MARIA R. TRUGLIO

ANNIE IN WONDERLAND:
VIVANTI'S *SUA ALTEZZA!* AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
DURING FASCISM

In her autobiographical poem "Ego," Annie Vivanti (1868-1942) registers both her "multicultural" heritage and her view of poetry as inherently transnational and transgressive.¹ The Latin of the title already announces the impossibility of limiting the "I" to a single national discourse, and Vivanti's casting the "world" as a "customs officer" underscores the theme of border-crossing. In the poem, the author succinctly reports her diverse identity and, as an artist, claims for herself "the whole world:"

Sono in contravvenzione, o Mondo astuto.

Volea truffarti con la merce mia:

Non è tabacco, sigari o liquori,

Nulla di spiritoso: è poesia.

...

Del mio paese chiedi? Io ti rispondo:

Non ho paese: è mia tutta la terra!

La patria mia qual'è? Mamma è tedesca,

Babbo italiano, io nacqui in Inghilterra.

E quale la mia fede? Io vado a messa;

La musica mi edifica e ricrea:

Ma sono battezzata protestante.

Di nome e di profile sono ebra.

(I am subject to a fine, O wily world. / I tried to cheat you over my merchandise: / It is not tobacco, cigars or liquor, / Nothing spirited: it is poetry / ... /

¹I would like to express my gratitude to the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Pennsylvania State University, which generously funded my archival research in Florence. I also thank Dr. Aldo Ceccone, curator of the Archivio storico Giunti, who was extremely gracious in facilitating my research.

For biographical and bibliographical information on Annie Vivanti see: Caporossi, "Annie Vivanti"; Merry "Annie Vivanti" and Lepschy, "The Popular Novel."

You ask about my country? I reply: / I have no country: the whole earth is mine!
 / What is my fatherland? Mama is German / Papa Italian, I was born in England.
 / And what is my faith? I go to Mass: / The music uplifts up and delights me, / I
 was baptized a Protestant. / My name and profile are Jewish.)²

Thirty-three years after publishing her *Lirica*, with its famous preface by Carducci, Vivanti brought her unique, cosmopolitan perspective to bear on the field of children's literature, penning the delightful *Sua Altezza! (favola candida)* in 1923. However, while recent years have seen a good deal of scholarly attention afforded Vivanti's many successful novels, plays, and short stories for adults, her children's book remains neglected in the criticism.

Indeed, unlike the classic works of Collodi, De Amicis, Capuana and Vamba, copies of Vivanti's children's book are rare and difficult to obtain. In the early twentieth century, the Florentine press Bemporad & Figlio boasted among its strong line of children's literature Collodi's *Pinocchio* and its many sequels by other authors, the works of the immensely popular Vamba (Luigi Bertelli), Luigi Capuana's fables, and the fantasy books of Emilio Salgari, among many others.³ Bemporad published two editions of Annie Vivanti's novel for children, *Sua Altezza! (favola candida)*, the first in the spring of 1923 and a second edition the following year. Unlike almost all the other children's books from this press, neither edition of *Sua Altezza!* was illustrated and neither appeared in the "Biblioteca Bemporad per i ragazzi" series. Ten years later, Vivanti re-published the novel with Mondadori in Milan in an abridged, illustrated version under the title *Il viaggio incantato*.⁴ Finally, Einaudi released a newly illustrated edition of *Il*

²Vivanti, *Lirica*, pp. 9-10. Translation from *The Defiant Muse*, p. 41.

³In his introduction to a special issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Ermanno Detti delineates three main threads in the "tapestry" of Italian children's literature: the Fairy Tale, which Collodi used to great effect in *Pinocchio*, "Sentimentality," inaugurated by de Amicis in *Cuore* and expressed in many texts through the mid-twentieth century, and the Adventure Story, epitomized by Emilio Salgari. See also Detti's discussion of Vamba in "The Difficult Art of Making People Laugh," pp. 152-154.

⁴In the early thirties, Vivanti transferred not only her children's novel, but all publishing ties from Bemporad to Mondadori. In 1920 she had signed a ten-year contract with Bemporad concerning the rights to *Naja tripudians*, the reprints of *I divoratori*, "un romanzo per ragazzi che si impiega di scrivere" (*Sua Altezza!*), and "un romanzo nuovo" (Gioia). The shift seems indicative of the general decline of Bemporad and ascent of Mondadori in the period. Bemporad, a major supplier of scholastic texts, was particularly affected by the 1929 institution

viaggio incantato in 1975. Although exact sales records are not available, the limited number of editions published, the absence of any foreign translations of the book, and the unwillingness of Bemporad ever to invest in producing the “richly illustrated” later edition that Vivanti had planned, all indicate that the book sold modestly. Its two editions compare unimpressively to other children’s books of the time. Cherubini’s *Pinocchio in Affrica*, for example, was already in its fifth edition in 1922, and Vamba’s *Novelle lunghe* in its sixth by 1933. Nor did *Sua Altezza!* enjoy the success typical of Vivanti’s own adult works, such as *Naja Tripudians*, which saw its sixth edition in 1932.⁵

My discussion will address the following questions: How does this book, written in Italian for a juvenile audience, construct the categories of childhood and of Italy? Secondly, can we situate the visions of childhood and of Italy developed by Vivanti within the panorama of Italian children’s literature of the period? That is, does *Sua Altezza!* serve as a typical example of these notions in the early years of fascism, or does it stand as an anomaly, or even a subversion of these categories vis-à-vis contemporary texts that also sought to intervene in the formative years of their readers’ development?

