

Articoli

About Antonio Rubino's *Viperetta*: coming-of-age novel and "imagining machine"

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Abstract. Antonio Rubino's novel *Viperetta* (1919) is the mature work of an author already known in the context of children's literature mainly for his activity as an illustrator for some covers of "Il giornalino della Domenica" and drawings for Andersen's fairy tales and as a contributor to the "Corriere dei Piccoli". In this context, *Viperetta* immediately presents itself as an editorial object of particular cultural-historical interest, both because of the specific relationship that Rubino establishes between the textual part and the body of the images, and because it is presented as a coming-of-age novel, with a female protagonist, which, fitting into the tradition of the marvelous journey to the moon, takes on the contours of a rite of passage, turning the protagonist into a fairy-tale child. The article purports to emphasize these aspects, trying to show how *Viperetta* bases on these two elements the distinctive features of its originality and narrative power, still alive after more than a hundred years.

Keywords. Antonio Rubino - picture book - educational journey - children's literature - little girls.

1. 1. Toward *Viperetta*: Antonio Rubino and the experience of magazines for children

When Rubino published *Viperetta* in 1919, his notoriety as an author for children was already high. This was mainly due to his activity as an illustrator (think of the covers for "Il giornalino della Domenica" or the drawings for Andersen's fairy tales to the volumes of the newly-born Bibliotechina series of "La lampada") and, above all, to his collaboration with the "Corriere dei Piccoli" that he himself had helped found in 1908, with his checkered drawings accompanied by the unflinching octosyllabic verses, the form that the first comic strip stories took in Italy. At that time, Rubino had already published three stand-alone books, both for the textual and the figurative parts, and only one of these for children (*I balocchi di Titina*), while the other two were aimed at a more restricted adult audience. These were, however, experiences that were of considerable importance in shaping a novel like *Viperetta*, whose quality of imaginary space, disclo-

sed by words, figures and page construction, is still clear and fascinating over a hundred years later¹.

Equally important for the development of Rubino's potential as an illustrator for children is his collaboration on the two main magazines for children of the early twentieth century, "Il giornalino della Domenica" and the "Corriere dei Piccoli". Rubino's collaboration with the "Giornalino" is limited to illustrations only; in fact, his contribution as a writer is lacking, but it represents a moment of important growth in his artistic career. The covers edited by the illustrator concentrated over a period from 1907 to 1911, more irregular, instead, his presence during 1911.

The lineup of artists who dedicate some of their time and smiles to the Giornalino has been enriched with a new name. The imaginative and bizarre cartoonist A. Rubino has given us this cover, in which everything is original, beginning with the style of the clothes, which probably has no real match in any country in the world! But the appearances of the two strange boys have a hilarious expression, and the whole drawing radiates great cheerfulness... The Giornalino is pleased to have given the chance to the talented Rubino (who generally takes pleasure in rather gruesome scenes) to show this kind new aspect of his art².

Antonio Rubino, in fact, until that time had not thought of devoting himself to writing and drawing for children, and his images were still characterized by strong grotesque traits; in this regard, as we previously said, the encounter with that artistic, cultural and educational laboratory that was Vamba's magazine, marked an important change for the artist and the opportunity for new experimentation in a field, that of children's literature, until then unexplored.

It is difficult to identify the sources of inspiration and links with precise artistic movements so diverse are the influences that characterize Rubino's drawings.

Antonio Rubino's covers represent a ground of stylistic achievements that re-propose the illustrator's sources of inspiration: Art Nouveau, gothic, eastern, and central European influences, experiments borrowed from decorative art and from the mixture of curved and straight lines direct Rubino's covers, who, in re-proposing precise graphic schemes, knows how to combine them from time to time in ways that are never commonplace... Despite the wealth of details and a clear taste for decoration, the images are sharp, clean in their essentiality. The artist achieves such structured simplicity by enriching the figures with details and leaving a few sharp elements inside the contours in the background. The result is a sense of balance and order that allows the eye to second-guess the attention to detail. Contributing to this effect is the use of color: Rubino uses a restricted color palette, at most four colors per drawing. Playing with contrasts and cross-references between black and white, he creates balanced compositions, never loud, despite the extensive use of pure colors³.

¹ See Zoboli G., *La voce del libro. Sull' "ovvia" questione della forma e del contenuto*, in "Hamelin", no. 20, 2008, pp. 24-31.

