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TO BE OR NOT TO BE.
DEATH AS A METAPHORIC DIMENSION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

ESSERE O NON ESSERE. LA MORTE
COME DIMENSIONE METAFORICA NELLA LETTERATURA PER L'INFANZIA

In the history of children's literature, in Italy as elsewhere, when we take into consideration the so-called "classics" or, in more recent times, the titles and authors most appreciated by readers and critics alike, we find out that there is an undeniable – if implicit, metaphoric, subterranean – theme, recurring through their pages: death. Aim of this exploration, characterized by a comparative approach, is to try and understand why death is a Leitmotiv in the best children's literature of all times, in Italy as in the rest of the Western world, and what is actually meant by the recurrent, metaphorical allusion to this dimension in children's books.

Nella storia della letteratura per l'infanzia, italiana e non solo, se si prendono in esame i cosiddetti "classici" o, avvicinandosi ai nostri tempi, i titoli e gli autori che hanno goduto e godono di maggior successo presso i lettori così come presso la critica, si scopre che un tema ricorre su tutti, se pure in maniera sottile, allusiva, metaforica, non necessariamente esplicita: la morte. Scopo di questa esplorazione è cercare di capire perché la morte sia il Leitmotiv della miglior letteratura per l'infanzia di tutti i tempi – studiata in modo comparativo e qui con un particolare sguardo all'Italia – e a che cosa si alluda quando, in modo metaforico, si tocca nei libri per bambini questa dimensione.

Key words: History of children's literature, classics, death, coming of age, social critique.

Parole chiave: Storia della letteratura per l'infanzia, classici – morte, crescita, critica sociale.

Children's classics as a discourse

If we search for a recurrent theme in the history of Italian children's literature, one that distinguishes possibly the best, and definitely the most widely read titles and authors both of the past and of the present days, we will end up finding, quite surprisingly maybe, that this theme is death. Death runs through our children's literature not as an explicit theme, but as one that emerges when, and if, we dig into the deepest meaning of what critics and readers alike consider the best books for children in our tradition. Books for children that have, if only in a subterranean way, death at their centre.

I will thus ponder about death as a Leitmotiv in Italian children's literature, and I will try to explore the reason why death, as a symbolic dimension, seems to be what stimulates the creation of the most memorable children's books. Not just in Italy.

Death, as an underlying theme, is in fact at the roots of all children's classics. We

could even dare say that death is what children's classics are actually about. In this sense, taken as a group, the best children's books in the Western world, from the second half of the Nineteenth century on, can be considered not as a scattered list of books for children, but as a coherent, poetic, philosophical and social "discourse" – a discourse addressed to adults as well.

But the death these books talk about is not the death we are used to thinking of. Our everyday vision, perception, or concept of death is much more limited, narrow-minded and superficial than the idea of death portrayed, evoked and explored by the great children's literature.

In the best books for children death is not the sad moment when someone actually dies, nor is it evoked for pietistic reasons - as it had been in many of the very first books for children, during the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries¹. It rather coincides, from a certain moment on – when the so called "classics" begin to appear – with the whole dimension of the unknown, of mystery, of adventure, of the not-here; it is an "elsewhere" that the protagonist invariably at some point must face, cross, get to know, or mingle with, before he/she can grow up, and in order to really grow up. As such, it transforms children's literature altogether, and makes it become not just a section of the history of education, but in its own right a *literature*: a poetic, metaphoric, evocative expression of the human and of its deepest issues (in particular, the relationship with that which is "other" than itself).

To tell the truth, there has always been a corpus of children's books based on the premise that, to grow up, children simply have to learn the rules of civilization, education, and of the social context they were born in. Not only the first children's books were educational in this sense: many of the books for children published today – albeit more subtly – still are. You grow up when, and if, you adapt to the social world that surrounds you – such is the implicit message in this still widely spread kind of literature addressed to the young.

But in the last decades of the Nineteenth century some more sensitive, more critical authors started to see children's books as a means through which it was possible to convey a different, provocative message – provocative not because too new, but because radically old, so ancestral in fact, as to have been forgotten and submerged in modern societies' official vision.

