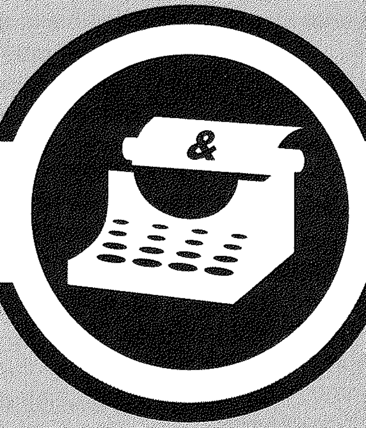
TEACHERS  WRITERS

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The Grammar of Fantasy

by Gianni Rodari

The Stone in the Pond

A stone thrown into a pond sets in motion concentric waves that spread out on the surface of the water, and their reverberation has an effect on the water lilies and reeds, the paper boat and the buoys of the fishermen at various distances. All these objects are just there for themselves, enjoying their tranquility, when they are wakened to life, as it were, and are compelled to react and to enter into contact with one another. Other invisible vibrations spread into the depths, in all directions, as the stone falls and brushes the algae, scaring the fish and continually causing new molecular movements. When it then touches the bottom, it stirs up the mud and bumps into things that have rested there forgotten, some of which are dislodged, others buried once again in the sand. In a short time countless events or micro-events occur one after another. Even if a person had the time and desire, I doubt whether all of this could be registered without missing some aspect of change.

It is not much different with a word, thrown by chance into the mind, producing waves on the surface and in the depths. It provokes an infinite series of chain reactions and, as it falls, it evokes sounds and images, analogues and recollections, meanings and dreams, in a movement that touches experience and memory, the imagination and the unconscious, and is complicated by the fact that the mind itself does not react passively, but intervenes continually to accept and reject these representations, to connect and censor them, construct and destroy them.

Take the word *stone* as an example. When it falls into the mind, it drags words after it, bumps into words, or avoids them. In short, it comes into contact with them in different ways:

GIANNI RODARI (1920–1980) was an educator, activist, and author of many books. This issue is devoted to selections from his book *The Grammar of Fantasy: An Introduction to the Art of Inventing Stories*, which T&W has just published. This first English translation of an Italian classic on education and writing is by Jack Zipes, a professor at the University of Minnesota and one of America's foremost experts on folk tales, fairy tales, and children's literature.

SPECIAL RODARI ISSUE

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• with all the words that begin with *s* but do not continue with *t*, like "seminar," "silence," "system"

• with all the words that begin with *st*, like "stamp," "stem," "start," "stag," "stop," "stink"

• with all the words that rhyme with it, like "bone," "tone," "phone," "scone," "drone"

• with all the words that come close in meaning according to the dictionary, like "rock," "pebble," "marble," "brick," "granite"

• et cetera.

These are the easiest associations. A word collides with another one through gravity. This is hardly sufficient to ignite sparks (but one can never know).

Meanwhile the word falls in other directions, sinks into a past world, and lets sunken existences emerge. At first contact, *stone* is for me Santa Caterina del Sasso, a sanctuary situated on a steep rocky cliff over Lake Maggiore. I rode there on my bike, and I also went there with my friend Amedeo. We would sit down beneath a cool portico to drink white wine and to talk about Kant. Because we commuted to school together, we also met each other on the train. Amedeo wore a long blue coat. On some days one could detect the outlines of his violin case beneath it. Since the handle of my case was broken, I had to carry it under my arm. Amedeo joined the mountain troops during the war and was killed in Russia.

Another time Amedeo's figure returned to me as I was "digging" for the word *brick*, which reminded me of certain low baking ovens in the countryside of Lombardy, of long walks in the fog or in the woods. Amedeo and I frequently spent entire afternoons in the woods talking about Kant and Dostoevsky and the poets Eugenio Montale and Alfonso Gatto. The friendships at sixteen are those that leave the most profound marks on our lives. But that is not what concerns me here. I am concerned with perceiving how any word chosen by chance can function as a magical word to exhume fields of memory that have rested under the dust of time.

The taste of the madeleine had the same effect in Proust's memory. And after him all the "writers of times past" have learned, even too much, to listen to the buried echoes of words, their smells, and their sounds. But we want to invent stories for children, not write tales to recuperate and preserve our "things past." From time to time it is entertaining and useful to play the memory game, even with children. Any word can help them remember "that time when...," to discover themselves in the time that is passing, to measure the distance between today and yesterday, even if their "yesterdays" are fortunately still small in number and not so packed with events.

The theme of the fantastic stems from this kind of search that takes off from one single word. Whenever unusual unions are created, whenever there are complex movements of images and capricious overlappings, an unpredictable affinity is illuminated between words that belong to different chains. *Brick* brings with it: sick, tick, lick, stick, click, nick, kick....

Brick and *stick* seem to me to be an interesting pair, even if not so "beautiful as the chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table" (Lautréamont, *Les chants de Maldoror*). In the confusing play of words that have been evoked, *brick* coincides with *stick* like *stone* with *bone*. Amedeo's violin probably introduces an emotional element and influences the emergence of a musical image:

> Here we have the house full of music. It is made out of musical bricks, musical stones. Its walls, due to the percussion of small hammers, produce all possible tones. I know that there is a C sharp over the couch. The clearest F sharp is under the window. The floor is entirely in B flat major, an exciting tone. There is an amazing atonal, serial electronic door. It is enough just to touch them with one's finger to produce an entire piece in the manner of Nono-Berio-Maderna. Stockhausen would become delirious about this. (He fits perfectly into this picture more than any other musician, since the word "Haus," house, is incorporated in his name.) But I am not solely concerned with a house. There is an entire musical country with a piano house, a bell house, a bassoon house. It is an orchestra village. In the evening the inhabitants organize a beautiful concert from their houses before they go to bed.... At night, when they are all asleep, a prisoner plays on the bars of his cell.... Et cetera. Now the story has begun.

