



PINOCCHIO, A TIMELESS CULTURAL ICON

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The story of a piece of wood carved into a puppet who rebels against adult authority, whose nose grows when he tells lies and who, after a number of harrowing adventures, becomes a flesh-and-blood boy, is familiar to us all. Written by Carlo Collodi (pseudonym of Carlo Lorenzini; Florence 1826-1890), *The Adventures of Pinocchio* had a troubled publication history. The first fifteen chapters were serialized in the children's magazine *Giornale per i bambini* under the title *Storia di un burattino*, which came out from July 1881. The story proved so compelling, and its protagonist so popular, that the author was persuaded to resume writing from the point he had left off, namely from the highly dramatic scene featuring the puppet hanging by the neck, dangling from a tree branch, buffeted by high winds. In 1883, Collodi brought out a complete volume in print, with the title *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, published by Paggi of Florence and illustrated by Enrico Mazzanti.

An acknowledged classic, serially revised, adapted and re-interpreted in multiple languages and in a suite of media, including music, film, radio, television and advertising, Collodi's story soon transcended the confines of Italian children's literature to achieve global cultural status. The range and breadth of its critical readings has been astounding, ranging from the psychoanalytic to the structuralist, from the mythopoetic to the theological and many more. Among others, Pinocchio's story has been read as an anti-Cinderella tale, a parody of the 'rags to riches' story, an embodiment of the Italian national character and an allegory of national strife and sacrifice leading to the unification of Italy. As a character, Pinocchio has been construed as a new Jesus Christ, Odysseus, Aeneas, Dante the voyager, Don Quixote, Candide and many others. Comparably with the classical heroes of



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Greek and Roman myth, Pinocchio suffers ordeals that enable him to reveal his heroic and divine nature. He experiences several metamorphoses, e.g. is morphed into donkey, a transformation which is particularly widespread in both Western and Eastern mythologies, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. His final metamorphosis from puppet made of wood into a flesh-and-blood boy concludes the parable of the puppet, transitioning Pinocchio into a fully-fledged human being.

In his capacity as a global and timeless cultural icon, Pinocchio finds new life in Philippe Boesmans's new opera *Pinocchio*, with libretto by Joël Pommerat. While introducing a handful of carefully chosen variables, first of all a *Directeur de la troupe* [director of the theater troupe], whose perspective as omniscient narrator provides a guidance and moral compass, Pommerat carefully revisits Collodi's original narrative, paying attention to the historical, social and psychological foundations of the story. I shall therefore begin by exploring the social and historical context underpinning Collodi's enduring tale.

Professionally, Carlo Collodi was employed as a civil servant. His passions, however, were theatre and satirical political journalism. Born in 1826, he lived and worked in Florence, capital of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, a city which experiencing rapid, tumultuous modernization in Collodi's time. After a stint working as an assistant bookseller at Piatti Bookshop, Collodi fought in the first and second Independence Wars (1848-1859), the wars that eventually propelled Italy's Unification. Collodi built his career precisely in the turbulent political climate that saw Florence transformed from epitome of a petty, provincial *Toscanina* [Little Tuscany], a cozy and insular periphery, into one of the drivers and first capital of the unified Kingdom of Italy (1865-1871). It is in this electrifying atmosphere that Collodi grew into one of the most enthusiastic and engaged polemicists of his time, founding





the satirical daily *Il Lampione*, followed by *Lo Scaramuccia* and composing polemical and vitriolic political pamphlets. An ardent theatre goer, he published hundreds of theatre reviews.

The social and political turmoil typifying the *Risorgimento*, together with the patriotic drive to ‘create Italians’ almost *ex novo* as a new anthropological category, was accompanied by an equally vibrant development of educational and pedagogical reform. From its pivotal position as cultural centre, as well as political capital of the new Kingdom, Florence was best placed to produce and disseminate educational and pedagogic literature through its burgeoning publishing industry. In a handful of years Florence became, in fact, an important hub for the publishing industry in Italy, specializing in school primers and textbooks for primary and secondary schools, especially following two Education Acts, *Legge Casati* (1859) and *Legge Coppino* (1877), regulating mandatory education for children. These liberal educational backdrops stand powerfully behind Pinocchio’s genesis, as well as providing impetus for a first nucleus of children’s literature in Italy. Children’s literature was, of course, well under way in other parts of Europe. In France, Jules Verne’s adventures were enjoying enormous popularity, while in Britain, Charles Kingsley had already published *The Water-Babies* (1862-1863) and Lewis Carroll *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Italy, where illiteracy rates, especially amongst children and women, were among the highest in Europe, was lagging behind and eager to catch up.

