

ITALIAN POETRY REVIEW

Flaming in the phoenix' sight
William Shakespeare

We are happy to dedicate once again this issue of "Italian Poetry Review" to the memory of the quintessential poet and lover of poetry, the expatriate Alfredo De Palchi (1926-2020), as well as to the memory of two great Italian American intellectuals: the poet and great translator Joseph Tusiani (1924-2020) and the brilliant writer and critic Robert Viscusi (1941-2020).

This three authors conclude a whole period in the history of Italian and Italian American writing in the United States.

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DONATELLA BISUTTI, *Storie che finiscono male*, Torino, Einaudi Ragazzi, 2017, pp. 115 (Illustrazioni di Eleonora Marton).

From its very first appearance – the manuscript was published in 1845, the final version in 1861 – the collection of stories for children *Der Struwwelpeter*, described by its author Heinrich Hoffmann as *Lustige Geschichten und drollige Bilder mit 15 schön kolorierten Tafeln für Kinder von 3-6 Jahren*, spawned an increasing number of translations, imitations, and critical responses. *Struwwelpeter* enjoyed unprecedented international fame, becoming in time Pierre l'Ébrouiffé, Stepka-Rastrepka, João Felpudo, Slovenly Peter, and in Italy Pierino Porcospino, according to the translation by Gaetano Negri, published in 1882 by Hoepli, in Milan, and still in print today¹.

Donatella Bisutti, with her *Storie che finiscono male*, published in 2017, obviously looked back to that rich tradition, as testified by the very first story, *Pallino Porcospino*, meant as «un omaggio» to the author of *Struwwelpeter*². Subsequently, however, her stories branch out with a vigorous life of their own, and despite the obvious and acknowledged archetype they deserve a distinctive place in today's children's literature. This fascinating, unusual and interesting book for children contains much that suggests a strong link with the cautionary tales of the past, but also directly illuminates the present condition of our children. For this reason, on first meeting the author, and reading the book, the idea for a conference was launched and pursued, so that at the end of 2019 the University of Milan hosted an international symposium on “Transgression vs Politically Correct in Children's Literature”³. According to Peter Hunt, who was present in Milan and traced the coordinates of the genre, from the cautionary tales of the past to the present day, the very project that animates children's literature is meant to build the features of future, adult societies. In Bisutti's case, such project is inseparable from a very stern admonition and repeated warnings against the many dangers and pitfalls threatening the young, today.

In many ways Bisutti has distanced her stories from the archetypal *Struwwelpeter*, while retaining those elements that generate in the reader fear and horror. Her protagonists are no longer children, prone to mischief and disobedience, but animals, or vegetables, who think and feel like humans, and who live in a social context culturally determined by today's familiar objects and familiar conditions.

Pallino porcospino is a young hedgehog, whose dress is always dirty:

¹ I have followed the history of this classic in the excellent study by M. NEGRI, *Pierino Porcospino. Prima icona della letteratura per l'infanzia*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2018.

² D. BISUTTI, *Storie che finiscono male*, Torino, Einaudi, 2017. Further page references are given in the text. Bisutti is an Italian poet, a journalist, a story-teller. She is the founder and director of the “Premio Andersen – L'albero delle parole”; in Italian schools she has conducted many workshops for students and teachers.

³ For details about the event, to which Donatella Bisutti was present and offered a reading of her *Storie che finiscono male*, see the website on children's literature in Italy, <http://users.unimi.it/chiddlit>

Ma come puzza questo bambino,
ma come è zozzo Pallino porcospino! (5)

Despite the efforts of his mom, and unlike his siblings, Pallino, whether a child or a hedgehog, enjoys rolling in cow's dung, ... until he finds a jar of pitch and meets a spider, and ends up trapped into pitch and the spider's web.