I think that the prisoner entered the story because of the rhyme *bell* and *cell*. I was not consciously aware of the rhyme, but apparently it was lurking in the background. One could say that the prison bars simply manifested themselves. But I don't believe it. Rather my memory must have quickly brought it to the surface and suggested it to me from the title of an old film: *Prison without Bars*.

The imagination can now follow another path:

> All the bars of all the prisons in the world are taken down. Everyone will become free. Even the thieves? Yes, even the thieves. It is prison that produces thieves. Put an end to the prisons, put an end to thieves....

At this point I can note how my ideology makes its mark in an ostensibly mechanical process, like the block of a stamp, but it also modifies the stamp itself. I hear the echo of past and recent readings. The world of the excluded asks arrogantly to be named: orphanages, reform schools, homes for the aged, insane asylums, schoolrooms. Reality erupts into the surrealistic exercise. In the end, if the musical country becomes a story, it will not be treated in an evasive fantastical manner, but in a way that will rediscover and represent reality in new forms.

But the exploration of the word *stone* is not finished. I must negate it as an organism that has a certain meaning and a certain sound and break it down into its letters disclosing words that I set down one after another to arrive at its pronunciation.

I write the letters beneath each other:

S -
T -
O -
N -
E -

Now I can write next to each letter the first word that comes to my mind, and in this way I obtain a new series. (For example: sand-top-oven-news-earthquake.) Or I can—this is more entertaining—write five words next to each letter that produce a logical sentence. For example:

S - Seven
T - tigers
O - oppose
N - nasty
E - enemies.

At this moment I do not know what to do with the seven tigers except to make a nonsense rhyme out of them:

Seven tigers snub their nose
Even when they smell a rose...et cetera.

But one should not expect a significant result on first try. I'll try another series with the same system:

S - Seventeen
T - tyrants
O - oppress
N - noble
E - elephants.

Seventeen is an automatic extension of the previous *seven*. The tyrants are evidently an intensification of the powerful tigers. Instead of opposing enemies, these tyrants exploit noble elephants, and we are left with a dramatic image.

I myself have invented many stories simply by choosing a word by chance. One time, for example, I took off from the word *omnibus* and made the following playful association: omnibus-Columbus. (Please excuse this arbitrary use of a famous name, which is not entirely arbitrary, and for introducing it into an area that also touches on fairy tales.) The omnibus of Columbus—only a bus—the wheels of a bus—the round o—round earth—round egg—oval—orbit. All these associations led me to write a story entitled "A World in an Egg" that was a combination of nonsense and science fiction.

Now we can let the word *stone* find its destiny. But we should not delude ourselves and think that we have exhausted its possibilities. Paul Valéry once said, "There is not a single word that can be grasped even when we get to the bottom of it." And Wittgenstein stated: "Words are like a thin surface over deep water." This is why stories are found when we dive for them.

In connection with the word *brick*, I recall an American creativity test that Marta Fattori discusses in her book *Creatività ed educazione* (*Creativity and Education*). The children who took this test were asked to count all the possible uses of bricks that they knew or could imagine. Perhaps this is why the word *brick* imposed itself on me with such insistence, for I had only recently come upon this test in Fattori's book. Unfortunately, tests of this kind are not intended to stimulate the creativity of children. Rather, they are mainly used to measure and select "the most imaginative" children, like other tests that select the "smartest in math." Of course, they may have their use. But in essence they follow goals that are well above the heads of the children.

On the other hand, the game of "the stone in the pond," which I have briefly illustrated here, moves in the opposite direction: it tends to be useful for children rather than to use them.

The Fantastic Binominal

We have seen the motif of the fantastic—the beginning for a story—originate from a single word. But we are dealing here with an optical illusion more than anything else. In reality one electrical pole is not enough to cause a spark; it takes two. The single word "acts" only when it encounters a second that provokes it and compels it to leave the track of habit and to discover new possibilities of meaning. To live means to struggle.

This is due to the fact that the imagination is not just a faculty separate from the mind. It is the mind itself in its entirety, which, applied to one activity more than another, always makes use of the same procedures. And the mind is born out of struggle, not out of tranquility. Henri Wallon wrote in his book *Les Origines de la pensée chez l'enfant* (*The Origins of Thinking in the Child*) that thought is formed in pairs. The idea of soft cannot be formed before or after the idea of hard, but simultaneously in an encounter that is the offspring: "The fundamental element of thought is this binary structure, not the single elements that compose it. The couple, the pair precedes the isolated element."

Hence, in the beginning was this opposition. And Paul Klee was also of this opinion when he stated in his *Writings about Form and the Theory of Figures* that "a concept is impossible without its opposite. Concepts do not exist alone for themselves; rather they are, as a rule, 'conceptual binominals.'"

A story can be born only out of a "fantastic binominal."

"Horse-dog" is not really a "fantastic binominal." It is a simple association within the same zoological classification. At the evocation of the two four-legged animals, the imagination remains indifferent. It is a major third chord that does not promise anything exciting.

It is necessary to have a certain distance between the two words. One must be sufficiently strange or different from the other, and their coupling must be discreetly unusual, because the imagination is compelled to set itself in motion to establish a relationship between the two and to construct a (fantastic) whole in which the two foreign elements can live together. Therefore, it is best to choose the fantastic binominal with the help of chance. The two words should be dictated by two children without each other's knowledge, chosen at random, and indicated by blindly pointing at two pages of a dictionary that are far apart from one another.

When I was a teacher, I had one child go to the movable blackboard to write a word on one side, and another child to write a word on the reverse side. A certain expectation was created through this little preparatory ritual. If a child wrote

the word *dog* in front of everyone, this word was already a special word, triggered to contribute to a surprise, to insert itself into an unpredictable event. This dog was not just any kind of a four-legged animal. It was already an adventurous, disposable, and fantastic character. When the blackboard was turned around, one could read, let us say, the word *closet.* It was greeted by a burst of laughter. The word *platypus* or *tetrahedron* would not have had a greater success. Now, a closet by itself would normally not cause anyone to laugh or cry. It is an inert object, a banality. But this closet, coupled with a dog, was something completely different. It was a discovery, an invention, an exciting stimulus.