This provocative message, adopted by a whole new kind of children's literature that exploded at that time and that has been producing masterpieces since (as opposed to strictly pedagogical books), says that only by passing through the unknown, the uncivilized, the outside, the forest, the animal kingdom, the underground – only by passing through Nature as opposed to Civilization (Harrison 1993) – we can achieve a full "human" nature. A full human nature, that is, paradoxically requires that we do not remove, but rather integrate that which we consider "other", the non-human, because the non-human – different, ungraspable, alien as it seems – is, in fact, where

¹ On the history of children's literature during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, see: Darton 1932; Avery 1975; Grenby 2011; Zipes 2005.

we come from. It is, as Charles Darwin put it, our origin, and thus undeniably and irreducibly part of us.

The passage through it, though (the passage through some place or state that recalls our obscure beginning, when we “were”, but only in an undefined, contaminated way), is a kind of death, because we have to give up, to relinquish – albeit only for a time – everything that we know and are (or have become), in order to experience what is beyond, or what was before, society, civilization, and the strictly anthropocentric dimension we are used to inhabit.

The idea of the importance of going back, of getting in touch with our origins again, if only for a moment, was part of our ancestors’ wisdom. They conceived and performed the initiation rites especially for that (not to forget how important our beginnings are, to determine our nature and, by means of that awareness, to really grow up as individuals)². In the modern world it has been left to children’s literature to pick up this lesson. It has been left to the best books for children to find metaphors for a death that is not really death (just like the one experienced during the initiation rites), but a necessary transition, a reminder of where we come from, and of what we are – part of the universe and confused with it – beyond, or deeper down inside our civilized selves.

We don't belong here. Death as a metaphor

So Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* – the first children’s classic – disappears underground: she is swallowed by the earth, becomes one with it again, and experiences her adventures in the place where we bury the dead; Tom Sawyer chooses the graveyard as the place to run away, at night, he witnesses a murder there, and hangs around death in many other ways (when he gets lost inside a labyrinthian cave, when he and his friends escape to an island for so long that the village eventually celebrates their funeral...); Peter Pan flies to a never-land (a place outside time, a place of non-being), bringing with him the “lost” boys, i. e. boys who may be dead and who find, in fact, a new home underground (he himself is a half-and-half creature, embodying as such the human ontological contamination with the non-human); Mowgli goes directly back to our animal origins when, lost in the jungle as a baby, he is naturally breast-fed by a wild beast, a very powerful image of fusion with the non-human; Heidi runs happily in the mountains, rolls free in the grass but falls ill, when she is sent to the city and to school (as if to say that the man-made world is *not* where we belong); the children of the *Secret Garden* recover from sickness and from sadness only when they find a tangled, mysterious, green oasis abandoned by humans and allowed to revert to the wild...

Wilderness and death (the dimensions that precede and follow that which we, as human beings, currently are) are symbolically the same thing, in terms of civilization:

² On the topic of initiation rites, see: Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969; Turner 1967; Eliade 1965.

they both represent the unknown, the other side, that which we have come to fear because it is now “alien” to what we consider our world. But it is from the non-human and from the non-being that we all come; it is to those dimensions that, deep down, we also belong, and that children especially belong.

In the *Secret Garden* the connection between wilderness and death is made even more explicit because the now-wild garden is also the place of death, the place where Colin’s mother died, which is why the civilized adults in the story rejected it, and why children, on the contrary, according to the best children’s literature’s perspective, need to find and enter it, if they are to grow up full-fledged human beings.

We could go on. There are metaphors of death in every children’s classic and in the best and most famous children’s novels of our time, and in all of them death is the “otherness” the protagonists must experience to grow up in tune with the whole universe, and not just with their anthropocentric society. We find it in the *Paul Street Boys* (Molnar, 1906), where the young protagonists fight and literally die for the only green space left in the city (as if to say that it is impossible to become adults without having the chance to stay for some time “outside”, “outdoor”, in a natural setting), and, more recently and more explicitly even, after a century, in Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002) and *The Graveyard Book* (2008), where the main characters are children who enter the world of the dead or are literally raised by them. In other contemporary examples of this discourse (examples that are considered unanimously and internationally among the best children’s novels of our times), we find it in all of David Almond’s children’s books, from *Kit’s Wilderness* to *Skellig* to *My name is Mina* to *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean*, where this otherness (be it a dark and abandoned mine, the meeting with a half-dead, half-human creature, the deep identification with another species, the need to spend time outdoor on a tree, the “gift” of being visited by ghosts) is inextricably intertwined with childhood, or rather with the end of it. Only by facing the unknown, the not-here, the wild, the dark, the underground, the sky, the mysterious “beyond” (as opposed to simply adapting themselves to the rules that are considered important in the house, at school, by society) can these children become human, and themselves, in the fullest sense.