² "La nostra copertina", in "Il Giornalino della domenica", Year II, No. 23, June 9, 1907, p. 20. The suspension dots are in the text.

³ Surdi E., *Fantasia e buon senso. Antonio Rubino nei periodici per ragazzi (1907-1941)*, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce 2015, p. 107.

The sphere of his illustrations is that of fantasy and dreams, and it is precisely in this sphere that the artist begins to deal with a child as a target, immediately declaring through the figures he draws his idea of children and childhood, a far cry from the traditional one, which wanted only images of well-behaved, cute and chubby children. When he focuses on children Rubino depicts, first of all, real children busy in the activities, movements and expressions typical of that age. The third cover that the artist offers to the "Giornalino" gives the image of two children, who are depicted in profile and facing each other in the act of inflating a large soap bubble with the help of a straw.

It is one of those caricatures of childhood that, long ago, a part of our public did not like much because their amiable and original side was not recognized. Kids, in fact, are not those perfect and cold angels whom conventional literature and painting have hitherto represented: they have in their appearance and in their souls various curious and amiable sides, which are those that make them so likeable. And art inspired by childhood must not neglect to highlight these spontaneous humorous forms of childish life. Our Antonio Rubino has depicted two grotesque boys focused on inflating some huge soap bubbles. They are very serious in doing the delicate operation and deem it appropriate to join their combined effort to inflate one bubble. Here is an evocative satire of childhood ambitions, which can extend to other ages and other swelling, too!⁴

In this brief commentary on the cover, the core of Mr. Rubini's drawing style for children can be perceived; the artist, depicting little boys and girls and delving into their world with his art, reworks under a new perspective those irreverent, sarcastic and grotesque aspects that characterize him and are inherent in his art. In this way, Elena Surdi reminds us again: the "image of childhood that derives from it is... loaded with references that unhinge a patronizing and sweetened vision of it"⁵. And this is what will also happen with the iconic depiction of Viperetta.

However, it was only with the call to the "Corriere dei Piccoli" that Rubino fully established himself as a writer for children. The magazine, as is well known, was born in December 1908 as an insert of the "Corriere della Sera" dedicated to children, thus completing the "project of modernization wanted by the director Luigi Albertini around the Milanese newspaper"⁶ and that had begun ten years earlier with the appearance of the "Domenica del Corriere", a weekly news magazine for families. The main novelty of the newspaper is represented precisely by the front page divided into frames with colored cartoons accompanied by octosyllabic verses, which highlights the importance that the figurative element acquires in the communicative strategy adopted by the creators of the weekly, which will quickly gain the favor of the bourgeois public⁷. Between 1908 and 1919, Rubino invents for the "Corrierino" numerous characters whose stories elude any overtly pedagogical intention: what interests Rubino, in fact, in line with that pleasure of astonishment that can already be found in his poetic production for adults, are "the combinations, the tricks devised by the characters to achieve their purpose. It

⁴ "La nostra copertina", in «Il giornalino della Domenica», Anno II, n. 28, 14 luglio 1907, p. 13.

⁵ Surdi E., *Fantasia e buonsenso*, cit. p. 108.

⁶ Boero P., De Luca C., *La letteratura per l'infanzia*, Laterza, Bari 1995, p. 140.

⁷ See *ibid.* p. 140 and following.

is the gimmicks, the ever new capacity for invention”⁸. The narrative strength of these strip stories lies, therefore, not in the presence of a compelling development or in the ending point of the story, which is indeed always taken for granted, but in the gimmick, in the leap of imagination that allows Rubino to make a simple and repetitive narrative scheme original and amusing: “indeed, it is precisely this game of variations on a fixed scheme that builds the specifics of these micro-stories bound within six, eight or nine drawings at most, activating in the child (and adult) reader a double pleasure: the reassuring one in recognizing known elements, and the exciting one of the surprise, introduced by the inventive deviation, by the novelty of the solution to the problem adopted from time to time”⁹.

Thus we arrive, in the years immediately after the end of World War I, at the publication of *Viperetta* and, soon after, *Tic e Tac*, which introduce the mature phase of Rubino’s production. As Santo Alligo points out in the volume in which he reconstructs the extensive production of the author from San Remo, the two novels, “well printed and laid out, definitively fix the artist’s stylistic evolution”, establishing itself as a “splendid crowning achievement” of his activity up to that time¹⁰. Rubino himself was convinced of the quality of these two works of his and of *Viperetta* in particular, which he indicated as the “best” of his volumes for children¹¹.