Some years later I read what Max Ernst had written to explain his concept of the "systematic shift of space." He really made use of the image of the closet that de Chirico had portrayed in a classical landscape between olive trees and Greek temples. By "shifting the space" this way, thrown into an unrelated context, the closet became a mysterious object. Perhaps it was full of clothes, perhaps not. But it was certainly full of fascination.

Victor Shklovsky describes the "estrangement effect" that Tolstoy achieves when he talks about a simple couch in words that one would use when talking to a person who had never seen a couch before and would not have the slightest idea of how a couch could be used.

In the "fantastic binominal," the words are not taken in their daily meaning, but freed from the verbal chains that hold them together on a daily basis. They are "estranged," "shifted," thrown against one another in a sky that has never been seen before. Hence they are in the best possible condition for generating a story.

At this point let us take the words *dog* and *closet* once more. The most simple method for creating a connection between the two is by coupling them with prepositions. In this way we obtain different pictures:

1) the dog with the closet
2) the closet of the dog
3) the dog in the closet
4) the dog on the closet
5) et cetera.

Each one of these pictures offers us the outline of a fantastic situation:

1) A dog runs down the street *with a closet on his back.* It is his little basket. What can one do about it? The dog always carries it with him just like a snail carries its house. Continue this as you wish.

2) *The closet of the dog* seems to me more than anything else to be an idea for architects, designers, and interior decorators of luxurious apartments. The closet is there to hang up the dog's little coat, his different muzzles and leashes, his overshoes for chilly days, back warmer with tassels, rubber bones, cat traps, a map of the city (in order to know where to go to fetch the milk, newspaper, and cigarettes for his master). The closet may also contain a story, but I don't have the faintest clue whether it does or doesn't.

3) *The dog in the closet* is much more inviting to hear and believe. Doctor Polyfemo comes home, opens the closet to take out his house jacket, and finds a dog inside. Right away, we are challenged to think up an explanation, to explain this apparition. But the explanation can wait. For the moment it is more interesting to analyze the situation at hand. The dog's breed cannot be ascertained. Perhaps it is a dog that sniffs out truffles. Perhaps it is a dog that sniffs cyclamens or rhododendrons. He is friendly, wags his tail, holds up his paw politely, but he refuses to get out of the closet, no matter how hard Dr. Polyfemo implores him. So Dr. Polyfemo decides to take a shower and finds a second dog, in the bathroom medicine cabinet. There is another one on the kitchen shelves, one in the dishwasher, another half frozen in the freezer. A poodle is in the pantry with the brooms, a Pekinese in the drawer of his desk. At this point Dr. Polyfemo could call the super to help him drive out the invaders, but the super happens to be a dog lover. So instead he runs to the butcher to buy twenty pounds of meat for his guests. And he does so for many days. But these acts draw attention. The butcher becomes suspicious. People begin to talk. Nasty rumors spread. Disparaging remarks. Is Dr. Polyfemo hiding atomic spies in his house? Is he possibly conducting diabolic experiments with all those pieces and slices of meat? The poor doctor loses his clientele. The police receives tips. The police chief orders the doctor's house to be searched. And in this way the people discover that Dr. Polyfemo had innocently suffered all this persecution out of love for the dogs. Et cetera.

At this stage the story is only "raw material." It would be the task of a writer to work it into a finished product. But the only thing that interests me here is to exemplify the use of the "fantastic binominal." The nonsense can remain the way it is. What concerns me is a technique that children know extremely well how to apply with the greatest pleasure, as I myself have seen in many Italian schools. Of course, the exercise has its real meaning, and I shall talk about this in later chapters. Yet one should not overlook how much joy it brings. In our schools there is too little laughter, if I may generalize. The idea that the education of a mind must be a dismal affair is among the most difficult things to overcome. Giacomo Leopardi had a great deal to say about this when he wrote in his *Zibaldone* ("Miscellaneous Notes") on August 1, 1823:

> The most beautiful and happiest period of human beings, childhood, is plagued in a thousand ways with a thousand anxieties, troubles, and hardships of education and instruction to such an extent that the grown adult, even in the midst of all unhappiness, would refuse to become a child again if it meant suffering the same things that he or she had suffered in childhood.

The Creative Error

A story can arise from a slip of the hand. There is nothing new about this. Sometimes, when I am typing an article, I make interesting mistakes. For instance, once I typed

"Lampland" instead of "Lapland," and by doing this I discovered a new country with its own special aroma and woods. It would be a sin to banish it from the map of possibilities with an eraser. It would be better to explore it like a tourist of the imagination.

If a child writes in his or her notebook "Atlantis Ocean" instead of "Atlantic Ocean," I can either correct this error with a red or blue pencil or follow the bold inspiration and write about the history and geography of this highly important body of water, marked on the map of the world. Will the moon be reflected on its surface?

A magnificent example of the creative error can be found, according to Stith Thompson (*The Folktale*), in *Cinderella* by Charles Perrault: the slipper, which in the original oral tradition was supposed to be made out of fur (*vaire*), was changed by chance into glass (*verre*). A glass slipper is certainly more fantastic than a fur slipper and also much more appealing, even if it stemmed from wordplay or from an error in transcription.

The orthographic error, if carefully considered, can give rise to all sorts of comical and instructive stories. Such stories can also have an ideological aspect, as I have endeavored to show in my book *Libro degli errori* (*Book of Errors*). In Italian, to write *Italia* with a *g* in the middle, Itaglia, may not just be due to the sloppiness of a student. In fact, there are people who scream and accentuate "I-ta-glia, I-ta-glia," with an ugly additional *g* endowing it with a nationalistic and fascist tone. Italia does not need an additional *g*, but rather honest and decent people, and if it needs anything at all, then it needs intelligent revolutionaries.

