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LA LETTERATURA PER L'INFANZIA

*Fanciulli G., Monaci E. La letteratura per l'infanzia
[Children's literature] (1931, 5 ed.). Torino, Milano, Genova,
Parma, Roma, Catania: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1926.
Pp. 150–161¹.*

*Children's literature in Russia*¹⁾

Popular literature. Russia has a very rich, eminently fantastic, popular literature. A great variety of aspects are reflected in these people, due to the immense extension of the territory — from the freeze of Siberia to the burning heat of Crimea — the diversity of races and nationalities merged or gathered within such vast borders, and the long history marked by the choice between eastern and western life: resigned fatalism and active enthusiasm, creating contradictions that are often mysteries for Westerners.

But a clear feature of that character is the importance of imagination: exuberant, naive, affectionate and — despite the apparent liveliness — often tinged with sadness. This imagination has interpreted the real world, which was frequently fearful due to the cruelty of natural elements and humans, through the invention of beings one often has to fight against, and others who can help, even if that's a rare case.

There is a whole Russian mythology populated with good spirits and evil spirits. The Liesci (from the word *lies*, forest) is the spirit of the forest. It is represented as an old shambling man, with a long green beard and horns on its head. Malignant in character, like the Greek fauns, the Liesci can take on the strangest aspects. Working for it, a host of witches, the *Vedime*, repulsive in appearance, sometimes can take on very vague forms to divert travelers from the right path. The Liesci enjoys making fun of men and making some poor travelers lose

¹⁾The difficulty of obtaining books from Russia (which is decreasing just now) has forced us to reduce this important subject in a very short summary; we promise to resume and complete the discussion another time, in better conditions.

their way: while the wretch wanders through the gloomy bush, the Old Man pursues him bursting into coarse and fearful laughter. (Of course, such sounds are nothing more than the mocking cry of a little bird which is very common in the Nordic woods). At dawn, the Liesci dissolves among the trees and the poor traveler feels he is coming back to life.

The spirit of the waters is called *Vodianoi* (from the word *voda*, water). It lives in deep wells in lakes; in short, it is the spirit of the cisterns, of the abyss, and it is evil too. It has a long dripping beard, magnetic eyes, and draws men into its eddies. Running waters, on the other hand, are the home of the *Russalche*, beautiful, diaphanous and agile girls, with long hair. At night, in the moonlight, they let themselves be lulled by the waves, while they comb their hair. Or they come out of the water, and, holding hands, they dance the *chorovodi* dance, a sort of round dance. The mermaids (*russalche*) are drowned souls, prisoners of the *Vodianoi*.

The *Tsar of water*, powerful and very rich, also lives in the ocean. In his underwater kingdom there are fantastic palaces, made of pure crystal and adorned with precious gems. He controls the seas, and all marine phenomena depend on him. He causes storms and makes ships sink, in order to get their wealth; and he also loves taking crews as prisoners. Sometimes some of the prisoners manage to escape, with the complicity of a mermaid in love.

Finally, another evil spirit is the *immortal Koscei*, which steals young wives and girlfriends. Besides that, the life of the Russian peasants is full of fantasies about witches and sorcerers; but there are also the good fairies, that sometimes manage to undo the devilish actions of the evil spirits.

But the Russian people, despite being so inclined to the marvelous — and perhaps precisely for this reason — do not like the rhetorical emphasis on invention. Their favorite hero is *Ivanuska duraciok* (“Giovannino il semplicione”); his simplicity often triumphs, with the help of the fairies, over the evil cunning of his brothers. Another character who is often present in Russian fairy tales is the evil stepmother who is ultimately punished for her cruelty towards her good stepdaughter. The “red-nosed Moroz” (*Moros krasnei nos*) is also worth mentioning, which is a spirit coming from the North, depicted as an old man, with a good or bad soul, depending on the circumstances.

The stories about animals are very interesting, and there are witty personifications: the fox is famous for its mockery of wolves and bears.

All these popular beliefs and imagines gave rise to a great number of short stories, which remained mostly an oral tradition. Nevertheless,

some transcriptions exist, even anonymous, which let us appreciate all the luxuriant beauty²⁾.