This wave of social reform underpins Collodi’s masterpiece. At close reading, *Le avventure di Pinocchio* betrays the author’s concern over the widespread penury, illiteracy and hunger engulfing a society suffering under the yoke of tyranny. Human characters, as well as most animals, are portrayed as inherently corrupt and evil. The *contadini* [peasants] are



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positively vicious, verging on the criminal. Pinocchio's adventures are not set against the backdrop of a pastoral or idealized bygone rural world, rather they inhabit a precarious, utilitarian and merciless world, where nothing is to be wasted. The police and legal authorities are also scourged and vilified: if contemporary society is deemed responsible for social inequality, figures of authority are satirized and jibed here. In a Darwinian twist, the Judge confronting Pinocchio when he is brought to court is portrayed as a gorilla. The doctors who treat, and fail to cure, Pinocchio are ineffectual birds of prey reminiscent of characters in Aesop's fairy tales. A powerful, almost Orwellian political dystopia is encapsulated in the episode of *Acchiappacitrulli*, a city governed by an oligarchy of birds of prey, magpies and foxes who starve and oppress other animals. The Fox, the Cat, the Judge/Gorilla stand as allegories of a modernity that fails to emancipate the dispossessed from their lot. One of the models here may be *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Lawrence Sterne's eighteenth century classic, which probably inspired Collodi's expressive 'naturalness' and ironical scourging of social and cultural prejudice.

In spite of his inveterate habit of lying, Pinocchio is an epitome of the hungry and the dispossessed, more often than not a victim of his own candid honesty and of a cruel and unequal social structure. *Le avventure di Pinocchio* is strewn with moral lessons: Pinocchio must learn to be frugal, honest and truthful. Truth, in particular, is an important lesson to learn for Pinocchio - with implicit reference to the current era of post-truth, it seems no accident that Pommerat's *Directeur de la troupe* is insistent on *la vérité*, a refrain punctuating his text. The puppet must be prepared to work hard and make sacrifices in order to achieve the ultimate goal of becoming a flesh-and-blood boy, in similar manner as a united Italy must be prepared to work hard and make sacrifices for the achievement of the common good. The puppet himself may well stand as a metaphor for Italy: a rebellious,





unwieldy and recalcitrant liar. The autonomy advocated by the puppet in his struggle to become a flesh-and-blood human may stand for the new moral discipline required by Italy in its impetus to become a unified country.

Le avventure di Pinocchio is, however, much more than a political tract and satire. We already mentioned its structural anomaly, e.g. the first fifteen chapters of a seminal narrative, which are fast, concise and punchy, written on the spur of the moment; and the finished product, which, while incorporating the original matrix, weaves a complex, multi-layered and nuanced narrative fabric around it. The psychological dimension and pedagogic and moral intent prevail in the volume-length manuscript, completing Pinocchio's parable with the final reward of achieving human status. Interestingly, while Pinocchio's human metamorphosis happens overnight in Collodi's narrative, Pommerat regards this process as gradual and going virtually unnoticed, not a magic transformation, but an all too human process of progressive change and maturation, 'fait peu à peu, progressivement'. 'A partir de ce jour' concludes Pommerat tellingly, 'on peut dire que la vie commença pour de bon.' Real life begins, in other words, when fiction tails off.

A comparable tension is also at work in Collodi's characterization. The main characters fall into one of two categories: those conceived in a realistic fashion (e.g. the father, Mastro Ciliegia, Lucignolo) and those who are fruit of Collodi's imagination, such as *The Fairy with Turquoise Hair*, Mangiafoco and the talking animals. Reality and imagination overlap all the time in Collodi's story, blurring the boundaries between fictional and true to life. Are we then to read Pinocchio's story as a fairy-tale or a realist narrative? Collodi is aware of the Tuscan mode *novellare* [story-telling] and its semantic apparatus (e.g. the bare interiors, the desolate and hostile landscape, the cunning, greediness and brutality of *contadini*). As such, *Le*





avventure di Pinocchio aims to cast a bridge between the fairy-tale and the canonical mode of Tuscan story telling, the realist Tuscan novella form, and, in so doing, achieving a degree of psychological realism, as is evidenced in the main characters.