Little Red Riding Hood in a Helicopter

In some schools that I have visited, I have observed the following game. The children are given some words, which they use to make a story. For example, a series of five words that suggest the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*: girl, woods, flowers, wolf, grandmother. The sixth word breaks the series. For example, helicopter.

The teachers or the other people who conduct this experiment, a game-exercise, seek to measure the capacity of the children to react to a new and unexpected element introduced into a certain series of events; their capacity to absorb the given word in the familiar story; and their capacity to make the familiar words react in the new context in which they find themselves.

Upon closer examination, the game has the form of a fantastic binominal. On the one hand, there is Little Red Riding Hood; on the other, the helicopter. The second part of the binominal is a single word. However, the first part is a series of words that combine and form a unit to confront the word *helicopter*. From the viewpoint of the logic of the fantastic, everything is thus clear.

In my opinion, the most interesting results produced by this game are for psychologists, when this fantastic theme is given cold, without preparation and also without a great deal of explanation.

After I first learned about this experiment from a teacher in Viterbo—whose name and address I have unfortunately lost—I tried it out with some children in the second grade whose minds had been blocked by a teaching routine of the worst kind (dictation, copying, and other similar things). In other words, they were being taught under terrible conditions. I attempted in vain to draw a story out of them. This is a difficult undertaking when a stranger suddenly appears in the midst of children and nobody knows what he wants. Moreover, I only had a few minutes at my disposal because I was expected in other classes. But I was sorry to leave the children without having done anything except to give them the memory of an eccentric guy who played the clown by sitting on the ground and climbing on top of a chair (necessary moves on my part to break the bureaucratic atmosphere created by the presence of the teacher and the school inspector). If I had only brought with me a harmonica, a flute, or a drum....

Finally, it occurred to me to ask if any of them wanted to tell the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*. The girls pointed to a boy, the boys to a girl.

"And now," I asked the children, after the boy had finished rattling off the story to me, not actually the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* as his grandmother had probably told him, but an insipid litany (which sounded like a school recital, the poor child)—"and now, give me any word that comes to your mind."

But they did not grasp what I meant by "any word." I had to explain it to them. Finally, they gave me the word *horse*. I could now tell them the story of Little Red Riding Hood who met a horse in the woods. She climbed on his back and got to her grandmother's house before the wolf....

Right after this I went to the blackboard, and as the room was filled with attentive silence and the children were burning with curiosity, I wrote: girl, woods, flowers, wolf, grandmother, helicopter.... I turned around. I did not have to explain the new game to anyone. The minds of the brightest children had already clicked, and they raised their hands. With many voices they produced a nice story: the wolf, when he knocks at grand-mother's door, is observed by the police from a helicopter. "What is he doing there? What does he want?" the policemen ask. And they descend in time to drive the wolf into the arms of the hunter....

One can debate the ideological value of the new creation, but this does not appear to me to be the point. What is more important is what was set in motion. I am certain that these children will ask every now and then to play the game of Little Red Riding Hood again with a new word: they will get to know the pleasure of inventing.

An experiment of invention is wonderful when the children enjoy themselves, even when they break the rules of the experiment itself to arrive at the goal, for the children are the goal.

The Fairy Tale Reversed

One variant in the game of making mistakes in the fairy tale consists of a premeditated and purposeful reversal of the fairy tale theme:

> Little Red Riding Hood is bad, and the wolf is good....
>
> Tom Thumb wants to escape from home with his brothers and abandon their poor parents. However, the parents are aware of this. So Tom and his brothers fill their pockets with rice and make holes in them so that they will be able to determine their path of escape. (As in the original tale, but everything is turned upside down. Where the right side was, we now see the left....)
>
> Cinderella is so very bad that she drives her patient stepmother to despair and steals her stepsisters' fiancés.
>
> Instead of dwarfs, Snow White encounters seven giants in the woods, where it is most dense and dark. She becomes their mascot and helps them commit criminal acts.

The technique of making mistakes creates guidelines for itself, a projected plan. The result is partially or totally new depending on whether the "reversal" includes one or all the elements of the particular fairy tale.

Through the "reversal" we can also attain stories other than a parody. For example, the reversal can be the starting point for an independent story that develops automatically in another direction.

A child in the fourth grade who was especially creative played with real history and historical legends instead of making use of the technique of reversing fairy tales. Remus kills Romulus; the new city is called Rema not Rome; and its inhabitants are called Remans. With the new name "Remans," the Romans no longer terrify people. Instead, the Romans as Remans are figures of ridicule. So, Hannibal defeats the Remans and becomes Emperor of Rema. Et cetera.

The exercise does not have any historical relevance because it is not made from "if," so to speak. Moreover, the exercise takes more from Voltaire than from Borges. It is possible that the result of the exercise is more appreciable, even if it is involuntary, because it parodies the manner, or the pretext, of teaching Roman history to children in the elementary schools.

The Fairy Tale Salad

Little Red Riding Hood encounters Little Tom Thumb and his brothers in the woods. Their adventures become mixed together, and they choose a new path that runs diagonally to both forces that act on the same point as in the famous parallelogram that I gaped at as it took shape on a blackboard in 1930 traced by the hands of my teacher Mr. Ferrari in Laveno.

He was a slender man with a little blond beard and glasses, and he had a limp. One time he gave an A to my rival in Italian for his essay. Even today I remember what this student wrote: "Humanity is more in need of good men than great men." It is clear from this that my teacher was a socialist. Another time he wanted to embarrass me and make clear to my schoolmates that I did not possess the key to all knowledge. So he said, "If I ask Gianni, for example, what 'beautiful' is in Latin, he will not know." But since I had heard "Tota pulchra es Maria" sung in church and I had been given to understand what those glorious words meant, I stood up and said with a blush, "It's *pulchra*."