Metaphors of death are, as we have seen, multiple, and I would like to say inevitable, in all great children’s books. Since the last decades of the Nineteenth century, their presence has been signalling what can be considered the deepest vocation of children’s literature: telling, in as many ways as possible, that our “here” does not coincide with “all that there is”, with the “whole”. That there is another dimension, a beyond, something other than ourselves. And that with this otherness one must relate, that it needs to be entered, experienced, acknowledged, which might mean, in social terms, somehow to die, no longer to be, to get lost, but with the possibility to find another, less rigid, less limited, less anthropocentric identity than the one imposed upon us by our society. An identity which is given by our feeling, at that point, not different but “identical” to that which is not strictly human or human-made, because it is to the whole cosmos that we belong, before we belong to the human world. This “call of the origin”, a deadly one (since by “origin” both the *wild* and the *non-being* are

evoked), is something that we find in Italian children's literature as well, as it appears by applying this hermeneutical perspective to some of the best titles of its history and of the present days.

The Italian contribution. Visiting the world of the dead

Le avventure di Pinocchio (1881), our first and most remarkable "classic", under its surface of a pedagogical book, is, in fact, in an anthropological and philosophical sense, the most mortuary story for children ever written, which is probably the reason why it has become so universally famous. The puppet runs away from its paternal home (a safe human dwelling) right at the beginning of the story, and knocks at the house of the dead instead (so the Fairy's house is called by the Fairy herself); the Fairy, as we soon find out, is also the lady of animals which, in ancient cultures, were associated with the dead (Eliade 1975; Eliade 1991); Pinocchio is hanged by the murderers to an oak, which makes him return to its natural origins (a piece of wood that goes back to the tree it was taken from); he undergoes then many metamorphosis, all of them representing some sort of dying, of relinquishing of his previous being. In the book we meet tombstones, coffins, black rabbits, a passage through the stomach of a big fish (an image of ritual death), to name but a few symbolic elements or episodes. Not to mention the final image, in which, next to the "flesh and blood" boy, we see the inanimate body of the puppet, a dead body, a corpse, clearly indicating that death must be faced, crossed, experienced, in order to grow up... Pinocchio's picaresque adventures are nothing but a journey into the world of the dead, the only experience that can make him turn into a human being, something that no school, no family, no society, with their rules, had been able to do. He must be part of that "otherness", first. Physically, too, in his case, as a creature made of wood.

Collodi's nephew, who signed his books as "Collodi nipote", is a lesser author who wrote a very successful children's novel, *Sussi e Biribissi*, in 1902. The book has never gone out of print since. It tells the story of two young boys who decide to make a journey into the underground. Inspired by Jules Verne and his voyage to the centre of the earth, the two friends go down a hole and wind up exploring the sewers of Florence, where they discover and meet with many strange things. Although a very humorous book, the story and its setting are, once again, clearly symbolic. Just like in *Alice*, a passage through the underworld (a meeting with death, a temporary disappearing from the social radar, a getting lost and confused with something else) is necessary, in every young person's process of growth.

Childhood and (as) non-being

In 1911 Giulio Gianelli (whose biography is in many ways similar to James Barrie's one – he adored children, didn't have any of his own, and adopted some orphans),

wrote the strangest book for children, from which Scott Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* seems inspired. *Storia di Pipino nato vecchio e morto bambino* is the story of a little clay statue of an old man that is suddenly brought to life and begins to rejuvenate. He becomes a middle-aged man, a young man, a boy, and finally a baby, at which point he dies. The End. There is hardly a more effective way of showing how close, ontologically speaking, childhood and death, childhood and non-being are. Childhood is the age that is closest to non-being, the age that has just got here from there, and that can easily go back to where it came from. It seems in fact very natural that this backward development ending with a new-born baby has its climax in the infant's vanishing into nothingness. Childhood and nothingness are, in their very essence, related. They both represent the negation of a too rigid, too heavy, too defined, or definable, way of being. Nothingness can, after all, be considered as the dimension in which everything is still possible, and childhood has the same characteristic: it is the age of possibilities, of constant becoming, of change, of transformation, of not-being-yet, of not being in any specific/specified way, something that has made it seem a very uncanny age, in many historical periods and by many cultures. As Giorgio Agamben reminds us (Agamben, 1979), children – and babies even more – have been considered as larvatic, ineffable, ghostly creatures. As creatures closer to non-being, closer to the dead than to “normal” people, by adults who are, etymologically (and also, often, psychologically) speaking, “finished”, “specified”, “crystallized” individuals, afraid, as such, of any indeterminacy or uncertainty. But what is uncanny to adults, is children's real domain, as children's literature recurrently shows.

