Fairy tales and abandonment between symbolism and reality: persistence and rewritings

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Abstract. Starting with a reflection on the motif of abandonment in fairy tales, this paper aims to investigate its persistence in modern and contemporary children's literature, with particular reference to rewritings and revisitations of classical fairy tales through the special textuality of the picture book. Abandonment thus becomes a key concept, among others, in retracing, from a historiographical perspective, the plots of a lost childhood, passed down to us from ancient times, among persistences and distortions that update its meaning.

Keywords. Fairy tale - Abandonment - Children's Literature - History of Children - Lost Childhood - Rewriting of fairy tales

1. Persistence of the fairy tale

The classic fairy tale is one of the deep matrices of our culture, «kept in the slow rumination of peasant consciences»[1], wrote Italo Calvino in the 1956 introduction to his *Italian Folktales*. However, though it speaks of an archaic time, reflecting existential models very far from ours, it still challenges us in symbolically staging the fundamental experiences of human formation, events and key figures, and urges an interpretative work in the light of our times – those of postmodernism, disenchantment[2], opulence, and material superabundance – and current social demands.

It can be said that with this extraordinary and universal narrative heritage, humanity still has an open account that drives us to an incessant rereading and continuous reinterpretation. This is evident not only in the persistence of in-depth studies on the subject[3], but also, looking at the most recent literary production for children, in the imaginative and artistic work of contemporary authors, writers and illustrators, who starting

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[1] I. Calvino, Introduction to *Fiabe italiane*, Milano, Mondadori, 2002, p. XV.

[2] Cambi writes that the notion of disenchantment has a precise anthropological character, referring to «the man who has changed in the travail of Modernity. He has emancipated himself from Orders, Faiths, Securities. He has affirmed himself in his freedom: of conscience, of choice, of building himself and his existential world, and, later, also social and political. A culture has been created that interprets its unease, its condition of constant search, its stretching between will-to-power and finitude, between re-construction and crisis, in a game of themes and forms that outline the *anthropos* in its radical uncertainty, weakness, anxiety and tension». F. Cambi, *Abitare il disincanto. Una pedagogia del postmoderno*, Torino, UTET, 2006, p. 16.

[3] See, for example, in the Italian context, the publication of A. Gasparini, C. Chellini, *Lupus in fabula. Le fiabe nella relazione educativa*, Trento, Erickson, 2017, and of M. Warner, *C'era una volta. Piccola storia della fiaba*, Roma, Donzelli, 2021.

from even the most well-known and settled of classic fairy tales, elaborate original transcriptions and rewritings using different narrative languages.

These are contributions that update the form of the fairy tale, provocatively overturn its structures, roles and functions, and, in the finest and most significant cases, confirm a constant comparison with its identity nucleus, a fixed term from which originates every transfiguration and adaptation.

The picture book as a literary object, today particularly in vogue due to the formal quality acquired, resulting from the meeting of refined authorial and editorial skills, for some time now, concerning the themes of the reuse of fairy tale and classic contents[4], offers young and older readers suggestive narratives, capable of seducing by virtue of the special textuality through which it communicates. It should be clarified, for those who still do not know its nature, that the picture book is the result of a complex narrative device, with its own expressive mechanisms and resources, whose reading (and understanding) is furnished by a harmonious interdependence between iconic language and verbal language, and requires the acquisition of a specific grammar that affects not only simple visual competence (knowing how to look at images) but also knowing how to understand the different levels (narrative, aesthetic, content, emotional) that are stratified and interpenetrate in the encounter between word, image, design, and book object itself. In the picture book, form and content coincide perfectly, not in a formal sense, observed Tontardini[5], but rather in a sense that the user will want to grasp at the end of a sensorial reading. Here, the image, on the other hand, does not express an exclusive function of illustration of the written text, as historically was the case for the most famous illustrated editions of classic fairy tales (e.g., think of the masterful interpretations of Gustave Doré, who interpreted the fairy tales of Perrault and La Fontaine, or of Arthur Rackham, who illustrated Perrault, the Grimms, and various English and Irish fairy tales, or, in more recent years, of Maurice Sendak with *The Juniper Tree*[6]): in the picture book, iconography becomes narrative language capable of giving rise, in relation to the verbal text to which it is attached, to chords and dissonances, compensations and overlaps, blanks to be filled, in an intertwining of inferential suggestions and meanings of charm and suggestiveness.