In this popular literature, the so-called Biline (from the word *béll*, things that happened) occupy a place of their own; fantastic poems by unknown authors, born among the people, telling stories of brave knights at the service of Russia.

The best writers

Children's and youth literature is also rich in Russia. This can be explained, in part, by the exuberance of imagination, in the "race", we were just talking about. But there is also another reason. Almost all Russian writers, during the past regime, felt the duty to promote the liberation of their people through education, and therefore they often spontaneously addressed children and young people, hopes of the longed-for future; moreover, the works dedicated to this young audience could also be useful for the people in general. The Revolution of 1917 took place when this educational work was very far from completion, and from this came so many errors and horrors. Bolshevism was a speculation on ignorance, like tsarism.

Due to the above circumstances, there were no writers specialized in children's literature, at least in the classical periods of Russian literature: all of them, starting from the best ones (poets or great novelists), produced a few books, or a few pages, for young people. In this quick review we will mention the best-known ones.

At the very beginning, children's literature, as other types of literature, took its inspirations from popular traditions and artistically elaborated them. Ivan Krylov (1768–1844) was an unsurpassed author of fables. The idea of dealing especially with this genre perhaps came to him after the success of his translation of two fables by Lafontaine, published in the Moscow *Spectator*. His great collection of fables and apologues (about two hundred) dealt with themes originating from popular tradition, such as from ancient legends of other countries. That literary art, due to its grace and its picturesque variety, remained classic. Aleksander Pusckin (1799–1837) and his contemporary Jukowsky beautifully elaborated some popular elements as well. It is said that the two writers challenged each other to write the most beautiful folk tale, and both of them composed a masterpiece: Jukowsky wrote the tale of

²⁾Some of these novels are included in the volume: *Racconti russi*, Italian transl. by Giuseppina Spezia (Collez. cit., soc. Editrice Internazionale, Torino).

Tsar Berendei [Zar Berendei] and Pushkin wrote the tale of *Tsar Saltan* [Zar Saltan], based on a plot which had been suggested to him by his old nurse Arina Radionovna³. She had a deep knowledge of popular short stories and, together with his old grandmother, had a great influence on the education of the poet, founder of modern Russian literature.

With Pusckin, literature already began to deal with stories inspired by real life figures and events. Many writers wanted, in a more or less conscious way, the Russian people to become aware of Russia and the Russian soul. Sergej T. Aksakov (1791–1859) belonged to a noble family of the Urals and acquired great fame above all with two works, that is *Notes on Fishing* [Appunti sulla pesca] and *Tales and Memories of Various Hunter Hunts* [Racconti e ricordi di un cacciatore], where nature is described with a wonderful poetic sensitivity. Many of his pages were read with great interest by young people⁴.

The great Nicolaj V. Gogol (1809–1852), who is also one of the founders of Russian literature, often used humor to represent characters from old fairy tales; but his art is almost always too high especially in the use of irony, to be suitable for a younger audience. However, young people can enjoy reading the *Taras Bulba* [Taras Bulba] and *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* [I racconti della fattoria di Dikanka] about the rural life, in the excellent Italian translation by Federico Verdinois.

Pavel Ivanovich Mielnikov (1819–1883), a writer/ethnographer, is considered the best scholar and the most profound connoisseur of primitive Russia. He devoted his leisure time to literature, and some of the beautiful stories he wrote, such as *Grandfather Policarpo* [Nonno Policarpo] and *Old Times* [Vecchi anni], made children dream⁵. A poet of that time was able to charm these young souls as well: Ivan S. Nikitin (1824–1862)⁶, who after a very difficult life managed to gain fame. His novel was particularly famous: *The hoarder* [L'incettatore].

Most of Ivan S. Turgenev's (1818–1883) books, so pure and noble, can be offered to young readers, and an anthology of selected stories or passages could be very interesting; the most interesting ones could be the *Poems in Prose* [Poemetti in prosa] and the *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* [Ricordi di un cacciatore]⁷.

