number of critical foci including the role of science (Bucciantini, Pilz), and the theme of love (Gabriele). What has not been investigated beyond acknowledging the complexity of the question is the nature of Qfwfq's identity. The reason why such a discussion is warranted is because, while the cosmicomic universe is constantly changing, what this article will argue is that its protagonist Qfwfq is instead a stable constant, and such a claim bears upon questions of the postmodern, fantastic theory and intertextual resonances. Qfwfq is a unique figure, but the vexed question of discussing characterization is marred by the fact that Qfwfq, despite being seemingly ever-present, is less than clear about his physical parameters.¹ Qfwfq is often assumed to be an immortal or omnipresent being of sorts, with the ability to metamorphose into a pantheon of organisms both macroscopic and microscopic, and Calvino himself states that 'Protagonista delle «Cosmicomiche» è sempre un personaggio, Qfwfq, difficile da definire, perché di lui non si sa nulla' (*Romanzi e racconti (II)* 1301).²

¹ As Milanini notes, 'Il protagonista medesimo, pur mutando sembianze vicenda dopo vicenda e nell'ambito di ciascuna vicenda, conserva sempre atteggiamenti aspirazioni appetiti inequivocabilmente maschili' (116), with which Bernardini Napoletano concurs (81 n. 48).

² Unless otherwise stated, quotations by Calvino come from *Romanzi e racconti (II)*.

This article will attempt to define Qfwfq, and is divided into three parts. In the next ('Sign or Metamorph?'), I review how critics have understood Qfwfq, and argue against the claim of many that Qfwfq changes form. I instead maintain that Qfwfq is a continuous and stable entity, and that he is a synecdochal character. In the following section ('Cosmic Units'), I demonstrate how Qfwfq exists as a single concept using a range of examples; and in the final part ('Against the Grain (of Dust)'), and as a corollary argument, I explore how a stable Qfwfq not only rethinks the makeup of the cosmicomic universe but also the interplay between Qfwfq and a number of literary foci. This discussion will also turn to Calvino's relationship with Lucretius, about whom Calvino speaks fondly, and will in turn show that Calvino's relationship with Lucretius' atomist model – one that embodies lightness – plays a central role in the cosmicomic universe. Qfwfq is not only a witness to the ever-changing universe but is more explicitly a part of it, a stable form that challenges the theory of postmodern fantastic literature – where identity and meaning are unstable and ever-changing concepts (see Horstkotte and Pilz below) – but where Qfwfq himself is not.

2. Sign or Metamorph?

The critical consensus on Qfwfq's identity takes two main directions. On the one hand, Qfwfq is an abstract, even philosophical, concept. Calvino himself suggests that 'non è nemmeno un personaggio, Qfwfq, è una voce, un punto di vista, un occhio (o un ammicco) umano' (1302). Ferretti in turn argues that 'Qfwfq, il protagonista delle *Cosmicomiche*, è un uomo-momento, un uomo-immaginazione' (101). Messina, in his analysis of the *Cosmicomiche* using possible-world theory, departs from the premise that the name Qfwfq 'is a sufficient condition for a "trans-world identification" [...]. It *designates the same individual* in different worlds, because its different properties do not affect the subject term' (1007, my emphasis). On the other hand, a more frequent argument voiced is that Qfwfq constantly changes. 'Qfwfq è allora l'essere proteiforme nel quale viene potenzialmente registrata la molteplicità delle mutazioni evolutive' (Deidier 79); he is a 'metamorfico Qfwfq' (Milanini 100); 'multiforme Qfwfq' (Turi 62); a 'polymorphous immortal creature' (Weiss 96); a 'protean palindrome' (Ricci 79). Cannon, in turn, discusses Qfwfq in terms of the problems of characterization, as:

A chameleonic character who alternately appears as a one-celled organism, a dinosaur, and an unspecified amphibian. [...] Qfwfq's continuous metamorphoses exceed the limits of the traditional narrative *persona*. The dinosaur, the mollusk and the amphibian cannot be subsumed into a single, coherent character. (49, 52)

Concurring with Cannon that Qfwfq 'is not a single, coherent character', Markey maintains that he is instead a '*phenomenon* who incongruously tosses atoms with his playmates' (91, my emphasis), a suggestion that resonates with the abstract terms in which Qfwfq is delineated by critics such as Messina and Ferretti. Bernardini Napoletano adds a gloss that Qfwfq is powerless against his transformations: 'Qfwfq, prigioniero ne *Le Cosmicomiche* dell'evoluzione biologica ed alienato alla materia nel continuo passaggio da una forma all'altra' (68).