The theme of fairy tale rewritings connected to the multi-modality of current narrative languages opens up reflections of great interest: it shows us, for example, that the fairy tale changes but is still necessary. And that it responds to not only a natural need for stories and fantasies, but also for a decoding of reality through the device of narration. An in-depth interpretation of the recurring motif of abandonment is proposed

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[4] On the rewriting of fairy tales, *cf.* chap. III and VII in J. Zipes, *La fiaba irresistibile. Storia culturale e sociale di un genere*, Roma, Donzelli, 2012; A. Articoni, A. Cagnolati (ed.), *La fiaba del Terzo Millennio. Metafore, intrecci, dinamiche*, Salamanca, Fahrenhouse, 2019, and Id. (ed.), *Le metamorfosi della fiaba*, Roma, Tab, 2020; S. Barsotti, *Letteratura per l'infanzia, fiabe e nuove forme del fiabesco*, in S. Barsotti, L. Cantatore (ed.), *Letteratura per l'infanzia. Forme, temi e simboli del contemporaneo*, Roma, Carocci, 2019; on the rewriting of the classics, *cf.* L. Cantatore, *Le riscritture dei classici nella letteratura per l'infanzia*, in S. Barsotti, L. Cantatore (ed.), *Letteratura per l'infanzia*, *cit.*; M. Nucci, *Giù le mani dai classici*, in "Robinson", supplement of "la Repubblica", 27 August 2022, pp. 24-25.

[5] I. Tontardini, *Meccaniche celesti: come funziona un albo illustrato*, in Hamelin (ed.), *Ad occhi aperti. Leggere l'albo illustrato*, Roma, Donzelli, 2012, p. 24.

[6] M. Sendak, *The Juniper Tree and Other Tales from Grimm*, London, The Bodly Head, 1974.

below, chosen from among the many *topoi* for its *longue durée*, with particular reference to the "thumbs"[7] that the fables of yesterday and today do not cease to include.

2. Traces and clues

With Charles Perrault's Tom Thumb (Pollicino), (together with his "brothers", from Grimms' Hansel and Gretel, Calvino's Petie Pete: Cecino, and Anderson's Thumbelina, Mignolina), we are faced with an archetypal figure around which the most problematic knots, themes and most anguished fairy scenarios insist: smallness, hence the eternal conflict between *puer* and *senex*, and hunger and the forest. Tom Thumb (or Pollicino) is also a figure who intercepts a central question of interior experience, perhaps the most ancestral and uncanny: that of abandonment in relation to the social category of childhood.

Andrea Zanzotto, who spoke of poetry as an original human experience (like the fairy tale, one could say, since both genres make their way among "forgotten languages"[8]) in which each of the two terms is able to symbolize the other in a restless relationship[9], dedicates to Tom Thumb the thirteenth of his "hypersonnets" in *Il galateo in bosco* (Mondadori, 1978), a poetic collection with a fabulous *fil rouge*. The enigmatic verses seem particularly appropriate here to introduce a reflection that unravels within a shady territory, not very reassuring, yet ideally and historically linked to the world of childhood:

Qual fia ristoro a' dì perduti un sasso:	What solace will a stone be for lost days:
ma qual sasso tra erratiche macerie,	what stone among errant rubble,
quale scaglia da cumuli e congerie	what fragment of heaps and congeries
identificherò nel bosco, ahi lasso?	will I place in the woods, alas?
Ché se pur m'aggirassi passo passo	Were I to even wander step by step
per Holzwege sbiadenti in mille serie,	Off the beaten track[10] among a thousand rows,
quale a conferir nome alle miserie	to which would a name to my miseries
mie pietra svilirei, carierei masso?	demean the stones, upon dented rock?
Nel buio-orco che si maciulla in rupi,	In the ogre-darkness mangled 'tween rocks,
dell'orbe a rupi dentro i covi cupi,	of the rocky orb in dark dens,
quali mai galatei cemeteriali	what cemeterial etiquette,

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[7] *Cf.* Milena Bernardi has reflected deeply and on several occasions on the representation of "thumbs" in literature. See M. Bernardi, *Pin, Pip e Pollicino. Ritratti di bambini resistenziali e autenticità dell'infanzia*, in E. Varrà (ed.), *L'età d'oro. Storie di bambini e metafore d'infanzia*, Bologna, Pendragon, 2001, pp. 11-27; Id., *Le briciole di Pollicino*, in *Infanzia e metafore letterarie. Orfanezza e diversità nella circolarità dell'immaginario*, Bologna, BUP, 2009 and Id., *Letteratura per l'infanzia e alterità. Incanti, disincanti, ambiguità, tracce*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2016, pp. 91-95.