Viperetta, in fact, is an editorial object of particular cultural-historical interest for two reasons: first of all, for the relationship between verbal and iconic elements; second, from a thematic point of view, for the way in which it deals with the coming-of-age topic by inserting itself into a specific literary tradition, that of the journey to the moon, managing to merge aspects proper to the coming-of-age novel and the marvelous travel story. The path taken by the protagonist, in fact, rich in encounters and experiences - terrestrial and lunar - will have the effect of triggering profound transformations in her, allowing her to mature and finally become “civilized”, “tamed”.

Like the Collodian puppet, in fact, *Viperetta*, too, at the end of her journey will eventually become part of that society whose institutions and norms are portrayed with a critical eye throughout the entire span of her incredible adventure. But Rubino’s critique is never fierce or subversive, it is a good-natured critique that stems from common sense and a love for the infinite variety of things in the world and the roles that everyone can occupy in it: dominating the novel, in addition to the pleasure of storytelling and the reversal of all perspectives, social but also cognitive, is indeed precisely the idea of the individuals’ freedom in determining their life, which only through direct experience are able to recognize their own path that no school or pre-established system of norms can indicate¹².

⁸ Ibid, p. 98.

⁹ Negri M., *Viperetta. Storia di un libro*, vol. 2, Scalpendi, Milan 2010, p. 16.

¹⁰ Alligo S., *Antonio Rubino. I libri illustrati*, Little Nemo, Turin 2008, p. 23.

¹¹ See Antonio Rubino’s handwritten letter to the Vitagliano publishing house, November 3, 1922, kept in the Archivio Storico Giunti Editore, Fondo Bemporad, Correspondence with collaborators, Antonio Rubino Florence).

¹² Negri M., *Viperetta. Storia di un libro*, cit., p. 24.

2. A little girl from the Earth to the Moon. *Viperetta's* coming-of-age journey

Viperetta presents itself, therefore, as a true coming-of-age novel, if by this expression we indicate the telling of the story of a change that occurs as a result of the experience of a journey, the encounter with the other than oneself, and the overcoming of trials. Calvino, as early as 1975, called Rubino's a novel that presented "the typical structure of a young person's journey to conquer him/herself"¹³. As a matter of fact, at the heart of *Viperetta*, as of the coming-of-age novel, lies the construction of an "I", the apprenticeship of a protagonist still young and in search of a form. An apprenticeship that is not established, however, as "the slow and predictable path to one's father's work"¹⁴, but as the exploration of social space, in which "travel and adventure, *bohème*, wandering, bewilderment, *parvenir*" have decisive importance¹⁵. Moretti's discourse that we have quoted refers to a literary genre that was born and developed within a precise historical and cultural context¹⁶, however, it can be traced, in the broad sense, also to many other modern novels, including many novels for children: *Viperetta*, indeed, or Collodi's *Adventures of Pinocchio*, from a few decades earlier, and with which Rubino's novel has elements of profound affinity. *Viperetta*, in fact, shares with *Pinocchio* the same rapidity of movement and language, his readiness to respond and react, as well as his good heart, and like him, she eventually changes deep within. However, whereas in the Collodian novel the final transformation of the protagonist takes on the dark tones of a death (this is what the puppet looks like, slumped in the chair and with whom the tidy child no longer has anything to do), in *Viperetta* the transformation does not take place as a final departure from the past. Rather, *Viperetta's* metamorphosis stems from the discovery of the other and the recognition of this latter's emotions, so similar to her own:

Walk. Walk. The road seemed eternal. The plain seemed endless.

Do we still have a long way to go?

Yes.

Stop saying yes all the time. You end up being nasty. Paolotta burst into tears.

By dint of walking across to the Sea of Rain, they finally saw an endless chain of snow-white mountains appear, which Paolotta had never seen. They were the Apennines of the Moon, but Paolotta did not know it and thought she was lost.

Viperetta, I don't remember the way to go anymore.

So much the worse for you.

Worse for us. The sun is going down. The moonlit night approaches. We only have a few hours ahead of us.

Stupid, boorish, ignorant.

¹³ Calvino I., back cover of the first Einaudi edition of *Viperetta* (1975).