Everyone laughed, even the teacher, and I realized that it is not always necessary to say all that one knows. This is also why, in this book, I am abstaining as much as possible from using the difficult words that I know. When above I wrote the word *parallelogram,* which seems difficult, I remembered that I had learned it in fifth grade.

If Pinocchio were to land in the house of the seven dwarfs, he would be the eighth among the wards of Snow White. He would introduce his vital energy into the old story, compel it to recast itself according to the dictates of two rules, that of Pinocchio and that of Snow White.

The same thing occurs when Cinderella marries Bluebeard, when Puss in Boots places himself at the service of Hansel and Gretel, et cetera.

Subjected to this treatment, even the images that are most constantly used appear to take on a new life, to blossom again, and to bear fruit and flowers in unexpected ways. The hybrid has its fascination.

An inkling of this "fairy tale salad" can be noted in certain children's drawings in which the characters of different fairy tales live together in a fantastic manner. Indeed, I know a woman who made use of this technique when her children were young and continually longed to hear stories. As they grew older and asked for new stories, she improvised by mixing the characters from the old stories. She had the children themselves determine the theme. It is from her that I heard a grotesque mystery story in which the Prince, who woke Snow White from her sleep, was the same one who had married Cinderella the day before. An intense and scary drama developed out of this situation with terrible battles among the dwarfs, step-sisters, fairies, witches, and queens.

The type of fantastic binominal that governs this game distinguishes itself from the general form only because it is constituted by two proper nouns and not by two common nouns (a subject and a predicate, et cetera) as we saw before. Naturally, here *the proper nouns are taken from fairy tales*, a genre that the normal grammars are not obliged to note. It is as if "Snow White" and "Pinocchio" were the same as "Bill" and "Jane."

Recasting Fairy Tales

Thus far the focus of the games has been old fairy tales. I have used their names openly and freely, and adopted their characters without re-baptizing them, even when their functions have been reversed and distorted in interesting ways. Their motifs have been remixed, and the force of inertia of their events has been exploited, but they were not torn out of their natural habitat.

A more complex game that I call recasting enables a new fairy tale to arise from an old one with various degrees of recognizability, or with a total transference to foreign terrain. There are famous precedents for this process. The most notable one was James Joyce's recasting of *The Odyssey*. But it is also not difficult to recognize the Greek myth in *The Erasers* by Alain Robbe-Grillet, and through close examination, we can rediscover the design of biblical stories in the plots of some works by Alberto Moravia. These examples have obviously nothing to do with the infinite number of plots in novels that spring from a simple change of names and transposition of the calendar.

The Odyssey serves Joyce only as a complex system of fantastic coordinates—a network in which he captures the reality of his Dublin, and at the same time it is a system of convex mirrors that reveals how dense this reality is that may otherwise escape the naked eye. Reduced to a game, the process does not lose its elegance and its capacity to excite.

A fairy tale can be reduced to the bare plot of its events and their internal relations.

> Cinderella lives with her stepmother and stepsisters who go to a grand ball and leave her at home. Through the intervention of a fairy, she, too, goes to the ball. The prince falls in love with her. Et cetera.

The second step consists in reducing the plot to a pure abstract expression:

> A lives in the house of B and stands in a relationship to B, different from the relationship that C and D have with B. While B, C, and D go to E, where there is some kind of event F, A remains alone. However, thanks to the intervention of G, A, too, is able to go to E and makes an extraordinary impression on H. Et cetera.

If we now interpret the abstract expression in a new way, we can obtain, for example, the following scheme:

> Delfina is the poor relative of Mrs. Notable, owner of a dry cleaners in Boston, and the mother of two pretentious girls who still attend high school. While Mrs. Notable and her daughters take a rocket cruise to Mars, where a great intergalactic party is taking place, Delfina stays in the dry cleaners, ironing the evening gown of Lady Importanzia. Delfina tries it on and begins to fantasize about the ball. She goes into the street and jumps into Space Ship II without thinking about what she is doing. Indeed, it is the very spaceship in which Lady Importanzia is flying to the party on Mars, with Delfina as a stowaway. At the ball, the President of the Republic of Mars notices Delfina and dances with her. Et cetera.

In this example, the second step—the abstract formula of a particular fairy tale—appears almost superfluous due to the fact that the new plot recasts the first one, staying close to the original, and introducing simple variants. Almost superfluous, but not entirely, because in each case it has created a certain distance from the fairy tale, preparing its changeability.

After we have obtained the formula for forgetting the original fairy tale, we can arrive at the following:

> Carlo is a stable boy at the estate of Count Cindertolis, father of William and Anne. It is vacation time, and the count and his children decide to take a journey around the world in their yacht. Carlo slips secretly on board with the help of the cabin boy. The yacht, however, is shipwrecked on a primitive island where Carlo proves himself to be valuable by giving a cigarette lighter as a present to the medicine man, who is the head of the natives. Carlo is celebrated as the god of fire. Et cetera.

With this story we have sufficiently distanced ourselves from the original character of Cinderella, who penetrates the new story like a woven secret, to experience her innermost feelings and inspirations of unthinkable developments. Seeing is believing, according to the old folk saying.

Another example:

> Hansel and Gretel are brother and sister. They get lost in the forest. A witch takes them into her house, intending to bake them in her oven.

Let us recast the plot:

> A and B get lost in the place C. They are taken by D into the place E, where there is also an oven F....

And here we have the new plot:

> A brother and sister (probably children from southern Italy who have emigrated north) have been abandoned by their father near the main cathedral in Milan. He is desperate because he cannot feed them and hopes they will be helped by public charity. But the children leave the cathedral and wander through the city. At night they take refuge in a courtyard, and they sleep beneath a pile of empty cartons. By chance a baker discovers them, and he takes them inside his shop where they enjoy the warmth of his oven....