[8] The reference is to E. Fromm, *Il linguaggio dimenticato*, Milano, Bompiani, 1982.

[9] A. Zanzotto, *Infanzie, poesie, scuoletta (appunti)*, in "Strumenti critici", n. 20, 1973, pp. 52-77.

[10] "Off the beaten track" is a reference to M. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge, CUP, 2002.

rasoterra e rasoombra noteranno	low-lying and umbrous, will heed
almen la traccia in che l'affanno e il danno	at least trace in which the toil and trouble
dei dì, persi lapilli, è vivo; quali?[11]	of days, lost stones, lives?[12]

Of the fairy tales that tell of estrangement and initiation[13], *Tom Thumb* is perhaps the most terrible. For us readers of today, the most scandalous and unacceptable, because it stages not only the abandonment of children by those who brought them into the world, but also because there is the appearance of the ogre, in this case a paternal figure who devours, albeit unaware, their own daughters. It is, moreover, an abandonment which in intentions amounts to infanticide, as happens in the fairy tale of *Hansel and Gretel*, but if in the latter the fault lies with the mother, then transmuted by the Grimms into a stepmother to appease the concerns of the bourgeois public who saw the mother figure compromised in her nurturing function[14], in *Tom Thumb* the mother opposes the abandonment established by the father and then lets herself be convinced of it. We are therefore in the presence of a doubly dark, conflicting fairy tale, in which the phenomenon of the *uncanny* (*Unheimlich*) of Freudian memory manifests itself in all its ambiguity and power, since the horror is planned within the domestic walls, and by those who are supposed to provide protection and the most loving care.[15]

Yet, intolerable as it may be, the tale of *Tom Thumb* does nothing but re-propose in a historical and social perspective an image of a fragile and defenceless childhood, threatened, and at the same time extraordinarily resistant, endowed with cunning, vitality, and multiple resources. The diminutive nature of its protagonist (but also of Calvino's Cecino and Pulcino, of Andersen's Thumbelina, of Lapucci's Pochettino or Minuzzolo)

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[11] A. Zanzotto, *Sonetto di Ugo, Martino e Pollicino 1778-1978*, in *Galateo in bosco*, Milano, Mondadori, 1978, p. 72. As a tribute to Zanzotto's sonnet, recently, Valerio Magrelli has taken up the figure of Tom Thumb for a poetic collection illustrated by Massimo Dagnino. The inspiration came after reading the name of Steve Pollicino among the victims of the attack on the Twin Towers in New York. *Cf.* V. Magrelli, M. Dagnino, *Pollicino Quater*, Milano, EDB, 2017.

[12] Own translation from the original Italian text.

[13] The studies on the morphology of the fairy tale conducted by Vladimir Ja. Propp illustrate the distancing from one's birthplace as one of the first functions of the characters. In the case of the "thumbs", we are not facing a temporary removal from home, but a process of victimization of the protagonist, which begins a hero's pilgrimage, during which the most varied adventures follow one another. It is, therefore, a real *exposure*, which subjects the hero to serious risks and dangers (XI function): V. Ja. Propp, *Morfologia della fiaba*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, p. 45.

[14] On this aspect, Bruno Bettelheim's reflections are interesting, since he connects the distancing of children to weaning: «The mother represents for the children the source of all food, and therefore it is she who is now perceived by them as the person who abandons them, in a kind of desert. The child's anxiety and deep disappointment when the mother is no longer willing to satisfy all his oral needs leads him to believe that she has suddenly become disaffected, selfish, frustrating». B. Bettelheim, *Il mondo incantato. Uso, importanza e significati psicoanalitici delle fiabe*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2000, p. 155. On the different versions of the brothers Grimm, *cf.* I. Filograsso, *Bambini in trappola. Pedagogia nera e letteratura per l'infanzia*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2012, pp. 77-83.