Take the protagonist. Is Pinocchio a puppet or a boy? Pinocchio's nature is ambiguous. He comes to life as a puppet and yet is immediately treated by his father as a little boy son. He is a dual character, both puppet and human, and much of the rhythm and tension of this narrative depend on this dialectic. Pinocchio is an instinctual creature. He can be gullible. In order to pursue his own selfish pleasure, Pinocchio does not hesitate to lie, behave in arrogant and possessive manners. He practices, in other words, what psychoanalysts call 'procrastination of duty'. On the other hand, Pinocchio displays many a good moral traits: he is brave, compassionate and gentle. He is tenacious and stands up for himself. His name comes from the Tuscan noun for 'pine kernel' (Ital. *pinolo* / Tusc. *pinocchio*), pointing to his parentage in arboreal nature. Pinocchio looks like a puppet but, unlike puppets, has no strings. He is an android capable of extraordinary feats of strength and physical power. His body is at one time strong and weak: like wood, he is lightweight and malleable. On the other hand, he suffers hunger and thirst, cries and throws tantrums just like a little boy.

Most importantly, Pinocchio's main physical and psychological trait is a perpetual, frantic dynamism: Pinocchio is a mercurial, kinetic creature, always breathless, always on the run, fleeing assassins, policemen, wild animals and other schoolchildren. This unbound energy and hyper-activity characterizes children at the early stages of development, and also qualifies Pinocchio's rebellious, but also curious, critical and inquisitive nature. Most memorably, Pinocchio's nose is subject to sudden bouts of activity, growing longer when he tells lies. The nose is arguably the most prominent,



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unpredictable part of Pinocchio's anatomy. Its sexual, phallic symbolism has been remarked upon, together with further psychological and symbolic traits - Winnicott, for example, singles out the noses as the body part symbolically connected to a transitional space where identity can be achieved. Noses feature prominently in modern art - see, for instance, Paul Klee. Alberto Giacometti welds a long nose on the skull of his sculptures to suggest the triumph of life over death. The growth of Pinocchio's nose has additionally been associated with the arboreal genesis of the puppet: as he is made out of wood, sap runs through his nose as it does the trunk of a tree, making it grow. These disparate traits confirm that, ultimately, Pinocchio is neither a boy proper nor a puppet proper. Instead, he inhabits a threshold, a middle ground where he is both dead and alive, a material object and a flesh-and-blood body, and, as such, a fertile ground to test out psychological states and human dilemmas.

What then of Pinocchio's parents? Pinocchio comes to life from under the chisel of his father Geppetto, who looms large on the original first fifteen chapters of the novel. Like a god of classical myth, Pinocchio is not born of mother, but hand-made by father alone. Not only does Pinocchio not have a mother, but, equally, no female figures inhabit the novel. Collodi's society is patriarchal, a world where women are absent or invisible, with the only exception of the entirely imaginative character of *The Fairy with Turquoise Hair* who appears for the first time in Chapter XV. It has been suggested that this conspicuous absence reflects Collodi's own uneasy, uncomfortable relationship with women - we know that he was a bachelor moving in circles where he was unlikely to encounter many women and extremely devoted to his *mamma* throughout his life. Pinocchio must then rely entirely on his *babbo* [father], whose role is to act as both father and mother to his puppet/son. Pinocchio's genealogy is god-like, suggesting once again his exemplary, paradigmatic status.





Do Pinocchio's adventures contain a moral lesson? Pinocchio's story can be read as following a Christian template where sin leads to guilt and punishment. Alternatively, the puppet can be regarded as an epitome of the boy who refuses to grow up, his wooden body simulating the armour protecting the boy from becoming an adult. Pinocchio is indeed characterized by an indomitable vocation to remain a child. The pedagogic lesson of teaching a naughty puppet to behave like a well-mannered boy is unsparing, subjecting Pinocchio to hard labour, hanging from a tree and trapping him in a snare. Pinocchio endures a harsh Victorian education. It may be precisely this callous sense of duty, sufferance and punishment, widely related to the dark, *noir* dimension of this narrative, that leads Collodi to obsess with death, to populate his narrative with assassins, shadows, cemeteries, darkness, voices from the other world, coffins, etc etc.

Despite its caustic humour, in fact, the dark and tragic undertones of this story can be brought back to the dramatic, theatrical appeal of this extraordinary text. As we already mentioned, Collodi was deeply immersed in, and involved with, theatre, his ultimate, deep passion. Popular theatre, especially *teatro comico* [comic or humorous theatre] of the kind that Collodi would have been familiar with, such as puppet shows, *commedia dell'arte* and the vaudeville, are vividly featured in *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, in the guise of physical venues, individual productions and structural and stylistic devices enmeshed in the architecture and fabric of the narrative. Even Collodi's style betrays his preference for parody and caricature, with frequent echoes of Rossini's *opera buffa*. Most importantly, Collodi was forcefully persuaded that opera was the most genuinely popular cultural genre in Italy. Boesmans's and Pommerat's *Pinocchio* is a powerful testimony to the eloquent theatrical and operatic background of Collodi's





masterpiece and of the moral, psychological and cultural lessons underpinning Pinocchio's icon across time.

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