¹⁴ Moretti F., *Il romanzo di formazione*, Einaudi, Turin 1999, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Franco Moretti in his study on the coming-of-age novel distinguishes the latter, meant in a general sense, from the Bildungsroman or "European coming-of-age novel", that is, that narrative model with specific characteristics and whose great season opens with Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1796) and ends with Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1848), although its descending parable ends, Moretti again states, only in 1914 "in the painful traumas of *Törless*, or *America* or *Dedalus*" (see *ibid.*, p. XI and pp. 3-15).

Yes.

That yes was said with such a sincere accent, that Viperetta for the first time in her life felt moved, or, rather, she felt something stirring inside of her that made her eyes itch. She kissed Paolotta on the cheeks and simply said:

- Let's go!¹⁷

This discovery will lead the protagonist away from a childish self-centered view of the world, her own needs and desires, her own whims, and push her toward a more mature way of understanding her relationship with the world and its inhabitants. The new “form” conquered by Viperetta, her finally constructed identity, will be definitively conquered thanks to the gift of her friend Pierrotto who, on the point of death, will leave his violin as a memento of their friendship: “indeed, it will be precisely the last dramatic encounter with Pierrotto that will play a decisive role in the fulfillment of Viperetta’s transformation who, from that moment onward, will channel all her efforts, and all her passion, into the study of the violin, achieving astounding results in a short time”¹⁸.

The ending is apparently equivalent to the typical scheme of the coming-of-age novel (and the bourgeois morality of the time): it ends, in fact, with the symbolic death of the protagonist who finds her place in the adult world, finally assuming a stable and socially acceptable “form”, confirmed also by taking a new name: Violetta. Collodi’s *Pinocchio* also ended with the disturbing image of the puppet abandoned in the chair, thus responding to the logic that governs the narrative development of the coming-of-age novel and revealing its contradictory nature: on the one hand, as Moretti points out, a tale of the restless and mobile age of youth, of its new way of exploring the social universe that leads to an increasing awareness of one’s self and the world; on the other hand, however, “the celebration of its funeral”, that is, the recognition of the necessary end of childhood and youth, and thus, ultimately, of freedom¹⁹.

In *Viperetta*, however, the latter aspect is nowhere to be found; Viperetta’s is a change linked to an emotional dimension that does not seem to misrepresent the vital form of the character, as happens between the puppet Pinocchio and the child Pinocchio, but channels it in a constructive direction. The passion for the violin thus becomes a symbol of an educational encounter in the deepest sense of the word because it is truly transformative: the protagonist’s overwhelming energy is channeled into that passion without being humbled or wasted.

Rubino reveals, in this respect, an uncommon pedagogical intelligence, at least for that time, understanding coming-of-age as a transformative process centered on the persistence and enhancement of the intellectual and emotional energy of the “the one in the process of coming of age” and of his/her desire to learn, which needs to find the right opportunity to come to light: an opportunity that the school, as an institution, cannot offer, nor the commitment of the adults responsible for it, but rather life, with its unpredictable encounters, and the direct experience of the world and the endless roads running through it²⁰.

¹⁷ Rubino A., *Viperetta*, (1919), Scalpendi, Milan 2010, pp. 94-95.

¹⁸ Negri M., *Viperetta. Storia di un libro*, cit., p. 82.

¹⁹ See Moretti F., *Il romanzo di formazione*, cit., p. 7.

²⁰ Negri M., *Viperetta. Storia di un libro*, cit., p. 83.

In *Viperetta* then, this coming-of-age journey takes the shape of the trip to the moon, which responds to a long tradition, a literary *topos* that the human imagination has used to deal with the topic of the Elsewhere, with a cultural and social diversity that is often extreme, which leads readers to reconsider the intellectual coordinates through which they view and interpret their own world.

The trip to the moon therefore fulfills, historically, a twofold task: it invites readers to indulge in the liberating pleasure of traveling through unusual territories, studded with bizarre inventions and unbridled fantasies, quenching their thirst for wonder, and at the same time, it conveys, under the fascinating veil of metaphor, a critique, more or less explicit, of the customs and ideas of the age to which they belong²¹.