[15] *Cf.* S. Freud, *Il Perturbante* (1919), in *Saggi sull'arte, la letteratura e il linguaggio*, Milano, Bollati Boringhieri, 1991, pp. 269-307. For an in-depth study on the uncanny in children's literature, see C. Lepri, *Scene d'interni. Il perturbante nella fiabistica del terzo millennio*, in A. Articoni, A. Cagnolati (ed.), *La fiaba del Terzo Millennio*, cit.

echoes the paradigm of this childhood[16], which, on the other hand, is opposed by the adult world of which the ogre is the worst representative.

After all, «fairy tales are true»[17], that is, they draw on a community feeling and real individual and collective experiences, and unfold in a mirror image of a very dense historiography on lost childhood that confirms a level of reality[18]. It should not be forgotten that the history of childhood is also the history of violence perpetrated on childhood. As Cambi and Ulivieri noted[19], it is no coincidence that deMause marked the evolution of child-rearing models with a periodization that passes from *infanticide* to *abandonment*, then to *ambivalence, intrusion, socialization*, and, finally, *help*[20]. And «history [...] invades the fairy tale in a dramatic way», wrote Giorgio Cusatelli, «exposing [...] the condition of serfdom, and more generally the socio-economic structures of the feudal world»[21]. Many fairy tales, indeed, narrate the rampant indigence of an era in which nutrition was a primary need linked to survival. In the tale of *Tom Thumb*, the ogre's house is related to wealth[22], therefore reflecting a place of power inside of which the change of status that the child finally obtains with a stratagem is possible. The same is true of the gingerbread house in *Hansel and Gretel*, in which the threat of the maternal *alter ego*, the witch, lures the little ones with the promise of plenty of food.

However, fairy tales, with their stratifications and rewritings, also historicise and chisel at the feelings of adults towards childhood, revealing, along the projection of the imaginary, stages in the evolution of the family institution and, at the same time, of the destinies of those figures that are unrecognised and marginalised[23] as part of it: women and children.

The fairy tale, as well as the authorial intervention on it, which develops from the second half of the nineteenth century in relation to the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe, together with literature and illustration for children, decodes social behaviours that are structured in symbols, figures and metaphors that give body to anxieties, fears,

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[16] *Cf.* M. Bernardi, *Infanzia e metafore letterarie, cit.*, pp. 108-126.

[17] I. Calvino, Introduction to *Fiabe italiane, cit.*, p. XIV. On the documentary value of the fairy tale, see also V. Ja. Propp, *Le radici storiche dei racconti di magia*, Torino, Einaudi, 1949.

[18] The historiographical production on the theme of abandoned childhood is truly extensive. The major studies on the subject published in Italian are indicated here: M. Gorni, L. Pellegrini, *Un problema di storia sociale. L'infanzia abbandonata nel secolo XIX*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1974; G. Di Bello, *Senza nome né famiglia. I bambini abbandonati nell'Ottocento*, Firenze, Manzuoli, 1989; J. Boswell, *L'abbandono dei bambini in Europa occidentale*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1991; G. Da Molin (ed.), *Trovatelli e balie. Secc. XVI-XIX*, Bari, Cacucci Editore, 1994; J. Bardet, O. Faron, *Bambini senza infanzia. Sull'infanzia abbandonata in età moderna*, in E. Becchi, D. Julia (ed.), *Storia dell'infanzia. Dal Settecento a oggi*, Vol. II, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1996, pp. 100-131; S. Polenghi, *Fanciulli soldati. La militarizzazione dell'infanzia abbandonata nell'Europa moderna*, Roma, Carocci, 2005; F. Lomastro, F. Reggiani (ed.), *Per la storia dell'infanzia abbandonata in Europa*, Roma, Viella, 2013; S. Montecchiani, *Per una storia dell'assistenza ed educazione dell'infanzia abbandonata nelle Marche*, Macerata, EUM, 2021.

[19] F. Cambi, S. Ulivieri, *Storia dell'infanzia nell'Italia liberale*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1988, pp. 81-184.