Qfwfq is certainly a constant on a linguistic level, where, at the beginning of nearly every story, his role as narrator is explicitly stated. Subsequently, the question becomes one of considering whether this continuity stretches further if the same linguistic sign Qfwfq is used throughout. I will argue that it does, and build on a much less common third proposal for Qfwfq's identity, suggested by Gabriele, who argues that 'the protean Qfwfq [...] [is] the unchanging protagonist in changing forms ranging from cell to human male' (126). Calligaris takes a similar position, where Qfwfq is 'Un denominatore comune o monade infinitesimale'

(91). My claim here, in contrast to the above consensus that Qfwfq is either a linguistic constant or a metamorphic character, proposes a resolution between these different assertions: Qfwfq is a linguistic constant but does not change form or metamorphose. Rather, and in continuing the argument made by Gabriele and Calligaris, he is a cosmic unit, a minuscule, stable entity that is one of many component parts that constitute various objects that exist over the course of the history of the universe. In this way, Qfwfq is merely a small part of a number of different host bodies that he inhabits throughout his adventures; he is, to put it in terms that will be discussed later, a Lucretian atom. This is not to argue that the unit Qfwfq has any particular recognizable physical form (such as a specific molecule, atom, particle etc.), but simply that he *has* stable and infinitesimal physical form. Qfwfq's occasional outwardly human features might appear to contradict such a claim, but I will argue that even in such cases, 'Qfwfq' denotes one of the many constituent parts – the unit Qfwfq – but that for the sake of labelling the larger host body, it too is called Qfwfq. Thus, for example, the human Qfwfq in 'La distanza della Luna' denotes the Qfwfq unit within, but his signifier also accounts for the human shell that likewise takes the name Qfwfq. The smaller part stands for the larger: Qfwfq is a 'synecdochal character', the smaller unit of which does not change throughout the cosmicomic stories. A unit model therefore allows for narrative continuity throughout the cosmicomic universe beyond simply the linguistic sign 'Qfwfq'; indeed, it denotes a stable point of reference from before and throughout history. Moreover, this approach highlights the role that Qfwfq plays as a building block of, and not just as an ever-present witness to, the cosmos.

In turn, a corollary consideration is that of mortality. Qfwfq exists through cataclysmic events on Earth, and plays with his companions in space, yet never records an instance where he dies (but then, nor does any first-person narrator); he simply continues the story that he is telling, to all appearances as a new creature. However, it is not a question that Qfwfq is immortal as a means to survive such ordeals but rather that mortality is not applicable. As he exists before time begins (with the Big Bang), it is more correct to qualify his longevity as *eternal* existence, that is, without (any discernible) beginning or end. Even when Qfwfq ponders the option of non-existence in 'L'implosione', he never goes through with it and closes instead on a note of continuity, 'Continuo a scavare nel mio buco, nella mia tana di talpa' (1272). The host bodies that he comprises are perishable, but Qfwfq himself always exists in the same state.

While Calvino has pointed out that Qfwfq is not always clearly defined, and it is certainly true that Qfwfq's form is ambiguous in some stories, to see him as a unit provides clarification in others because it gives him a basic form and allows Qfwfq to be the same character both at the beginning of the universe and a human in Central Park eons later (in 'Le figlie della Luna'), both a dinosaur and a lizard-like creature in 'I Dinosauri', and it gives Qfwfq's form a point of departure at the beginning of 'Senza colori', where his shape is unclear before he becomes part of a human host. There is therefore a practical dimension to this approach: disregarding mortality (or immortality) and seeing his name as referring primarily to the unit but also to the body, Qfwfq provides a stable, continuous framework for how to conceive of a complex character that survives in space, lives on Earth, and also exists in the infinitesimally small and dense singularity that creates the Big Bang.

I will also argue that characters with similarly unique names as Qfwfq, such as G'd(w)ⁿ and il Decano (k)yK, are also cosmic units. Below, I use a selection of stories which proceeds thematically rather than chronologically, and not every story in the whole collected cosmicomic universe is needed; rather, the following narratives respond to various difficulties in establishing Qfwfq's unit form. 'Tutto in un punto' (1965), 'Sul far del giorno' (1965) and 'Quanto scommettiamo' (1965) depict a molecular Qfwfq, where the latter also

shows Qfwfq as part of a human billions of years after the Big Bang; 'Priscilla – Mitosi' (1967) problematizes a single Qfwfq by the presence of a double; 'Il sangue, il mare' (1967) is a story that challenges the idea of mortality and suggests why Qfwfq can 'survive' apocalyptic events such as those which take place in 'La molle Luna' (1967); 'I Dinosauri' (1965) represents non-human changes to Qfwfq's outer form; and 'Tempesta solare' (1968) is an example where – uniquely in the cosmicomic universe – characters are unfamiliar with the impossible.