Viperetta's lunar image has its roots in that line of descent from Lucian of Samosata's *Storia Vera* (2nd century A.D.) to Rubino's novel through the tales of the adventures of Baron Münchhausen and Georges Méliès' *Voyage dans la lune*. Rubino retrieves narrative cues or even simple visual suggestions from here²². But what significantly links *Viperetta* to these novels belonging to distant and different eras are: the similar rapidity and lightness of the narrative rhythm and its nature as a coming-of-use novel, in the specific form of an education of thought that crosses the gaze and the direct experience and that teaches the relativity of all knowledge. What is decisive in the maturation of individuals, Rubino tells us, is not necessarily the relationship with adults who, in the novel, indeed are often ridiculous caricatures, let alone with those who institutionally fill that role but, rather, the personal encounter with the world, people, situations, and feelings.

What really matters, then, is the road, the real and imaginary journey that each of us takes in the course of our lives moved by the desire to meet, wonder and understand [...]. The journey, in this sense, becomes an excellent metaphor for the formative process meant as a search for an elusive, and in many ways, mysterious goal, an interrupted beginning and restarted each time along different possible paths, without any guarantee of a success or a fulfillment, but such, by its very nature, as to cause profound changes in the individual: since what changes us is not the goal we have reached - the end of the lunar experience, for *Viperetta*, her return home - but rather the path accomplished, the quest undertaken and the ability to put ourselves on the line without reservation, with all the risks this may entail²³.

Thus, if we consider how the topic of the encounter of places, situations, and relationships is of crucial importance in the idea of coming-of-age developed by Rubino, we will also be able to understand how decisive the moon is in the formative process concerning the novel's protagonist. The first experience of the world that the newborn *Viperetta* experiences, in fact, is precisely through the image of the moon.

In the room that was set for her, the moonlight was so strong that the cradle seemed to be brightly lit. The first thing the child saw, her eyes wide open, was that big face of the full moon staring back at her through the glass²⁴.

²¹ Ibid, p. 94.

²² This is the case with the famous image of the moon-face centered in the eye by the astronaut capsule in the Méliès' *Voyage*; it will recur several times in Rubino's novel, albeit reworked by his imagination.

²³ Negri M., *Viperetta. Storia di un libro*, cit., pp. 116-117.

²⁴ Rubino A., *Viperetta*, cit. p. 12.

An encounter that marks the little girl once and for all: an indelible stain on her forehead and a propensity to whimsical fantasizing that only at the end of a long series of tribulations will be transformed into artistic discipline. Through this experience the little girl's initiation takes place: in one of the first pages of the novel, a "strange little old woman", with a beautiful name with a folksy touch to it, Ziluna, is eager to "meet the little newborn creature", thus shows up to pay homage to the new parents and takes the little girl with her to show her off to the other neighbors, finally taking her to her dormer, up there, close to the sky and the stars, from where it is possible to admire from above the city bathed in moonlight and where she exposes the little one to the influence of the star:

The full moon truly exerts a special charm on the child.

She stretches her little hands out toward the moon and stares at it ecstatically, while the old woman points it out to her with her very long finger, and the parrot sewn onto her shoulder falls silent, mesmerized by that light²⁵.

It is precisely as a result of this exposure to the full moon that the fateful spot, white and round, a sign of a fateful encounter, will appear on the little girl's forehead: "Viperetta thus receives a kind of 'other' baptism, and her otherness as a bizarre child will be immediately witnessed by the unmistakable sign of her dual origin: earthly and lunar"²⁶.

As with so many fairy tale maidens and little girls who are marked on the forehead by a star, if it goes well, or by a donkey's tail, if it goes badly, Viperetta also receives her mark, that "white, round spot", which makes her look like a host of female figures placed somewhere between the here and the elsewhere. A closeness, that of Viperetta with the fairy tale, already foreshadowed by the presence of the "godmother" Ziluna who presides over the initiation rite. In this respect, Viperetta's journey, which is indeed a coming-of-age journey, also takes the shape of the fairy-tale initiation journey to timeless border places, outside of known spaces, inhabited by quirky characters and dominated by dangerous trials. The fairy-tale initiation journey of the fairy-tale child, Viperetta, is thus intertwined with the coming-of-age novel, a tradition in which it is rare to encounter a female coming-of-age journey. This makes Rubino's novel even more significant in the historical and literary context in which it is set. "Maidens, deprived of pedagogical, socialization and coming-of-age projects other than domestic ones, have almost never had access to real plots of *Bildung* designed for them, dedicated to them except, precisely, in the cave of the *intus*, the interior and the interiors"²⁷. The imagination of girls and adolescents were restricted within predetermined pathways and tended to form through the proposition of stereotypical models and roles for both the female and male genders. If, however, "the male was forced into a form that [...] obliged him to manifest and realize himself as much as possible [...], the female was forced to take the opposite direction namely that of non-self-realization"²⁸. Throughout the nineteenth century,

²⁵ Ibid, p. 16.