Adventure: or, the fascination of death

In the history of Italian children's literature Emilio Salgari (1862-1911) has been possibly the most beloved author by young readers themselves. Children, at least until a generation ago, chose to read Salgari, they weren't told to, they spontaneously turned to him, which is something different from, for example, the Rodari phenomenon. Rodari is definitely the most popular Italian author, but he is famous and widely read because he is imposed to every Italian child by teachers in school. Salgari not only wasn't imposed, but children often read him against their parents and teachers' will, or with their disapproval (Faeti and Beseghi 1992). Salgari's genre was Adventure. He wrote hundreds of novels, set in all the typical geographical/historical places of adventure: the jungle, the desert, the ocean, the Far North, the Far West... He created many unforgettable characters, all of them similar, as for their temper. His heroes are romantic, melancholic, sad individuals who fight and are brave during battles and actions because, deep down, they care little about dying, they are ready to die. Dying, for them, is better than living under tyranny, without freedom, or having to bear injustice. Salgari often wrote about historically dominated peoples and pleaded their cause (it should not be forgotten that Italy was still partly dominated by Austria during his lifetime). His proud, fearless characters are loved by children and dreaded by

teachers and parents for there is a certain aura of nihilism hovering around them. Although incredibly brave and always ready to fight, they feel in fact somehow doomed and relentlessly torn. They are at all effects heroes, but, as their name often suggests (let's think of the Corsaro Nero, for instance), heroes with a dark soul. The seduction of death, felt shamelessly by Salgari's heroes, who constantly talk and dream of it, and sometimes even long for it, becomes in his pages a radical critique to the pettiness, the compromise, the injustice characterizing the kind of life imposed by systems of power that Salgari could not stand. It is not hard to see how fascinating this literature can be for pre-teen and adolescent readers, "dominated" as they easily feel to be, by tyrannical, unfair, arrogant adults. Death, in Salgari's novels, is an elsewhere one can look at, a no-matter-how-dangerous alternative to a social world that is characterized by unbalanced power relationships and that imposes itself as normal, but does nothing to make itself understood or seem fair to some categories of people, the young among them.

The same is true for the protagonists of Mino Milani (1928), a contemporary author of adventure stories. Milani's characters are heroic and brave, but much of their bravery stems from the fact that they have nothing to lose if they die, they are already dead inside. Most of them are, in fact, survivors of some terrible war or violence and, because of what they have seen, because death has got so close (indeed they often suffer from some unhealable physical wound), they are now like walking dead. They are pure in soul and driven to fight injustice wherever they find it, but they have become loners, wanderers, ghosts, they are unable to accept any tenderness, any offer of settling down, of living a regular life, of starting for example a family, a farm, or any other activity which isn't the one of constantly, heartbreakingly, leaving everything behind and going away, no matter where to. Milani's characters have a bleak soul, their only obsessive thought is death. Which is to say: another dimension, the feeling that this is not their place, that they belong elsewhere, touched, as they have been, by something that with the 'here' – and with the zealous attention everyone else pays to the here – has nothing to do. There is nothing more fascinating for a young reader than this pensiveness, this 'spleen', and nothing more socially subversive. A wanderer with no destination, no social link, no roots, no interest, who comes and goes as he/she likes, is a fearful and provocative image for a society obsessed by control over everyone, and over everyone's ambitions and desires. But to young readers, Milani's characters, so keenly aware of death, so melancholic, so meta-physical in their thoughts (so spiritual, in a sense), definitely represent deeper values than the economic, competitive ethic and the hyper-active, hyper-focused attitude promoted by our society.