If I ask myself at which point a spark was ignited and my energy was set into motion to conceive the new story, I can easily respond that it was with the word *oven*. I have already said that I am the son of a baker. A baker's shop is usually associated with something to eat. To me, the word oven means a large room filled with sacks of flour and a mechanical mixer on the left-hand side. In front are the white tiles of the oven with the door that opens and shuts. My father, who kneads the flour, puts it in the oven and takes it out. Every day he made a dozen rolls from a white flour for me and my brother. These rolls were very crisp, and we devoured them like gluttons.

The last picture I have of my father is that of a man who tried in vain to warm his back on the oven. He was drenched and trembling. He had left the shop during a storm to help a little cat stranded between large puddles of water. Seven days later my father died of pneumonia. Penicillin had not yet been invented.

Later, when my father lay dead on his bed with his hands folded, I was led in to see him. I remember his hands but not his face. I also remember the man who warmed

himself against the warm tiles of the oven, and I remember his arms, not his face. He had scorched the hair off his arms with a burning newspaper so that the hair would not fall onto the bread dough. The newspaper was *La gazzetta del popolo* (*The People's Gazette*). I know this for sure because it had a children's page. It was 1929.

The word *oven* had been swimming about in my memory, and it surfaced with sad and warm colors. These colors influenced the formation of the various unions in the tale—between the abandoned children of the fairy tale and those of the new one, between the trees of the forests and the pillars of the cathedral in Milan. The rest is deduction, fantastical not logical.

The story will have an unexpected ending because the baker bakes bread—not the children—in the oven. What is also unexpected is that the story invites us to look at the large industrial city from the lower depths, with the eyes of the two lost children, to discover the reality of a social drama in a game of the imagination. The contemporary world with all its violence will be entered through the abstract recasting: A, B, C, D.... We find ourselves once again on Earth, at the heart of the Earth. And in the recasting, political and ideological contents of a certain sign will make their mark because I am I, not an aristocratic lady of San Vincenzo. All of this happens inevitably. And as it happens, it produces images and signs that will need to be examined and interpreted in their turn.

The recasting usually offers different people different ways that lead to different "messages." But we did not start with the message. It emerged by itself as an involuntary point of arrival.

The essential moment of the "recasting" is the analysis of the given fairy tale. It is a process that is at once analytical and synthetic, and it goes from the concrete to the abstract, and from the abstract it turns to the concrete.

The possibility for a process of this kind stems from the very nature of the fairy tale itself: from its structure, strongly characterized by the presence and repetition of certain constitutive elements that we can call "motifs."

Piano Jack

The characters of comic books are not different from our glass men or straw men. Each one follows the logic of the attribute that distinguishes it from others and that is sufficient to make it continually encounter new adventures—or always the same adventure, repeated in infinite variations and modifications. In this case, the attribute is not physical, but is of another nature, generally moral.

If we take the characteristics of Scrooge McDuck—very rich, stingy, and boastful—and if we take the characteristics of his friends and antagonists, anyone can easily imagine a hundred thousand stories. The true and proper invention of these "periodical" characters takes place one single time. The rest is, in the best cases, variation; in the worst, formula and exploitation in the extreme, the production of serials.

After the children have read a dozen or a hundred stories about Scrooge McDuck—an exercise that is nevertheless fun—they are perfectly capable of inventing their own by themselves. Once they have fulfilled their duty as consumers, they should be placed in a position to act as creators. It is a shame that very few people think about this.

To invent and draw a comic book is, after all is said and done, much more fulfilling than to write a theme about Mother's Day or some "noble" president. The comic book affords children the opportunity to create the idea of a story, its "treatment," its design and organization in individual scenes; to invent dialogue, the physical and moral characterization of its figures, et cetera. These are all things that children sometimes do alone to amuse themselves, if they are intelligent. And in the meantime they receive an F in Italian or English at school.

Sometimes the principal attribute of a character can be personified by an object, such as Popeye and his can of spinach.

Let us invent a pair of twins by the name of Marco and Mirco who always run about armed with hammers. The twins can be told apart only by their hammers: Marco's hammer has a white handle; Mirco's, a black one. Their adventures are already predictable, whether they encounter a thief, or whether they come upon a ghost, vampire, or werewolf. It can be deduced from the hammers that they will always triumph. They were born without fear and inhibition. They are aggressive and ready to fight to the bitter end against all sorts of monsters (but certainly with many misunderstandings).

Attention: I wrote "hammers," not "clubs." These characters have nothing at all in common with two little neofascists.

The strong ideological content of this invention—please allow me this digression—should not be misleading. It has not been programmed but has arisen by itself. I once thought of writing something about the twins of my friend Arturo, who named them Marco and Amerigo. I wrote their names on a piece of paper, and without realizing it I rewrote and changed them into principal characters of this exercise. That is how I got the names Marco and Mirco, which are more symmetrical, more twin-like than the original names. The word hammer (*martello*)—which arrived third—was evidently a result of the syllable *mar* from Marco, partly contradicted but also partly reinforced by *mir* from Mirco. In the plural, hammers (*martelli*) arose more out of a sense of rhyme from twins (*gemelli*) and hammers (*martelli*), than out of a logical consideration. This was not explicit but implicit. This is how I came to the image of the two twins armed with hammers. The rest was deduction.

There are also characters whose names simply "tell" everything about them. Such are the "pirate," the "bandit," the "pioneer," the "Indian," the "cowboy," et cetera.

If we would like to invent a new cowboy, we would have to choose his attribute with great care. Or his peculiar mannerism. Or an object that is most emblematic of him.

A courageous cowboy? That is banal. A bronco buster has been used too often. A cowboy who plays the guitar or

banjo is traditional. Let us vary the instruments. A cowboy who plays the piano is more promising.... But perhaps it would be better if he carries it with him on a pack horse.