[20] L. deMause, *Storia dell'infanzia*, Milano, Emme, 1983.

[21] G. Cusatelli, *Ucci, ucci*, Milano, Mondadori, 1994, p. 8.

[22] *Cf.* M. Rak, *Logica della fiaba. Fate, orchi, gioco, corte, fortuna, viaggio, capriccio, metamorfosi, corpo*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2005, p. 52.

[23] For an in-depth discussion on this topic, also in relation to developments in children's literature, see F. Bacchetti, *I bambini e la famiglia nell'Ottocento. Realtà e mito attraverso la letteratura per l'infanzia*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 1997; see also F. Cambi, S. Ulivieri (ed.), *I silenzi nell'educazione*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1994.

dreams, and expectations[24]. In *Literature and Myth*, Furio Jesi identified in the abandoned child one who «lives the first hour in the world» and one for whom «nature is simultaneously maternal and dangerous, a rescuer and mortal». [25] The orphan, in particular, lives «the experience of man's terrors only in the primordial world», and it is to him that the human soul blindly entrusts its hope[26]. It is to the orphan and his being «pure of heart»[27] that the quest is usually entrusted in fantasy (just think of Harry Potter): a predestination and an investiture that inevitably push him towards discovery and journeying, and often the saving of an entire people. The orphan (the wanderer, the foundling) is once again the figure at the centre of moralistic literature intended for children between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries[28], in a society that was moving towards the "privatisation" of childhood. If, on the one hand, through this production, we have the pulse of a tragedy that affects the subordinate layers of society, on the other hand, we observe the instrumental use of stories to move, in bourgeois readers, feelings of piety and charity[29]. However, the orphan, or the abandoned or *lost* child, is also a *topos* of cultured fiction and the modern novel, from Dickens to Stevenson, Twain, Burnett, up until Ian McEwan and Stephen King. This is a *leitmotif* that captures children, both in their imaginary dimension and in their existential dimension, and which seems to insistently communicate to us that they walk «on the crest of the dark zone» and that «in reality, childhood is always exposed»[30].

Starting from these premises, let us go further along the paths scattered with the "crumbs" of Tom Thumb, looking at certain significant figurations of today, in which we will try to glimpse an image of childhood captured in its complexity and in its historical development[31].

3. Representations of today

According to what textual strategies and sensibilities do we give voice and figuration to the so pervasive reason for abandonment in today's literary representations? What outcomes, the fruit of innumerable stratifications, reach us or are reworked in the light of the persistence of a character of childhood *exposure* even in the most advanced societies of our contemporaneity?[32]

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[24] *Cf.* F. Cambi, *La metamorfosi dell'orco da Perrault a Collodi (e oltre)*, in F. Cambi (ed.), *Mostri e paure nella letteratura per l'infanzia*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2002, p. 13.
[25] F. Jesi, *Orfani e fanciulli divini*, in *Letteratura e mito*, Torino, Einaudi, 1968, p. 10.
[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.
[27] *Cf.* W. Grandi, *Infanzia e mondi fantastici*, Bologna, BUP, 2007, p. 106.
[28] In this regard, see the studies of Lorenzo Luatti, among which: L. Luatti, *Adulti si nasceva. Immagini e metafore letterarie sull'emigrazione minorile girovaga e di lavoro dall'Ottocento ai nostri giorni*, Isernia, Cosimo Iannone, 2016.
[29] *Cf.* S. Barsotti, *Allontanamento e abbandono nella letteratura per ragazzi*, in G. Bandini (ed.), *Adozione e formazione*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2007.
[30] M. Bernardi, *Letteratura per l'infanzia e alterità*, *cit.*, p. 56.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[32] In Save the Children's *Atlas of Childhood at Risk 2021*, we read that «in Italy, we have one million and three hundred thousand minors in absolute poverty and the highest percentage in Europe of NEETs [that is, young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training]. Young people who risk entering dangerous contexts, because poverty and lack of education are the perfect terrain for attracting resources to organized mafias». V.