3. Cosmic Units

Beginning with the most compact moment of the cosmicomic universe, 'Tutto in un punto' (1965) is a story that anticipates the Big Bang. Acknowledging that figurative language is necessary to explain a world without form – or more exactly, a world *before* form – Qfwfq describes an environment in which his family and nearby characters interact as they would in the real world but with the restriction of occupying the same, infinitely small space. After coexisting with everything else in the universe, il signor Pber^t Pber^d, la signora Ph(i)Nk_o, De XuaeauX and the rest are all flung to distant parts of the cosmos after it begins. What this story highlights is firstly a common point of origin for cosmicomic units; secondly, Qfwfq articulates what is contained within the singularity and, in so doing, highlights his own function:

Aggiungi poi la roba che dovevamo tenere lì ammucciata: *tutto il materiale che sarebbe poi servito a formare l'universo, smontato* e concentrato in maniera che non riuscivi a riconoscere quel che in seguito sarebbe andato a far parte dell'astronomia (come la nebulosa d'Andromeda) da quel che era destinato alla geografia (per esempio i Vosgi) o alla chimica (come certi isotopi del berillio). (119, my emphasis)

The universe before the Big Bang is 'smontato'; it exists in a state before its beginning and form that necessarily includes Qfwfq and the other characters. This is not to suggest that Qfwfq and the likes of Pber^t Pber^d are reduced or dismantled, but instead that they exist alongside the building blocks of the universe and indeed *are* building blocks of the universe. Subsequently, in 'Sul far del giorno' (1965), in the middle of a cloud of nebulous gas, Qfwfq and his family begin to feel their surroundings harden as the planets of the solar system are formed, where Qfwfq is small enough to be irritated by passing particles: 'ma tutto questo vorticare di particelle non aveva altro effetto che un prurito fastidioso' (97–8). Unfortunately, his sister G'd(w)ⁿ is trapped in the Earth's core and does not emerge until billions of years later in Canberra:

Tutti riconoscemmo G'd(w)ⁿ: spaventata forse dall'incendio del Sole, in uno scatto della sua anima ritrosa, era sprofondata dentro la materia della Terra in condensazione [...] finché non la incontrai, molto più tardi, a Canberra, nel 1912, sposata a un certo Sullivan [...] cambiata che quasi non la riconobbi. (106–7)

G'd(w)ⁿ forms part of the Earth's core, then, by a process of passing through substances and organisms, reappears eventually as part of a human female. The normality of the name – by a cosmicomic measure – would suggest that her husband Sullivan is an ordinary human being, and that G'd(w)ⁿ's form is now recognizably human from the exterior, but that it is her unit that Qfwfq recognizes with difficulty eons later. Likewise, Qfwfq mentions 'il signor Hnw, quello che poi diventò un cavallo' (97): he is a unit like Qfwfq, who becomes part of

a horse after the Earth solidifies and when animal life has evolved after billions of years, an allusion, no doubt, to the likewise nearly unpronounceable horse-like race of Houyhnhnms from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Gulliver is instructed to 'Hhuun, Hhuun' by a horse, 'which I understood was to attend him' (Swift 198), and the linguistic difficulty that Gulliver encounters in understanding the Houyhnhnms is mirrored by il signor Hnw: 'che quanto a capacità d'esprimersi non era mai stato molto dotato' (101).

In turn, a cosmic unit approach gives Qfwfq form in those stories where it is hardly mentioned. In 'Quanto scommettiamo' (1965), Qfwfq places bets with il Decano (k)yK on what events will take place as the universe grows older, indeed beginning with the bet that the universe will even begin.³ As in 'Sul far del giorno', one of the few details given is that Qfwfq is small enough to notice the surrounding particles:

Quando cominciammo a scommettere non c'era ancora niente che potesse far prevedere niente, tranne un po' di particelle che giravano, elettroni buttati in qua e in là come vien viene, e protoni su e giù ciascuno per suo conto. (154)

After many eons, as their betting becomes ever more precise, Qfwfq and (k)yK take outwardly human form as they endeavour to predict events on Earth, 'stabilitici su questo pianeta' (162). Both Qfwfq and (k)yK begin as discrete units and are taken up as part of two humans on Earth billions of years later, witnessing events through human eyes, not strictly speaking as humans *tout court*.