²⁶ Bernardi M., *Letteratura per l'infanzia e alterità. Incanti, disincanti, ambiguità, tracce*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2016, p. 193.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 197.

²⁸ Gianini Belotti E., *Dalla parte delle bambine*, (1973), Feltrinelli, Milan 1985, p. 178.

the texts to which girls had access reproduced the ideals, the virtues that the dominant culture demanded of women: obedience, honesty, sacrifice, while they were barred from adventure and the discovery of the outside world, territories of the coming-of-age novel. Women, considered physically and intellectually inferior to men, did not participate in life "outside", had no political voice or social freedom. The scant presence of the female figure in children's literature involving coming-of-age paths finds its explanation in this. Girls are the "great outcasts" in the literature of Western culture, absent or shaded characters, imprisoned in the supposed neutrality and asexual image of childhood, thus not offering themselves to young female readers as characters with whom they can identify.

Viperetta, on the other hand, goes through the extraordinary experience of an initiation into an elsewhere, the trip to the moon, which gifts her with special encounters through which she will eventually be able to arrive at her metamorphosis, the fulfillment of a coming-of-age, female path, oriented toward a life project for the future. *Viperetta*, tamed and turned into Violetta "endowed with a new name, as the ceremony of the initiate's renewed return to society dictates, is undertaking the enterprise of music. And embarking on an enterprise is, in fact, the positive outcome of the coming-of-age novel that assigns to the protagonist - for once a child, a maiden, a woman - the right to the opportunities that life holds for her"²⁹.

3. *Viperetta* between text and image: a prototype of picture book?

What characterizes *Viperetta* and links her to the previous works by the author from San Remo is predominantly the underlying idea of text. The book is conceived as a veritable "imagining machine" in which the different parts, iconic and verbal, are bound together within a relationship of interdependence. This feature, which characterizes the very identity of the novel, is rather significant for the child reader for whom the work, for all intents and purposes, was intended. The iconic apparatus of Rubino's novel is made up of a series of illustrated drawings, in color, that run along the text marking its prominent moments and that represent, therefore, illustrations in the true meaning of the word; however, it is enriched by a further system of images, made up of only line cartoons, parallel to the narrative and interwoven with it: it suggests, visually anticipates concepts and atmospheres that in the different chapters acquire narrative form and are made clear through words.

The type of iconic-verbal textuality proposed in *Viperetta* implies, therefore, a real syntax that binds together verbal and iconic elements and that is quite similar to the one explored and developed, a few decades later in the first picture books, that is, in those particular textual devices "characterized by a constitutive interdependence between iconic and verbal language, which precisely in this relationship have indeed their expressive specificity"³⁰. The picture book is characterized by multiplicity: multiplicity of codes,

²⁹ Bernardi M., *Letteratura per l'infanzia e l'alterità*, cit. p. 197.

³⁰ Negri M., *Viperetta. Storia di un libro*, cit., p. 49.

For a more in-depth analysis on the picture book, see, among numerous studies: Hamelin (ed.), *Ad occhi aperti. Leggere l'albo illustrato*, Donzelli, Rome 2012; Terrusi M., *Albi illustrati. Leggere, guardare, nominare il mondo nei libri per l'infanzia*, Carocci, Rome 2012; Campagnaro M., Dallari M., *Incanto e racconto nel labirinto delle figure. Albi illustrati e relazione educativa*, Erickson, Trento 2013; Terrusi M., *Meraviglie*

alphabets, meanings; it has the specificity of a real language with its own expressive resources. It is not a book like any other, only enriched by figures, but a particular kind of book with a specific grammar that the reader must know in order to read it, a grammar that requires visual competence, certainly, it is necessary to know how to look at images, to be educated to see, but it is equally, and indeed mainly, necessary to know how to make all the aesthetic, narrative, content, emotional information that comes to light from the constant interaction between word, image, graphic, book object, converse one with the other. Reading a picture book is a complex action that requires possessing different skills, just like a language that thrives on a layering of forms, symbols, and meanings, but manages to blend them so effectively that it is fully understood by child readers. The narrative of the storybook is born of the clash between the text of words and that of images, sometimes it is composed of the sequence of images alone, as in the so-called *silent* (or, according to the Anglo-Saxon term, *wordless*) *books*, but it always implies the active presence of an implicit reader, that is, a reader capable of venturing into those empty spaces to construct his or her own interpretation of the text.