Metamorphosis

One of Italy's most interesting contemporary authors of children's books is Silvana Gandolfi. Almost all her novels (*La scimmia nella biglia*, *Pasta di drago*, *La memoria dell'acqua*, *L'isola del tempo perso*, *La bambina in fondo al mare...*), underneath the

surface of their different plots, revolve around death as a philosophical issue: the relationship between being and not-being, the nature of change, the question of how we can become, and yet still be... In *Aldabra* (2001), these ontological speculations are made explicit by a weird old woman's passion for Shakespeare and *Hamlet*. The woman spends all her time playing the monologue of "to be or not to be" with her adoring granddaughter, and reveals to the child that she has decided not to die, but to transform, instead. The whole book is about the strange and slow metamorphosis of the grandmother into a giant sea turtle and the readiness of the child to accept this as perfectly natural, but keep it a secret from adults who would not understand (because their idea of being – and thus of life and death – is so rigid, dull, oversimplified). Yet another example, brought by children's literature, of how it is possible to talk about death with children overcoming simplifications, stereotypes, commonplaces, and introducing, on the contrary, philosophical speculations that they, much more than adults, seem ready to grasp and accept.

The same idea of death as a metamorphosis, as a sort of reincarnation, offered to the child protagonist (and to the child reader) by an old figure – a special grandparent that the other grown-ups tend to consider odd – is to be found in another contemporary Italian novel for children: *Mio nonno era un ciliegio*, by Angela Nanetti. A beloved grandfather teaches his grandchild to look for the dead grandmother in her favourite animal in the farm, the goose, because she has surely become that very creature, and when he himself is no longer "here", the young protagonist climbs on the grandfather's favourite cherry tree and, by putting his ear on the bark, still hears the old man's voice. He can thus ponder on what "being" means, on being someone but also possibly something else, on "being and its contrary", as Thomas Bernhard writes in his autobiographical book, *Gathering Evidence & My Prizes. A Memoir* (Bernhard 1986, 290) In it, he recalls how, as a small child, he loved to spend hours alone in a graveyard looking at the tombstones and thinking about these very same philosophical questions. Something that children very naturally do.

The most popular living children's author in Italy today is Roberto Piumini. He has written literally hundreds of books, of all genres, from poetry to ballads to novels to mythological retellings to non-fiction etc. With such a prolific production, not all his books can be considered great literature, but according to all critics, he did write a true masterpiece: *Lo stralisco* (1987). Again, it is a book whose main – hovering – character, is death. It tells the story of a child, in an unnamed kingdom and unspecified time, who is dying of some mysterious disease. For he can't go out, his father, the King, summons the best artist around and asks him to paint the palace walls with images of the world the child will never see. With the enthusiastic involvement of the child, the artist paints an impressive work of art, especially fascinating because the characters and details in it are ever-changing, constantly redefined, modified, moved, according to the child's second thoughts, experiments, ideas. Never had a picture been so incredibly full of life. Death, the imminence of death, or rather its presence as an invisible character, is, paradoxically, what gives life: to beauty, to astonishment, to the joy of endless creation. Also, it is what makes the painter become a much wiser man, in the end.

So, to try and dare some sort of conclusion for these reflections on the deepest meaning of children's literature (or of what is considered the best children's literature), in Italy as elsewhere: death is more than just an interesting theme in children's books. It is a radical theme, one that can transform children's literature into a deeply philosophical and provocative discourse. It allows children's books to hint at something that is not here, not now, not us, and yet still is, in the universe. It makes them deal with something that is "other" than our everyday life, other than we can understand by rational means or by social schemes, and yet is part of our deepest being. So much so that the protagonists must re-create a contact with it, even if this means going against what is normally approved, or going away from the civilized dimension. This topic, not clearly definable in any specific way, but introduced through an incredible amount of metaphors by children's literature, is otherwise neglected, concealed, tabooed in our self-centred societies. To talk about it would – and does, in fact – make our social lives, values and priorities appear relative, questionable, and superficial. But great children's books, both classic and contemporary, open this door, point to this otherness, show how limited our everyday life and vision can be, which is why these books are so important for all of us, adults included, and why, even if they are prejudicially considered simple, harmless, imaginary (i.e. not connected to the real world), they wind up being possibly the cultural expression able of the most radical critique.

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