If the primacy of rewritings in a modern key[33] is perhaps due to the fairy tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, there is also a tendency towards the revival of fairy tales such as *Tom Thumb* and *Hansel and Gretel*, which confront us with a still compelling question today, the representation of which mixes the symbolic and folkloric elements with a feeling, with an entirely postmodern solitude. These re-proposals re-elaborate with an extreme variety of codes and languages motifs that evidently remain at the centre of the psychological world of the child and of adult projections. They are rewritings that are presented through the most diverse media, from theatre to cinema, from comics to poetry, from illustration to dance and to music, giving rise to a phenomenon, that of the remake, which is not new and to which the fairy tale, with its apparently antithetical qualities of plasticity (think of the innumerable versions of *Cinderella*[34]) and immanence, seems to fit particularly well. Jack Zipes wrote, in this regard, that «people have never told or repeated any story without reshaping their experience or the narrative form itself, in one way or another; nor have stories ever been written that did not rework other stories, or did not refer to others - thus reviving experiences and dreams (and *reconfiguring a genre*)»[35]. Therefore, in revisiting, there is always an interaction between inter-textual and extra-textual conditions, times and places, personal, social and cultural factors of production and reception that must be taken into account.

In general, looking at models widespread in the Italian context, but not necessarily originating there, despite an awareness of the impossibility of categorizing such rich and varied material, three trends can be observed through which, in the picture book, reasons for abandonment and loss are found. The first of these updates and dramatises disturbing elements, keeping the threshold of *pathos* high. The second brings about a reversal and a demystification of the most distressing aspects. With the third trend, there is an authorial sophistication aimed at interpreting the concept of bewilderment in a freer and broader manner, which is grasped by means of refined iconotextual strategies.

Updating and dramatization. There are fairy tale rewrites that seem to perfectly interpret the thought of Bruno Bettelheim – sceptical as he was of a modern children's literature that eludes existential problems – when he wrote that good stories enrich the inner life of the child even when, without any excuses, they present «severe interior pressures»[36]. These are stories that do not calm, do not give up on illustrating dark corners and anxieties of the human, nor diminish «the violent interior struggles that the path of growth entails»[37], underlining, in words and images, all the ambiguity and drama of the events narrated. In this direction, among books of recent years, our

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De Marchi (ed.), *Atlante dell'Italia a rischio. Il futuro è già qui*, 2021.
(https://atlante.savethechildren.it/content2021/XII_Atlante_dell_infanzia_a_rischio__Il_futuro_e_gia_qui. pdf· ultima consultazione 29.09.2022).

[33] *Cf.* S. Barsotti, *Bambine nel bosco. Cappuccetto Rosso e il lupo tra passato e presente*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2016, also Y. Verdier, *L'ago e la spilla. Le versioni dimenticate di Cappuccetto Rosso*, Bologna, Marietti, 2022, and S. Calabrese, D. Feltracco, *Cappuccetto Rosso: una fiaba vera*, Roma, Meltemi, 2008.

[34] C. Ongini, C. Carrer, *Le altre Cenerentole. Il giro del mondo in 80 scarpe*, Roma, Sinnos, 2011. Ongini counts 345 versions of the Cinderella fairy tale.

[35] J. Zipes, *La fiaba irresistibile*, *cit*., pp. 60-61.

[36] *Cf.* B. Bettelheim, *Il mondo incantato*, *cit*., p. 16.

[37] *Ibid*., p. 12.

thoughts may turn to the Perraultian *Le petit poucet* by actress and director Chiara Gui-
di, published in 2016 by Orecchio Acerbo, with illustrations by Simone Massi, entitled
Buchettino[38]. The valuable element of this book, which also presents the theatrical text
of a play by the avant-garde theatre company Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, consists in its
ability to evoke the darkness of the subject matter through an illustrative procedu-
re "by subtraction": «We asked Simone Massi for something that seemed impossible: to
illustrate the fairy tale without showing anything, neither Buchettino nor his brothers,
nor his parents, nor, least of all, the features of the horrible ogre. To work only in the
dark, on the forest, on suggestions. To work, in short, only on fear in the imagination»,
notes the preface. Indeed, the chiaroscuro patterning lets one grasp something indefinite
and frightening, the same that is captured in the theatre in the immersive experience to
which the spectators are called and from which the book springs, whose reading is enri-
ched by the sensorial textuality of the narration by Monica Demuri, and the sounds and
noises produced by the actors with simple means, such as the crackle of a fire made from
popped bubble wrap, and the forest rendered by rubbing nylon bags together; downloa-
dable online via a code placed on the last page of the book.