³In Russian tradition, the spelling is Arina Rodionovna. Hereinafter, the author's spelling of proper names is preserved.

⁴Ibidem. Their novels are included in the volume: *Russian novels* (Racconti russi).

⁵Idem.

⁶Idem.

⁷Idem.

Another famous writer, Anton P. Chekov (1860–1904)⁸⁾, son of a serf, novelist and playwright, well known also in Italy, wrote excellent short stories for children. The following have recently been translated into Italian: *Little Ivan* [Il piccolo Ivan], a dramatic figure of a little child, a shoemaker's boy, who writes to his distant family on Christmas Eve, and dreams of an impossible happiness; and *Little Chestnut* [Castagnetta], the story of a little dog that prefers the misery of its first master to the splendor of the equestrian circus. These essays are enough to show the author's extraordinary power and finesse, even in this field.

Nicolaj G. Mikailovskij, under the pseudonym Garin (1852–1906), wrote in particular for young people. He spent his childhood and adolescence in Odessa, studied engineering in Petersburg, and until the age of forty he devoted himself exclusively to engineering and rural economics. *Tioma's Childhood* [L'infanzia di Tioma], the book in which he recalled his happy childhood, suddenly revealed his genius as a writer; this work contains many parts suitable for young people. The same can be said of another well-known book he wrote: *Several Years in the Village* [Alcuni anni nel villaggio]. For young people there are two volumes: *High School Pupils* [I ginnasiali] and *The Students* [Gli studenti], lively pictures and tales of school life in Russia⁹⁾.

Dmitrij N. Mamin, better known under the pseudonym Sibiriak, (1852–1912) is like Aksakov, a Russian from the Urals. Man of action, hunter, passionate about athletic exercises, he wanted to describe and celebrate, more than anything else, the active life of his country. He is the unsurpassed poet of the Ural Mountains and their inhabitants; he was also one of the best writers for young people. We believe that only his first novel has been translated into Italian, *The fighters* [I lottatori]. As regards books for youth, the following have been translated: *Simovie on the Studenaia* [Simovie sulla Studenaia], a sublime picture of life in the steppe and *The Little Deer* [Il piccolo cervo], a delicate hunting episode¹⁰⁾.

The *Childhood Memories* [Le memorie d'infanzia] and the *Gospel Parables* [Parabole evangeliche] by Tolstoj were and are widely read by young people — although they were not written for them.

Other good authors who wrote children's literature are Dimitrievna¹¹⁾, Kuprin, Lichovskaia, Remisov, Sascia Cernei, etc. Among the most recent ones, we can mention Michail Ossorghin, author of *The*

⁸⁾Idem.

⁹⁾Idem.

¹⁰⁾Idem.

¹¹⁾This refers to Elizaveta Dmitrieva (1887–1928), she is also Cherubina de Gabriak.

little Swallow Natascia and other Russian Stories [Rondinella Natascia e altri racconti russi]: full of imagination and at the same time a careful observer of childhood life, he created for us very precious stories. Pictures of real life, fresh and graceful, are also the sketches of another young writer, Elacic, now presented for the first time to Italian young people¹²⁾.

Children's literature, mostly developed in times of slavery, has the fundamental feature of great freedom. It aims at playing an educational role, because it aspires to illuminate and elevate the souls of the children, and the great soul of the people without the burden of pedagogical systems or methods. It relies mostly on the charm of art, so that the implicit teaching of poetic invention can become fruitful persuasion. This fundamental character also includes the exuberance of the imagination, the drama and subtlety of the inventions and observations, the colorful and attractive style. It is simply a literature that deserves to be better known and disseminated, also because it probably contains the healthiest part of Russian art and soul.

Translated by Dorena Caroli

Notes

- ¹ For his biography, see <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-fanciulli/>;
D. Montino: <http://dbe.editricebibliografica.it/cgi-bin/dbe/Scheda?883>.

¹²⁾ *Vania e Ferferka*, translation by Rafia Pomeranz, quoted by the Collezione della Soc. Editrice Internazionale, Torino.