Let us then return to *Viperetta's* line cartoons and give a few examples that help us understand how Rubino's novel can, in some ways, be considered a "prototype", a forerunner, of the picture book.

Let us start with the first chapter, the one in which we meet *Viperetta's* future parents, Mr. and Mrs. Rini: the cartoon that introduces it shows the reader a small viper with a tongue curled in on itself [Translator's note: the literal translation of *Viperetta* is "small viper"]. This is undoubtedly an image that is easy for the reader to decode; in fact, it immediately leads back to the protagonist herself, whose main characteristic will be precisely a capricious and impertinent tongue.

However, on closer inspection, it also refers to the description of the family picture that occupies the entire chapter that will be precisely the root of the little girl's character.

In later chapters, however, Rubino tends to become less obvious; he surprises readers, forcing them to make greater efforts to join image and text together. Sometimes he even involves readers in the narrative game as a witness to the narrated events, makes them almost his accomplices. Just think of the cartoons that introduce chapters six and eight. The fifth chapter ends with the child, capricious and always screaming, using a personal method in opposition to the mutually opposed techniques with which her father and mother try to make her stop crying: she cries, always, with renewed insistence and stubbornness, so that she does not become, on the family scene, a secondary character. Eventually, exhausted after the futile, repeated attempts, it is the parents who will fall asleep, while the little girl contentedly watches them. At this point, having turned the page, readers are confronted with the bewildering image of a lobster, seemingly lacking any logical connection to the narrative; but as readers go on to read the sixth chapter, they realize that *Viperetta* can boast of additional stratagems similar to that

mute. Silent book e letteratura per l'infanzia, Carocci, Rome 2017; Barsotti S., Cantatore L., *Letteratura per l'infanzia. Forme, temi e simboli del contemporaneo*, Carocci, Rome 2019, chapters 1, 5, 6, 7, 8 edited respectively by Ilaria Filograsso, Marnie Campagnaro, Martino negri, Marcella Terrusi, Giorgia Grilli; Cantatore L., Galli Laforest N., Grilli G., Negri M., Piccinini G., Tontardini I., Varrà E., *In cerca di guai. Studiare la letteratura per l'infanzia*, Edizioni Junior-Bambini Srl, Reggio Emilia 2020 (in particular the chapter edited by Ilaria Tontardini, *Asimmetrie: albo illustrato, immagine e parola*).

of weeping, equally effective in satisfying her self-love, among them that of insistently pinching people's faces. "And there the lobster is revealed for what it is: a kind of visual metonymy, the emblem of a natural drive of the child, a garment of life that has taken animal form"³¹.

Even more disorienting to the reader turns out to be chapter eight. Here *Viperetta* is left in the care of Caterinella, the deaf nanny: the child resorts to her usual tears, her usual screams, which can do nothing in the face of the nanny's hearing numbness as she falls sound asleep. *Viperetta* is furious, "clenching her fists and stretching out her neck in an act of terrible wrath"³², eventually piercing the sheet with her sharp teeth and falling from the cradle, rolling under the bed. The image that introduces the chapter is the round face of a little girl with her index finger straight in front of her mouth mimicking silence that seems to invite the reader, witnessing the scene just described, to say nothing, as if revealing where the little girl ended up and fell asleep would somehow prevent the narrative from proceeding. We can then go so far as to read this image as a "visual wink" to the reader whose complicity Rubino is asking for, as a witness to facts that the other characters in the story do not yet know, inviting him or her to actively participate in the narrative game.

It should be noted, finally, how on some occasions the cartoons-embodiments that introduce chapters reappear in the course of the story - this is the case of the lobster [...] - taking on similar or new meanings in relation to the contents of the new chapter to which they are linked: chapter twenty-ninth, for example, is also introduced by the figure of the lobster, now called upon not so much to symbolize the 'pinched' of chapter six as the sparkling red of the child's dress. A little rebus for young readers who find themselves a few pages apart with the same image, the same sign, but with a different meaning³³.