The same darkness of stroke belongs to another extraordinary iconographic inter-
pretation, that of Lorenzo Mattotti's *Hansel and Gretel*, which presents, with strong black
brushstrokes on small white patches, gloomy visions well-known to us: children lost in
the thick wood, the house of the witch, etc. This is a version already published by Orec-
chio Acerbo in 2009 and now re-proposed by the Roman publishing house, with a text
rewritten by Neil Gaiman[39]. The British writer and cartoonist, whom we remember for
Sturdust and *Coraline*, emblematically chooses to set the tale in a time of war and to nar-
rate it with modern language, close to that of our children, to communicate to them that
there is a part of the world in which poverty and hunger still spread.

We believe there is, in this disposition, the will to represent symbolically and
without pulling punches a condition that affects childhood outside a precise temporal
anchorage, and which is strictly connected to its simultaneously vulnerable and resilient
nature, since the happy ending, as in the original version, is guaranteed.

Reversal and demystification. In continuity with what has just been stated, we must
not overlook the representation of what Giorgio Cusatelli defines, in Baroque poetics,
«the most drastic antagonist»[40], that is, the ogre. According to the scholar, it is precisely
in *Tom Thumb* that the standardisation of a figure destined to impose itself in the entire
subsequent tradition of cultured fairy tales takes place. Here, indeed, the passage from
the ritual to the culinary dimension takes place and the anthropophagous ogre becomes
a symbol that takes it forms from human practices and categories that have innervated,
over time, the collective mentality and the individual psyche. In reality, as Franco Cambi
recalled, the ogre has an ancient origin and embodies an original fear, like the witch and
the Baba Yaga, that «of adults [...]: being children, being an object of desire, being subject

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[38] C. Guidi, S. Massi, *Buchettino*, Roma, Orecchio Acerbo, 2016.
[39] J. & W. Grimm, L. Mattotti, *Hansel e Gretel*, Roma, Orecchio Acerbo, 2009, and N. Gaiman, L. Mattotti,
Hansel e Gretel, Roma, Orecchio Acerbo, 2014.
[40] *Cf.* G. Cusatelli, *Ucci, ucci, cit.*, p. 63.

to authority, and totally so»[41]. And it is a figure that undergoes a significant transformation when it passes from the popular fairy tale to an *auteur*'s fairy tale in which the playful, the fantastic and the parodic transgressiveness prevail, unequivocally reflecting the perception that, over time, one has of the danger personified by the adult figure.

In line with a childhood that in the Western world is becoming more and more valuable, and is placed at the centre of social life, care and consumption, today, we can observe a weakening of the "monster", often represented in production for little ones as a bugbear to mock, therefore «in crisis in his ancestral identity»[42] (one example among many: the ogre from the smart and successful *Shrek* series of animated films). This is an entirely modern trend aimed at comforting and preserving the little reader, and indicative of the fact that «the young-adult relationship has come to be redescribed beyond fear, giving space – instead – to support»[43], lamented Natalia Ginzburg, as far back as 1972, commenting on this process of demystification that deprives childhood of a fundamental experience[44].

Four examples clearly show us this trend. First, in *Zeralda's Orc* by the great Tomi Ungerer, we see a little girl who helps a famished ogre by preparing delicious dishes: when she grows up she will become his wife and the ogres will learn not to feed on children anymore[45]. Second, *L'orco, il lupo, la bambina e il bignè* (trans. *The ogre, the wolf, the little girl and the cake*) by Philippe Corentin, published in Italy by Babalibri[46], is a comic book in which the ogre is at the top of a food chain but fails, due to his stupidity, to get fed. Third, *L'orco che mangiava i bambini* (trans. *The ogre who ate children*) by Fausto Gilberti, published in Italy by Corraini[47], instead shows us an ogre greedy for children as long as they are junk food consumers. Finally, in *La zuppa dell'orco* (trans. *The ogre's soup*) by Vicent Cuvellier, published in Italy by Biancoenero[48], we read a revision of *Tom Thumb* in which the seven children are abandoned by terrible parents only to arrive at the house of a plaintive yet polite ogre where they will think they would do as well as to move to. The traditional stylistic features of the fairytale are turned upside down in these works: in the words of Tommaso Braccini, «the figures and events of fairy tales are reinterpreted with the filter of irony, often very accentuated, or of allegory, through which the fantastic world of *contes* reflects, with *only* an *external* deformation, contemporary society»[49].