As part of a red blood cell in 'Priscilla – Mitosi' (1967), Qfwfq explores a new sensation to him and indeed a unique transformation in the cosmicomic universe: he splits and becomes part of a second red blood cell, creating his own double in an entirely natural process. Qfwfq sees beyond his outer cellular identity and through the perspective of the larger human organism of which he is a small part, and sees a woman through the void between bodies:

Vidi chi mi veniva incontro dal vuoto dell'altrove altravolta altrimenti con nome cognome indirizzo soprabito rosso stivaletti neri frangetta lentigginini: Priscilla Langwood [...]. (288, my emphasis)

By extending the image of the blood cell in the host body, both in dimension – vastly reducing the size – and applicability – to all the cosmicomic stories, 'Priscilla – Mitosi' metaphorically represents the unit model at work. Returning to more literal terms, in the preceding story entitled 'Il sangue, il mare' (1967), Qfwfq is part of another blood cell in a human body, which is sat in a car with other passengers. His unit form changes one particular assumption that has been made of him in this story: that he is mortal and that he dies in a car crash at the end of the story (for example, Capozzi 71). Taking both sides of the debate, Chubb argues that 'Paradoxically, then, Qfwfq is discontinuous because he dies, but continuous because his existence is metamorphosed into a new consciousness' (12). Yet Qfwfq does not die, he simply leaves the form he has been occupying – in this case, a human blood cell inside a human being. He is continuous on both a physical and an existential level, and indeed, due to this he is able to continue recounting his adventures after his otherwise fatal car crash because death is not applicable.⁴ Mortality does not enter into a

³ The implication being that Qfwfq and (k)yK make this first bet in the same singularity of 'Tutto in un punto'.

⁴ Even in 'L'implosione' (1984), non-existence is a *choice* for Qfwfq; it is not beyond his control.

discussion of Qfwfq's eternal character, which means that he survives cataclysmic events not by being immortal but simply by passing between forms. Thus, in 'La molle Luna' (1967), Qfwfq witnesses a meteor storm that destroys the surface of the world, but then, 'Dopo centinaia di migliaia di secoli' (235), witnesses its reconstruction. Instead of suggesting that Qfwfq's host is human both before and after the disaster, Qfwfq is more precisely, to use Chubb's term, 'continuous':

La Terra attorno a noi era irriconoscibile, ricoperta da un altissimo strato di fango impastato di proliferazioni verdi e di organismi sguscianti. Delle nostre antiche materie terrestri non era più visibile alcuna traccia. (234)

Qfwfq also makes up part of non-human organisms. In 'I Dinosauri' (1965), Qfwfq tells of how he outlives his fellow dinosaurs in the uplands and returns to the low plains to meet the Nuovi, ostensibly humans, who now populate the Earth. This story does not show Qfwfq as a unit on his own but is rather an example of where a unit model explains how Qfwfq moves between bodies. He remains continually anxious that he will be hunted but soon realizes the villagers have never seen a dinosaur and simply call him 'Brutto' for being different. Qfwfq himself claims to be the last dinosaur of his kind, but has in fact taken on a different exterior. To the Nuovi, he appears as a large lizard of similar physical dimensions to the human villagers he meets, with a coiled tail (166) and a 'boccuccia da lucertola' (170). However, when a giant dinosaur skeleton is discovered, Qfwfq recognizes its form, although it is far larger than his current lizard body:

Giaceva uno scheletro di Dinosaurio gigantesco. [...] Io continuavo a guardare lo scheletro, il Padre, il Fratello, l'uguale a me, il Me Stesso; riconoscevo le mie membra spolpate, i miei lineamenti incisi nella roccia, tutto quello che eravamo stati e non eravamo più [...]. (177)

Qfwfq fears that the villagers will recognize him: 'Sarebbe bastato che uno di loro passasse con lo sguardo dallo scheletro a me, mentr'ero fermo a contemplarlo, e si sarebbe accorto che eravamo identici' (177), but Qfwfq's host body is clearly not identical to the skeleton that they find. Although he may have once been part of a dinosaur, just like the skeleton, he is no longer, but he retains a memory of being part of one. Qfwfq has passed on to being a lizard-like and anthropomorphic creature after having been a dinosaur. Furthermore, he claims, 'sono stato dinosauro: diciamo per una cinquantina di milioni d'anni' (164) but not that he has been the *same* dinosaur over this period.