Is his name Piano Jack or Billy the Piano Player? He always travels with two horses; he is on the first, and the piano is on the second. He rides alone through the Rocky Mountains. Whenever he sets up camp, he sets the piano on the ground and plays a Brahms lullaby or Beethoven's variations of a waltz by Diabelli. The wolves and the wild boars come from afar to hear him. The cows, in love with the music, give more milk. In the inevitable encounters with bandits or sheriffs, Piano Jack does not need pistols. He scares away his enemies by playing some Bach fugues, atonal dissonances, excerpts from Bela Bartók's *Microcosmos*. Et cetera.

Stories for Laughing

The child who sees his mother put the spoon into her ear instead of her mouth laughs because the mother "makes a mistake." She is so big and yet does not know how to use the spoon in the proper way, according to society's rules. This "laugh of superiority" (see *Il senso del comico nel fanciullo* [*The Child's Sense of the Comic*] by Raffaele La Porta) is among the first forms of laughter the child is capable of. The fact that the mother commits the mistake intentionally does not make the least difference: her gesture is in any case a wrong gesture. If the mother repeats this gesture two or three times and then varies it by sticking the spoon in her eye, the laugh of superiority will be reinforced by a laugh of surprise. These highly simple mechanisms have been carefully noted by the inventors of cinematic gags. Moreover, a psychologist will observe that even the laugh of superiority is an instrument of knowledge that plays on the opposition between *correct use* and *incorrect use* of the spoon.

The simplest way to invent comical stories is to take advantage of errors. The very first stories were more like gestures than verbal expressions. Papa puts the shoes on his hands. He puts the shoes on his head. He wants to eat soup with a hammer.... Oh, if only Giacomo's father, Monaldo Leopardi, had made a little use of the clown for the benefit of his little son, there, in his home, then perhaps as a grown-up poet he would have shown his gratitude and honored him by writing a poem about him. Instead we had to wait for Camillo Sbarbaro in order to experience a father made out of flesh and bones in poetry.

Little Giacomo sits in his high chair and is intent on eating his cereal. The door bursts open, and in walks his stately father the count, disguised as a farmer. He is playing the flute and...dancing a jig.... Oh, get out of here, noble father, you haven't understood a thing....

It is from such mistaken gestures that the so-called proper stories themselves originate, and in turn they provide whole phalanges of mistaken characters:

> Mr. So-and-So goes to a shoemaker to have a pair of shoes made for his hands. He is a man who walks on his hands. He eats with his feet and plays the harmonium with them. He is a topsy-turvy man. He reverses everything when he speaks. He calls bread "water" and suppository pills "lemon drops."
>
> A dog does not know how to bark. It believes that a cat can teach it how to do this, but naturally the cat teaches the dog how to meow. He goes to a cow and learns mooing: moooo!...
>
> A horse wants to learn how to type on a typewriter. It destroys dozens of machines with its hooves. A machine as large as a house must be made for the horse. Then it writes by galloping over the keys.

It is important to pay attention to a particular aspect of the laugh of superiority, which, if we do not watch out, can assume a conservative function and align itself with the most dull and sinister conformism. Here we have the origins of a certain kind of "reactionary comic" that ridicules the new and the unusual, such as the man who wants to learn how to fly like the birds, women who want to enter politics, or people who do not speak and think like the others as custom and rules demand.... In order for the laugh to have a positive function, it is necessary for its arrows to target the old ideas, the fear of change, the bigotry of the norm. The non-conformist topsy-turvy characters in our stories must be successful. Their refusal to obey nature or the norms must be rewarded. Those who are "disobedient" are the ones who make the world move forward.

One type of topsy-turvy characters is represented by their comical names. "Mr. Potholder lived in a country called Pot." In this case, the name itself gives rise to the story; at the same time, the banal meaning of the common noun is amplified and assumes a more noble aspect as a proper noun. A character called Pimpom, to give a little example, is certainly funnier than one called Carl. At least at the beginning. Then we shall see what comes later.

Surprise comic effects can be achieved by animating the metaphors of language. Viktor Shklovsky already noted that some of the erotic stories in *The Decameron* are nothing but extensions of popular metaphors used to define sexual acts (in Italian, "to send the devil to hell," "the nightingale," and other similar ones). In our contemporary language we use many worn-out metaphors like old shoes. When we speak about a clock and say that it "strikes on the hour," we do not show any surprise because we have already used and heard this image used hundreds of times.

For a child, this can be something new in a situation in which "to strike" really means "to destroy," as in "striking a person or a tree down."

> Once upon a time there was a clock that struck on the minute. It also struck wood and stone. It destroyed everything.

(And look at what we have here: through mere association, the nonsense took on the meaning of a parable about Father Time, who strikes down everything in his way.)

If we trip over a stone by mistake, while playing football, and experience a hard fall to the ground, we "see

stars," as one says, but not like astronauts. This expression can also lead to interesting developments:

> Once upon a time there was a king who liked to look at the stars. It pleased him so much that he wanted to see them also during the day. But how could he do this? The court doctor advises him to use a hammer. The king tries to hit himself on the head with the hammer, and indeed, he "sees stars" in broad daylight. But he does not like this method. Instead, he wants the court astronomer to take the hammer and hit himself on the head so that he can describe the stars he sees to the king.
>
> "Oww!... I see a green comet with a violet tail.... Oww! I see new stars that are coming like the Three Wise Men...."
>
> The astronomer flees to a distant land. The king, perhaps inspired by Massimo Bontempelli, decides to follow the stars in their course: every day he circles the earth so that he can live at night beneath the star-studded sky. His court is now on a jet plane....

Our daily language and vocabulary are filled with metaphors waiting to be taken literally, at their word, and developed into a story. All the more so because many other common words still reveal themselves to the child's ear, as intact as the original metaphor.

A very productive method for comical stories is that of placing a banal character in an extraordinary context (or the other way around, putting an extraordinary person in a banal context). This method exists in almost all inventive processes. From a comic perspective, one can make full use of this potential for surprise and the deviation from the norm.