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[41] F. Cambi, *La metamorfosi dell'orco da Perrault a Collodi (e oltre)*, *cit.*, p. 13.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[44] In this regard, the clear stance of Natalia Ginzburg in 1972 is interesting when, in relation to the release of the series "Tantibambini", directed by Bruno Munari for Einaudi, which aims to publish «simple fairy tales and stories, without fairies and without witches», she criticized the rhetoric of optimism in children's literature, writing: «suppressing fear and anguish also means suppressing happiness», and «I do not see what advantage children have in thinking that wolves become meek if they are fed. I do not even see what advantage children have of not being afraid of wolves anymore. It is a mistake to believe that fear is bad. Fear, you have to suffer it and learn to bear it». N. Ginzburg, *Senza fate né maghi* (1972), in *Vita immaginaria*, Milano, Mondadori, 1974, p. 165; p. 161.

[45] T. Ungerer, *L'orco di Zeralda*, Milano, Bompiani, 1974. Recently the book has been reprinted by Salani.

[46] Ph. Correntin, *L'orco, il lupo, la bambina e il bignè*, Milano, Babalibri, 2004.

[47] F. Gilberti, *L'orco che mangiava i bambini*, Mantova, Corraini, 2012.

[48] V. Cuvellier, *La zuppa dell'orco*, ill. by A. Antinori, Roma, Biancoenero, 2016.

[49] T. Braccini, *Indagine sull'orco. Miti e storie del divoratore di bambini*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2013, pp. 188-189.

Sophistications and the concerns of today. *Only external*, in fact. The work of authorial sophistication of classic tales today recovers fairy tale figures also to interpret shadows that weigh on the childhood of our times. The result is a product whose connotations are no longer those of universality and timelessness typical of popular fairy tales. The characters themselves do not appear polarized, but take on a fluid and very human depth in the figure of the complexity and ambivalence they express. The stories become personal, even intimate in the hyper-realistic representation with which they capture nuances of the face and domestic interiors. They are fairy tales that draw a single, problematic subject, traversed by uncertainties, yet they speak to anyone who is reflected in the disturbance of the protagonist. *Into the Forest* by the English illustrator Anthony Browne, published in Italy by Kalandraka[50], is in this sense a paradigmatic work. It is a book that zooms in on a section of the journey of a child today. We don't know much about him, but we catch his bewildered gaze in the images on the first pages, sitting at the kitchen table with his mother, while he asks where his father is without getting an answer. Then we experience the anguish and the sense of helplessness along a journey into the woods that becomes a dream in the encounter with the most famous characters of fairy tales: Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel and Rapunzel are other lost children, hologram prisoners in a still image that sees them stop in a state of bewilderment which is the same as the protagonist of the book. Why has the father not returned? Is it a simple argument between parents or a separation? Browne seems to tell us, in fact, that it is not important to establish this. Rather, we should be interested in sharing the emotional processes of the protagonist in the face of the prospect of abandonment, but also in taking note of the frailty of adults. The ending remains open to multiple interpretations, and yet is able to compensate temporarily those who approach this layered tale. Thanks to the author's iconographic artifices, once again the fairy tale becomes flexible in bending to the readings of current events, in the terms that it Jack Zipes argued well when he wrote that «in order to save the core of hope inherent in the fairy tale, contemporary visual artists have stripped it of beautiful princesses and heroes, as well as reassuring scenes that delude the viewer about the meaning of happiness; and at the same time they have endowed it with deeper meanings, through the creation of dystopian, grotesque, macabre and comic figures. Their works collide with past conventions, generating extraordinary and imaginative narratives in images that force viewers to wonder if it is possible to lead a so-called fairytale life in a rapidly changing world that seems to let brutality and greed triumph over beauty and goodness»[51].

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The italics are mine.

[50] A. Browne, *Nel bosco*, Firenze, Kalandraka, 2014.

[51] J. Zipes, *La fiaba irresistibile*, *cit.*, p. 174.

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