In each story, extraordinary events occur without much reaction (by a measure more typical of characters in fantastic narratives), while 'Tempesta solare' (1968) provides an exception, where Qfwfq's companion deviates from the norms of the narrative world, and where the story also stands out for the highly literary aspect and intertextual resonance with Joseph Conrad (McLaughlin 93–6). The importance of Conrad is due not just to allusions to texts such as *Typhoon* and *Lord Jim* but to the paradigm of reality to which characters in Conrad subscribe: they are humans with terrestrial notions of what constitutes normal and impossible.⁵ By contrast, in stories such as 'Il cielo di pietra' (1968), allusions to Orpheus and classical mythology denote a paradigm where journeys to and from the Underworld or the

⁵ 'Paradigma di realtà' is a term used by Lugnani to describe the norms of a particular world in fantastic literature, 'è un buon sostitutivo di quella anonima «norma»' (54).

centre of the Earth are possible. Qfwfq's fellow characters are, moreover, usually of the same type as him, or similar enough not to evoke terror: in stories on Earth, they are all human on the outside; in the nebulous cloud, they are units, but in 'Tempesta solare', while Qfwfq is part of a human sea captain, his love, Rah, is a giantess, invisible to the sailors and later visible to Reverend Collins who flees upon seeing her. This is a rare instance of an incompatibility between the possible and the impossible in the cosmicomic universe, and it is worth noting that the reactions are felt by human characters whose world view does not allow for such extraordinary events. By contrast, Qfwfq recognizes Rah attached to his ship's mast, 'Rah era riuscita a raggiungermi' and the exchange which follows – 'Sei lì, Rah, – dissi – mi hai scovato. – Perché ti sei nascosto quaggiù?' (replies Rah) (1235) –acknowledges a prior familiarity, one 'down there' on planet Earth, implying a previous existence in space, that can be supported by seeing Qfwfq and Rah as units.

4. Against the Grain (of Dust)

Citing a line from Beckett's *Molloy*, Jackson uses the formulation of 'There could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names' (38) to describe a particular distinction in fantastic literature. On the one hand, 'nameless things' belong to a tradition of horror and gothic literature, where the monster is referred to as 'it' or is left unnamed, without 'adequate articulation except through suggestion and implication' (38–9). By contrast, 'thingless names' are 'words which are apprehended as empty signs' that 'shift towards language as signifying nothing', such as Lovecraft's Cthulhu or Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky (40). In other words, in the former, the real or manifest monster is not named; in the latter, there is no clear signified denoted by a signifier which is itself nonsensical: it is not clear what manner of creature (a Cthulhu or Jabberwocky) is being encountered. In both cases, there is a separation of signifier from signified, at least temporarily (*Dracula*, for example, is a creature at first called 'it', then eventually named). Whether or not fantastic is the most appropriate label for the whole cosmicomic universe, but in keeping with the first position taken by the critical consensus mentioned at the beginning that Qfwfq is a sign, Qfwfq falls into a 'thingless names' category, not only because his signifier does not correspond to a clear and stable signified but also because there is nothing horrific or macabre to Qfwfq's stories (indeed the cosmicomic adventures are comic, not macabre).

Jackson continues, 'The signifier is not secured by the weight of the signified: it begins to float free' (40), an argument that echoes what Lacan writes about in his essay *The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud* (1957) in which he proposes: 'The notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' (419). This is not to ally Qfwfq in strict terms with Lacanian psychoanalysis and its wider applicability to language as an endless chain of signifieds. Rather, Lacan provides a useful perspective through which to analyse Qfwfq: the object to which each signifier refers continually shifts, which figuratively stands for the changes in the forms that Qfwfq takes while the signifier Qfwfq remains the same, and it is a perspective that adheres to the second assumption of the critical literature, that Qfwfq undergoes metamorphosis.

However, in proposing a cosmic unit model, a neat categorization in Jackson's and Lacan's terms is disrupted. Qfwfq's signifieds do not slip, as both the signifier and signified are stable; he is neither thingless nor nameless. Instead, the larger signifieds are unstable, the permutations of which Qfwfq becomes a part: the human, dinosaur, mollusc and so on. He changes at one degree of remove, a synecdochal figure, and responds to Jackson's argument by adding a hidden, even subversive level of stability – which is ironic given that Jackson sees the fantastic as subverting a rational and stable order. Here, the fantastic is stable, and

subversively so, as it disrupts the extent to which Qfwfq can be ascribed a label of being either thingless or nameless.