After this opening, that clearly illustrates a case of transgression against parental warnings, Bisutti tells us stories about animals or plants entirely anthropomorphised, whose dire destiny – death usually – is determined by a dangerous relationship with their bodies, inasmuch as they fall victims of modern myths prescribing to achieve beauty, slimness, passion, power, often at the cost of their health, and life. I shall examine the stories according to their sequence: the reader then may trace his or her own way across the several adventures that Bisutti describes as «much more amusing» than stories about obedience and good deeds. In this respect, she embraces the tradition of the so-called «awful warning» in children's literature, that often sprung from religious orthodoxy and the concept of innate depravity, as in the case of *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818-1842-1847) by Mary Martha Sherwood, in which children were originally branded as sinners, and thus needed stern correction. A gothic strain indeed also colours the stories told by Bisutti, who often seems to dwell with fascination on the frightening details that inevitably mark their endings. A fine equilibrium between distancing the horrid details by setting the stories in the animal world and bringing it all home by imposing Christian names to the characters, within recognizable cultural contexts, is also achieved.

The second story – the book all in all contains 24 stories, plus an afterword by the author, about which later – is about “La gatta Riccia”, a she-cat too fond of food, a real glutton, an obsessive eater, who eventually after stealing from the pantry ends up inside the fridge. The door shuts, and she is found there: frozen, and obviously dead.

Vanity is the cause of the undoing of several characters. The stupid margherita Rita is a daisy, happy to be chosen and picked by a girl for her beauty. But the girl then painfully plucks her petals away, to find whether her boyfriend loves her... or not. «L'aragosta Augusta» is a lobster who wants to enjoy an ardent passion: she ends up in hot water, boiled alive! Vanity is also the fault of Emilio, a clover flower, who thinks of himself as «the king of the meadow» until he's munched with gusto by a young calf. «La giraffa Genoveffa», who wants to be the most elegant among all the animals, and hates her big bottom, falls victim of her desire to appear slim, and loses weight... until she dies. Beppe leprotto, the young hare, again is a glutton with a sweet tooth for confectionery, chocolates and cream. He eats so many sweets that he is almost choked and drowned in a big cake.

A different kind of danger awaits «Il lombrico Cesarino». This young worm finds a strange grass in the garden and wants to smoke it with his hookah: soon enough he has visions and hallucinations and ends up falling out of the window and finding a horrible death on the pavement. In this case, the reference to the

dangers caused by drugs is evident, and it has to do with today's threats, often awaiting our children at a very early stage, just out of their schools.

«L'anatrino Carlino» is a young and obstinate duck who does not want to learn to swim and builds a raft to join his family in the pond: Carlino will be drowned when the raft capsizes and sinks in deep water. Like the giraffe Genoveffa, also Lucy the lizard is the victim of the obsession with slimming: she wants to become a mannequin, she wants to appear on TV. She eats less and less, until she dies: a fashion victim indeed. Genoveffa and Lucy remind us of Hoffmann's Suppen-Kaspar, the boy who did not want to eat, and ended up dead and buried, under a cross and a tureen. The relationship with food and eating habits that cause either starving or overweight diseases, is the subject of several stories, that end badly. Thus «Lo scimmio Filippo» who is too fond of chocolate, eats and eats until his health is seriously affected. The last lines in Filippo's story dwell on his mother's tears, creating the sense of guilt evoked by the distress inflicted to parents by children who do not attend their warnings:

La mamma piange a lui vicino
Bagna di lacrime tutto il cuscino. (55)

Other dangers await the protagonists of these stories, as anthropomorphised young animals whose habits are those of a young child. Recent episodes of bullying, mainly occurring at school, are evoked by the story of Gianni castoro, a young beaver tormented and regularly threatened by a band of five young pigs. On his way home, after school, Gianni is regularly assaulted by his tormentors, who beat him, steal or break his things. Gianni, full of shame, does not find the courage to tell his parents: but one day he wins an important prize, he's given a gold medal, invited to the United States... and the cruel pigs sent to a rehabilitation centre. Bullying is a modern threat for many children: but in Hoffmann's «Die Gesichte von den schwarzen Buben» it seems by no means a thing of the past. The story is about race discrimination, and a black boy tormented by three white boys, who mock the colour of his skin. Saint Nicholas intervenes and ducks the three tormentors in a big bottle of ink, so that they become as black as the young moor.

Giovanna the squirrel loves listening to rock music on the way back from school, where she has to cross a railway line. She never takes away her earphones: predictably the train arrives, and she's smashed to smithereens. Another danger portrayed within a modern context.