The introduction of a talking crocodile into a TV quiz show is an example. Another good example is the well-known joke about the horse that goes into a bar and asks for a beer. (The joke becomes more complicated as it is pushed to the extreme: the bartender is astonished when the horse drinks beer and eats the glass, but then throws away the handle. "That's the best part," says the bartender, and thus the story takes a subtle turn into the absurd. But this does not concern us here.) As an exercise, let us use a young chicken instead of a horse and a butcher shop instead of a bar.

> One morning a young chicken enters a butcher shop and, without waiting her turn, asks for mutton chops. The other customers become upset: What poor manners! She has no respect! She should go to the end of the line. Et cetera....
>
> But the butcher's assistant serves the young chicken right away. In just those few seconds required to weigh the mutton chops, he falls in love with her. So he asks the Mother Hen for the young chicken's hand in marriage, and they get married. Now, during the wedding celebration that is to be described, the young chicken withdraws for a moment to lay a fresh egg for her husband.

(This is not an anti-feminist story; it is just the opposite, if it is conceived in the right way.)

Children are very quick to take advantage of this method. They generally use it to "desacralize" or mock the various types of authority they are compelled to obey. They plop down the teacher in a tribe of cannibals, into a cage at the zoo, or into a chicken coop. If the teacher is intelligent, he or she will be amused by this. If the teacher isn't, he or she will be enraged. Too bad.

The complete and radical reversal of norms is also a method that is simple to use and a favorite of children. Here we have Peter—but I have already talked about him and used him as a double with Marco and Mirco in another context—who instead of being afraid of ghosts and vampires, pursues them, torments them, and throws them into a garbage can.

In this case, the exorcism of the fear ends in a "laugh of aggression"—that is very much related to those popular cake-throwing battle scenes in silent films—and a "laugh of cruelty." Children are always prone to laugh like this, but this laughter carries a certain danger with it (as when children laugh at physically disabled people, torture cats, or tear the wings off flies).

Experts have explained that people tend to laugh at somebody who falls because that person does not behave according to human norms but according to the norms of a ball. If we take this observation literally, we arrive at the method of "reification":

> a) Robert's uncle is by profession a coat rack. He stands in the lobby of an expensive hotel. The customers hang hats and coats on his arms and put umbrellas and canes in his pockets....
> b) Mr. Dagobert is by profession a desk. When the director of the factory makes his rounds, Mr. Dagobert walks by his side and bends his back when the director must write down notes....

The laugh, initially cruel, yields gradually to an uneasy feeling. The situation is comic, but unjust. One laughs, but it is a sad laugh. We have now entered the domain where Pirandello's notion of humor and his kind of play reign. And we shall stop here in order not to complicate our discussion.

When Grandfather Becomes a Cat

Many times I have told an unfinished story about a retired old man to various groups of children in Italy and other countries. This man feels that he is useless at home because everyone, adults and children, is too preoccupied to pay attention to him. Therefore, he decides to go live with the cats. No sooner said than done. He goes to the Piazza dell'Argentina (we are in Rome), ducks under the iron bar that divides the street from the archeological zone (the realm of the stray cats), and all at once he is transformed into a handsome gray cat. After he has various adventures, he returns to his home. But he returns as a cat. And as a cat he is accepted and welcomed. The comfortable easy chair is there for him. He is petted and given milk and pieces of meat. As a grandfather he was a nobody. As a cat he is the center of attention in the home....

At this point I ask the children: "Would you like the grandfather to remain a cat or to return to his human form as grandfather?"

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred the children prefer that the cat become the grandfather again, for the sake of justice and out of empathy, or perhaps to free themselves from an unpleasant inquietude that can engender a feeling of guilt. They want the grandfather to be recuperated, reintegrated with all his human rights, and reconciled. That is the rule.

Until now I have encountered only two exceptions. One time a boy insisted emphatically that it would be better for the grandfather if he remained a cat forever in order to punish those who had offended him. And a five-year-old girl, a little pessimist, said: "He should remain a cat. Otherwise everything will begin all over again, and nobody will want to pay attention to him."

The meaning of these two exceptions is fully clear. Both are also marked by sympathy for the grandfather.

I follow my first question right away with another question: "But what must the cat do to become the grandfather again?"

The children, no matter where I have told this story, north or south, do not hesitate to propose the solution: "He must duck under the bar, but go in the opposite direction."

The bar is made into the magical instrument of transformation. When I told the story for the first time, it did not occur to me at all. The children revealed this to me and taught me this rule: "Whoever ducks beneath the bar and goes one way becomes a cat; whoever goes the opposite way becomes human again."

With the bar as the means of separation, however, it would also be possible to distinguish between "going beneath" and "going over." But nobody has ever proposed this to me. It is apparent that the ritual use of the bar must respect very precise rules, and the variations cannot be exaggerated. If you "go over the bar," this is reserved for cats that come and go and remain cats.... And, in fact, a child raised this point one time by saying, "Why is it that the cat, when he ducks under the bar to return home, doesn't become the grandfather right away?" Then another child was quick to answer, "But he didn't crawl under the bar this time, he went over it. He climbed over the bar."

Now, after all this, we are left with the sneaking suspicion that the re-transformation of the cat into the grandfather is not always determined exclusively by motives of justice, but also by reasons of symmetry in the imagination. A magical occurrence had taken place in one direction, and the imagination, without knowing it, waited for it to happen in the magical opposite direction.

If a reader is to have complete satisfaction, there must be a logical-formal aspect to a story that accompanies the moral aspect. Here the solution was produced by the mathematical mind and the heart together.

If at times one has the impression that only the heart decides, then this is due to a defective analysis. When I say this, I naturally do not want to deny the fact that the heart has its "reasons" in the sense indicated by Pascal. But the imagination, too, has its reasons, as we have seen.

GIANNI RODARI: SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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