In defining the postmodern fantastic in one regard as the addition of 'new and typically postmodern elements to [the traditional fantastic]' (64), Horstkotte incorporates Jackson's argument into his discussion:

Although the idea of the 'nameless things' plays an important role in the postmodern fantastic too, Jackson's 'thingless names' are more significant in this context because the signifier's loss of one fixed meaning is also a central theme in the theory of deconstruction. (63)

Horstkotte echoes Olsen, who, in his study of postmodern fantasy, argues that 'fantasy is a deconstructive mode of narrative' (19). In Jackson's and Horstkotte's terms, Qfwfq is not a postmodern fantastic character because he has both a 'name' and 'thing': a stable signifier and signified. Yet, Qfwfq bears the appearance on the surface – particularly in literal terms as a dinosaur, mollusc – of having the traits of an unstable signified. To understand Qfwfq, therefore, as a metamorphosing character allies him with a label of postmodern fantastic, but to consider him an unstable unit disrupts such a categorization.

Moreover, within a broader framework of postmodernism, Pilz argues that 'With Qfwfq Calvino anticipates the decentered, postmodern subject that stands in contrast to the modernist notion of unified subjects with fixed identities' (29). Qfwfq certainly has 'multiple identities' (29) but as a unified and continuous subject, whose outer, synecdochal identities change, and not the unit within. That said, Qfwfq as a unit still has a decentering effect. Despite the human characteristics that Qfwfq displays, humans are not the only form of which he is part; they are simply one of many. In short, Qfwfq is not a decentered subject, but a stable subject that decentres humanity, as humans are not the only or most significant characters in the cosmicomic universe. Yet, this is itself a postmodern trait, as Markey suggests, 'In keeping with postmodernism's democratic attitude, in *Cosmicomics* creatures usually presumed less significant than humans – amphibians, dinosaurs, slugs and the like – merit the same attention as people and astronomical phenomena' (91). As a stable unit, Qfwfq may not fit neatly within a category of a postmodern character, but his character is postmodern in effect. And although Qfwfq does not cohere entirely with Lacan's argument of sliding signifieds, he does, however, resonate with Lacan's claim that the subject 'I' is decentered,⁶ because the 'I' for Qfwfq denotes the unit within the exterior host, whatever that host may be.

The *De Rerum Natura* by the Roman poet Lucretius, whom Calvino held in high regard, further informs the stability that Qfwfq demonstrates. For the most part, Lucretius is mentioned by critics with regard to *Palomar* and in connection with the Norton Lecture 'Leggerezza', which Calvino was to present at Harvard University. Here, Lucretius' materialist perspective provides an insight into the makeup of the cosmicomic universe:

Lucretius gives a materialist account of the universe, in which transformation *stricto sensu* is impossible. Instead, there is incessant flux: *entities come into, and go out of, existence through the agglomeration, reconfiguration, and dispersal of atoms – the minuscule building blocks of matter that remain always the same.* [...] Lucretius' account

⁶ Reworking Descartes, Lacan states that 'I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking' and adds, 'I am not, where I am the plaything of my thoughts; I think about what I am where I do not think I am thinking' (430).

of the universe combines *eternal stability* at the level of elementary particles with constant mutability at the supra-atomic level. (Gildenhard and Zissos 13, 14, my emphasis)

Gildenhard and Zissos cite the following passage from Lucretius' poem, which resonates with what has been discussed so far:

But yet, because true reason and nature itself
 Compel, be with me, while I demonstrate
 In a few verses that there do exist
 Bodies that are both *solid and everlasting*,
 Which we teach are seeds or primal atoms of things
 From which now all creation has been made.⁷

(Bk I, vv. 498–502, my emphasis)⁸

Qfwfq as a cosmic unit is a representation of the atomist and materialist view that Lucretius advances: an eternal building block that constructs a panoply of creatures. This is not to dismiss Calvino's own thoughts and fondness for either Lucretius or Ovid, but in analysing the reach of the cosmic unit model, it is important to note that Qfwfq is not so much an Ovidian metamorphosing creature; he is a Lucretian atom.⁹ Indeed, the remarks on the dust jacket of *Cosmicomiche: vecchie e nuove* (1984) that Qfwfq's adventures are a 'controcanto grottesco al poema di Lucrezio' complement the underlying structure of Calvino's cosmic protagonist. The atomist perspective chimes particularly with the first story that establishes Qfwfq as a unit, 'Tutto in un punto', where Qfwfq finds himself together with 'tutto il materiale che sarebbe poi servito a formare l'universo' that recalls the above line from Lucretius, 'Which we teach are seeds or primal atoms of things/From which now all creation has been made'. Yet the correspondence with Lucretius goes further. In Book II of the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius suggests that atoms move off in some instances under their own volition, they 'Make movements by the movements of their bodies' (v. 311).¹⁰ Likewise, Qfwfq and his family can also move: G'd(w)ⁿ, for example, plays too close to the crust of the Earth and is dragged in. Death for living organisms, moreover, simply leads to a recombination of their atoms:

And death does not destroy things when they die
 So as to bring destruction to their atoms,
 But breaks their combination everywhere,
 And then makes new conjunctions [...]¹¹

(Bk II: vv. 1002–4)

⁷ 'sed quia vera tamen ratio naturaque rerum/cogit, ades, paucis dum versibus expediamus/esse ea quae solido atque aeterno corpore constant/semina quae rerum primordiaque esse docemus/unde omnis rerum nunc constat summa creata' (*De Rerum Natura*).

⁸ English quotations come from Lucretius (trans. Ronald Melville).

⁹ Speaking under the heading of a more general 'strange granularity of Calvino's worlds' (34), Hume, by contrast, argues for a negotiation between the poets: 'Lucretius presides over this particulate cosmos, and Ovid hovers over the metamorphic capabilities inhering in its granularity. The prevalence of metamorphosis and transformation is quickly established in the cosmic realm' (36).

¹⁰ 'praeterquam siquid proprio dat corpore motus'.

¹¹ 'nec sic interemit mors res ut materiai/corpora conficiat, sed coetum dissipat ollis;/inde aliis aliud coniungit'.

Therefore, when Qfwfq experiences a car crash in 'Il sangue, il mare', he is freed when the body that he inhabits dies. In keeping with Calvino's use of reversal, a tendency that McLaughlin notes throughout the cosmicomic stories (80–99), and which is even mentioned on the cover of *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove*, which describes the collection as 'fantascienza all'incontrario', Qfwfq reverses metamorphosis. Metamorphosis denotes the change of one object into another or many; here, the unit Qfwfq forms part of many objects. In the essay 'Leggerezza' itself, Calvino remarks of Lucretius that: 'La più grande preoccupazione di Lucrezio sembra quella di evitare che il peso della materia ci schiacci' (*Saggi (I)* 636). In understanding the atom as 'infinitamente minuto e mobile e leggero' (636), Qfwfq's unit form is precisely that, the embodiment of 'leggerezza'.

5. Conclusions

To think of Qfwfq as a constant rather than a changing character is a perspective that leads to a number of corollary implications. Qfwfq is demonstrably the same character throughout, not only on a linguistic level as the name Qfwfq but also on a structural level, which explains how he does not die in a car crash, or how he can not only exist in conditions inhospitable to humans but also later appear in New York.

Qfwfq is, however, harder to classify within some literary discourses. He falls outside of the considerations of a postmodern fantastic using the framework to which Jackson and Horstkotte subscribe, as he is neither 'thingless' nor 'nameless'. He is a building block that is continually in use, and that makes him a widely deployed structure, not a function of instability. He is, in Lucretian terms, an atom, a cosmic unit – to repeat the term I have used throughout – that functions to build the cosmos, not simply witness it. Highlighting how Qfwfq is part of the construction of the universe furthermore echoes the debates on structuralism that surrounded the stories during the 1960s: Qfwfq's experience of the universe as a means to link one cosmicomic episode to another bears distinct allusions of intertextuality, not to mention specific intertextual allusions within the work to writers such as Conrad.

His stable existence throughout the history of the universe refutes the label of immortality; rather than never dying, Qfwfq simply passes through new organisms. Thus, characterization and its implications in narrative are rethought: mortality is not a valid concern; neither is metamorphosis or evolution; and as a synecdochal figure, the unit that stands for the whole challenges to what a character's name refers. Moreover, this is not to deny that the cosmicomic universe and its stories are postmodern: Qfwfq does indeed decentre and challenge notions of a stable human identity. However, Qfwfq himself departs from more easily applicable labels of a postmodern character, despite also disrupting an anthropocentric point of view, by his role in being part of a series of non-human creatures. The greater importance of Lucretius rather than Ovid rethinks Qfwfq not as an outwardly mutating organism but one who reverses metamorphosis as he moves through a universe in flux. Rather than an unstable character who changes within a cosmos that is itself continually transforming, Qfwfq stands at odds with the universe around him, a universal constant in a constantly changing universe.