The image, then, becomes a message to be deciphered, conveying a meaning that is not sent in a linear and unambiguous way, but rather evoked through the multifaceted signs of the visible. Rubino constructs for his child readers a language made of words and figures that must be related in order to be fully deciphered, understood, and ultimately enjoyed. As Roberta Cardarello points out in her volume on the early education of the reader, it is generally believed that the role of figures in children's picture books is to arouse interest in the young reader or, at most, to serve as a moment of rest from the intellectual labors of actual reading, where, actually, they take on functions no less complex than those held by the text. The iconic part of books for young children, we said in mentioning the mechanism of the picture book, does not only respond to attentional needs, but can play an important role in activating the process of reading both because it must be read and because it plays a supplementary role with respect to the written text. Moreover, Cardarello again notes, when the integration between the verbal and figurative parts of a book is not left to chance, "we are in the presence of an authentic textual construction in which the images add to their ornative role a more obviously semiotic role"; it is a context, that of the picture book, in which the reader, even if young, "is prompted to search for meaning, the links between the image and the

³¹ Negri M., *Viperetta. Storia di un libro*, cit., p. 43.

³² Rubino A., *Viperetta*, cit. p. 30.

³³ Negri M., *Viperetta. Storia di un libro*, cit., p. 45.

verbal text, progressively recognizing both the cohesion and the coherence of the quotation mark text³⁴. Rubino demonstrates that he understood that the time required for reading also depends on the organization and distribution, within the single page and in the pages following one another, of the verbal and nonverbal elements that build the story. Even those elements that seem to lack a specific role, “seemingly unrelated to the more obviously semantic aspects of a work - I am referring to the margins separating the body of the text from the borders of the sheet, or the white on which a figure stands out - have instead a precise semiotic value: not merely appeasing the eye of the most experienced reader [...] but acting significantly on the imagination of any reader, however perhaps, often, below the threshold of his or her awareness³⁵”.

In some ways, the *silent books* that make up the so-called “trilogy of the limit” come to mind - as their author calls it - by Korean illustrator Suzy Lee, who, by going further in her experimentation with the book as an object and, by exploiting the stitching of pages, sets here what she calls the “boundary between fantasy and reality³⁶”. Another recurring aspect in the “trilogy”, and generally in the author’s albums, are the pages devoid of images and words: if the blank page is not out of context, but is essential to add meaning within that context, it is not a misprint; it is not a blank page, but a bearer of further meaning. It can prepare for the coming turning point and simultaneously gives respite to the rhythm that precedes it; it represents a kind of blackout at the theater, Suzy Lee tells us, triggering our curiosity as to what will happen when the lights come back on. One young reader, asked about what was happening during the black page of *Ombra*, said, “Everything is still and motionless, it is holding its breath”. A completely full blank page.

The emptiness of the white space that surrounds the color drawings, the silence that this claims, also takes on a specific meaning in Rubino’s novel; the absence of signs makes the value of the few words found there all the more significant, and in that silence they regain their ability to say; moreover, it forces the child reader to slow down, which dilutes the reading time and invites him or her to let the words resonate in one’s imagination. A similar function is performed by the line cartoons that stand out precisely on a blank page. Here meanings become more complex and dilate; certainly not according to the reader’s whim, since, having turned the page, it becomes clear to what extent the anticipation of meaning elaborated by the image itself corresponds to the text or should, instead, be structured in another direction.

The white space around the text, in this respect, thus becomes specifically important and meaningful transcending the pure aesthetic pleasure of the layout and of the reader concerning, rather, times and mechanisms of the act of reading, which it helps to tune and define, making Rubino’s book an ‘other’ place, an imaginary and symbolic space - a ‘forest’, Giuseppe Pontremoli would perhaps say - in which it is pleasant to move at ease, without haste or constraint and, perhaps, even lose oneself³⁷.

³⁴ Cardarelli R., *Libri e bambini. La prima formazione del lettore*, La Nuova Italia, Florence 1995, pp. 96- 100.

³⁵ Negri M., *Viperetta. Storia di un libro*, cit., p. 47.

³⁶ Cf., Lee S., *La Trilogia del limite*, It. tr., Corraini, Mantua 2011. The silent ones referred to are: *L'Onda* (2008), *Mirror* (2008), *Ombra* (2010), all published, for the Italian edition, by Corraini.

³⁷ Negri M., *Viperetta. Storia di un libro*, cit., p. 48.

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