Vanity again affects a young endive, «la cicoria Onorata», who believes to be a very dainty food, worth being cooked by the best chef. Sadly, against her hopes, she is thrown to the chicken.

The story of «Il topo Giorgio» contains a warning against meeting strangers and believing the stories they tell. A young disobedient mouse, tired of home, tired of his parents, decides to explore the wide, wide world. He meets a stranger who invites him home, feeds him, gives him a drug inducing sleep.... Giorgio is put into a sack and sold to a terrible destiny, as a laboratory animal:

Così adesso ti avrà venduto,
 a essere cavia sei destinato
 in un laboratorio imprigionato
 dove qualche nuovo farmaco
 viene sperimentato. (76)

«La pecora Maria» is a fashion victim, who imitates whatever she sees on television: and ends up following other sheep down a deep ravine, where they all fall, and presumably die. Also Miss Patata, a lovely young potato, wants to become a TV celebrity: to her happiness, she wins a contest, she's given a silver cloak, wrapped inside it, and put in a very hot place, to become a jacket potato!

Gino il babbuino, a young baboon, does not heed his mother's warnings about keeping away from the dangerous fireworks: as in Hoffmann's sad story of Paulinchen and the matches, he sets fire to the rockets and all that is left is a tiny heap of grey ashes. «Pippo bassotto e l'amico barboncino Federico» is the story of two great friends – a dachshund and a poodle – who find a loaded gun and play with it. Federico ends up shot by Pippo, in a pool of blood.

«Daniele il formichiere» is a young ant eater who wants to try something different from ants and water. He goes to Ronald Mac and has a sandwich and a lager. He keeps drinking more and more, moves on to whisky, gets dangerously drunk. Luckily, he manages to go home, and wakes up next morning with a terrible headache, and a total dislike for alcohol.

«La trota Arabella» is another story of vanity punished: attracted by a shining hook she thinks it's a jewel. She ends up in the fisherman's basket: but he also guts her and throws the entrails to a hungry cat.

Maria Antonietta is a young beautiful owl with many suitors: she keeps them waiting, never conceding her hand, so that she ends up a spinster. The last story is about Arnaldo, the dormouse, Peppina, a snail, and a young frog, Deodato. Arnaldo only wants to sleep; Peppina decides to travel, slowly but safely; Deodato forgets the pan on the fire, the house is burnt down, and in the end, Arnaldo sleeps the eternal sleep of death.

The presence of *Struwwelpeter* cannot be overemphasized. Yet Bisutti has managed to transform the cautionary tales of the past into something that children and young readers are likely to recognize, and to identify with. And even though Hoffmann's stories are today kept out of the hands of children, because of their contents that are considered too cruel and sadistic by pedagogues and psychologists, also the stories by Bisutti contain a dose of cruelty and gore, inasmuch as they often dwell on the unnecessary detail of bodies burnt, bleeding, maimed and squashed. The illustrations by Eleonora Marton, it must be noted, have a very modern touch and do not follow the realistic Biedermeier style of the original *Struwwelpeter*: the stories are represented in fragments, animals are portrayed in a simple way, objects and temptations separated from the dire consequences they cause, so that the overall effect of the illustrations is to mitigate the horrid details of the narration.

Bisutti's afterword is an attempt at explaining the aim of her rhymes. By looking back, ironically, towards the cautionary tales of the nineteenth century,

and to Hoffmann's, she intends to counteract the present lack of responsibility, and the lack of real values. To this end, she decided to discard the classic happy ending, in order to represent dangers such as drugs and alcohol addiction, illegal organ trade, obesity and bulimia, anorexia, and the allurements of the myths disseminated by today's media. To have a beautiful body, to be famous, envied, empowered, are some of the delusions she wants to unmask. The operation, she admits, has required some courage, in the face of today's do-goodism, but she hopes that children, fascinated and horrified at once, will learn from her stories. The reviewer can describe her operation as fully successful, and worth being read and appreciated among the classic «awful warnings» of today's children's literature.

FRANCESCA ORESTANO