References

- Bernardini Napoletano, Francesca. *I segni nuovi di Italo Calvino: da Le Cosmicomiche a Le città invisibili*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1977. Print.
- Bucciantini, Massimo. *Italo Calvino e la scienza: gli alfabeti del mondo*. Roma: Donzelli, 2007. Print.

- Calligaris, Contardo. *Italo Calvino*. Milano: U. Mursia, 1973. Print.
- Calvino, Italo. *Cosmicomiche: vecchie e nuove*. Milano: Garzanti, 1984. Print.
- Calvino, Italo. *Romanzi e racconti (II)*, Mario Barenghi, Claudio Milanini and Bruno Falchetto (eds.). Milano: Mondadori, 1992. Print.
- Calvino, Italo. *Saggi: 1945–1985 (I)*, Mario Barenghi (ed.). Milano: Mondadori, 1995. Print.
- Cannon, JoAnn. *Italo Calvino: Writer and Critic*. Ravenna: Longo, 1981. Print.
- Capozzi, Rocco. 'Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove: Keeping in Tune with the Times.' *Calvino Revisited*, Franco Ricci (ed.). Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 65–84, 1989. Print.
- Chubb, Stephen. *I, Writer, I, Reader: The Concept of Self in the Fiction of Italo Calvino*. Market Harbourough: Troubador, 1997. Print.
- Deidier, Roberto. *Le forme del tempo: miti, fiabe, immagini di Italo Calvino*. Palermo: Sellerio, 2004. Print.
- Ferretti, Gian Carlo. *Le capre di Bikini: Calvino giornalista e saggista, 1945–1985*. Roma: Editori riuniti, 1989. Print.
- Gabriele, Tommasina. *Italo Calvino: Eros and Language*. Rutherford, London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. Associated University Presses, 1994. Print.
- Gildenhard, Ingo and Andrew Zissos. 'Metamorphosis: A Phenomenology.' *Transformative Change in Western Thought: A History of Metamorphosis from Homer to Hollywood*, Ingo Gildenhard and Andrew Zissos (eds.). London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 1–34, 2013. Print.
- Horstkotte, Martin. *The Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary British Fiction*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2004. Print.
- Hume, Kathryn. *Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos*. Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press. Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.
- Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen, 1981. Print. New Accents. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203328446>
- Lacan, Jacques. 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud.' *Ecrits: the first complete edition in English*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 412–41, 2006. Print.
- Lucretius, Titus Carus. *Lucreti De rerum natura libri sex*. Trans. Cyril Bailey. altera. Oxonii: e typographeo Clarendoniano (ed.). 1922. Print.
- Lucretius, Titus Carus. *On the Nature of the Universe*. Trans. Ronald Melville. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.
- Lugnani, Lucio. 'Per una delimitazione del «genere».' *La narrazione fantastica*, Remo Ceserani, Lucio Lugnani and Emanuella Scarano (eds.). Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 37–73, 1983. Print.
- Markey, Constance. *Italo Calvino: A Journey Toward Postmodernism*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999. Print.
- McLaughlin, Martin. *Italo Calvino*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. Print.
- Messina, Davide. 'Qfwfq as Kafka? Possible-Worlds Interpretations.' *The Modern Language Review* 106(4): 1001–27, 2011. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.106.4.1001>
- Milanini, Claudio. *L'utopia discontinua: saggio su Italo Calvino*. Milano: Garzanti, 1990. Print.
- Olsen, Lance. *Ellipse of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Postmodern Fantasy*. New York: Greenwood, 1987. Print.
- Pilz, Kerstin. *Mapping Complexity: Literature and Science in the Works of Italo Calvino*. Leicester: Troubador Pub., 2005. Print.
- Ricci, Franco. *Painting with Words, Writing with Pictures Word and Image in the Work of Italo Calvino*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442678231>

- Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*, Colin McKelvie (ed.). Belfast: Appletree, 1976. Print.
- Turi, Nicola. *L'identità negata: il secondo Calvino e l'utopia del tempo fermo*. Firenze: Società editrice fiorentina, 2003. Print.
- Weiss, Beno. *Understanding Italo Calvino*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993. Print.

How to cite this article: Reza, M 2018 The Irreducible Qfwfq; Rethinking the All-Seeing I. *Modern Languages Open*, 2018(1): 1, pp. 1–12, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.130>

Published: 16 February 2018

Copyright: © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

]u[*Modern Languages Open* is a peer-reviewed open access journal
published by Liverpool University Press.

OPEN ACCESS 