* * *

Sua Altezza! opens with an anecdote that serves as its dedication. Vivanti tells us that the story owes its genesis to the desire of little Prince Valdemar for a story with fish in it.⁶ Valdemar takes expressions quite literally and

under the fascist regime of the standard “Libro di Stato” (Wakefield, however, has argued that the Libro was not the root cause of the press’s financial crisis in this period). See Tranfaglia, *Storia degli editori italiani*, pp. 270-272, and Tatiana Wakefield “Ascesa e crisi della Bemporad (1918-1938).”

Unless otherwise indicated, all letters and documents cited are found in the Vivanti dossier at the Archivio storico Giunti, Florence.

⁵The frontispiece of the second edition (1924) announces that the book had “giunta al 13o migliaio.” In a post-script to her letter to Bemporad of 14 March 1923 (in which she indicates her desire for a second edition “riccamente illustrata”) Vivanti proposes L. 5,000 as the price for the rights to do a Spanish translation (though no specific person or press is mentioned). However, no discussion of such a translation appears in any of the secretarial communication of the period (while many letters do exist concerning the rights to translate *Pinocchio*, Vamba’s *Ciondolino*, and others into a variety of languages). To the best of my knowledge no translation in any language exists.

⁶Valdemar, Count of Rosenborg was born in 1915, and thus would have been about seven at the time of the book’s composition. In a post-script to her letter

wonders how Vivanti could have “put fish in the book” if she did not even have a fish. In comically representing a child’s literal understanding of expressions, the author here introduces one of the book’s main strategies. Vivanti agrees with the insight of the child’s naïve questions, “Come si può mettere in un libro quello che non si ha?” (vii) and assures the little prince, and her readers, that she has put in nothing but “un po’ di allegrezza, un po’ di mestizia, un po’ di fantasia. E molto amore” (vii). The story ultimately offered to the Danish prince recounts the fantastic adventures of a boy about Valdemar’s age, Bobby, and his older sister Tina.

The story begins on the morning of Bobby’s seventh birthday. He and his older sister Tina eagerly await a promised boat outing, but are disappointed by the rain. Bored at home, for the first time the children notice a landscape painting that hangs above the piano. As they contemplate it, elements in the painting appear to shimmer. Tina, the more adventurous of the two, climbs up to get a closer look and manages to enter into the landscape. Bobby, though frightened, follows her in, and their adventures begin. Tina suddenly remembers her mother’s words from earlier that day. The “Spirit of the Artist,” her mother had noted with reverence, is a rare and winged thing. Tina decides it must be a kind of butterfly and so the children begin a quest to find it within the painting. Along the way, they encounter a talking gnu, the much feared but affectionate *Babao*, a child with his head turned backward, and a whole range of other fantastic characters. They walk on water, climb a rainbow, and ultimately arrive at the bridge of adolescence that leads into the fabulous gardens of Sua Altezza.

Sua Altezza, a beautiful cherub with bow and arrow, seduces Tina into eating the bitter fruit that quickly ages her and then erases her memory with the waters of Lethe. The cupid-like creature leads Tina into his realm, where he steals her heart and then abandons her to wander through the seemingly endless paths of his domain. Bobby, determined to rescue his sister, finds the artist, who can see that Bobby has within himself the “Anima dell’artista.” Time does not pass in the painting, and so Bobby, as directed by the painter, is able to read every book in the artist’s enormous library. As soon as he has completed his education with the *Divine Comedy*, he is transformed into a strong and courageous eagle. He swoops into the dreaded realm of Sua Altezza, plucks up his sister and whisks her away. Failing

to Bemporad of 10 March 1923, Vivanti explains that Valdemar, a little “Altezza” himself, was the nephew of the King of Denmark (Christian X) as well as the nephew of Vivanti’s own neighbour, the Count Calvi of Bergolo. (Valdemar was the son of Mathilde, Countess Calvi de Bergolo, and great-grandson of King Christian IX of Denmark.)

in his pursuit to recapture Tina, Sua Altezza grudgingly returns her heart, but not without a final, sinister promise that they will meet again. In a passage that celebrates fraternal love, Bobby is retransformed into himself, and the artist carries the sleeping children back out of the painting into their home.

Vivanti's plot participates in the *topos* of a fantastic voyage in a magical land framed by everyday life in humdrum reality, a *topos* employed by countless tales for children (we can think of the exploits of Alice, Dorothy, Max, and the children of Narnia, to name a few). Indeed, just one year before Vivanti's book appeared, Bemporad published in their "Biblioteca per i ragazzi" series Massimo Bontempelli's *La scacchiera davanti allo specchio*, the tale of a boy who, left alone as a punishment for an unnamed misdeed, enters into the reflection-world of the living room's large mirror. Guided by the white king of the reflected chessboard, he encounters the images of everyone who has ever looked into that mirror, including his grandmother as she appeared in her twenties. Ultimately, the boy-narrator returns to reality and is found by his mother. Vivanti's and Bontempelli's young protagonists share the experience of being enclosed in a restricted space. For Tina and Bobby, the rain has disappointed their hopes of an outing. While the adults have the freedom to go off to a concert, the children are left at home with only the cat to amuse them. Bontempelli's character is imprisoned within one room of the house and told not to touch the fragile objects it contains.

The spatial limitations the children must endure are subject to temporal boundaries as well—Tina and Bobby feel the weight of time as they count the hours until the adults' return, and Bontempelli's child, in what is now called a "time-out," must do his time as a punishment. The themes of waiting and enclosure are emphasized in the boy's last line "aspettavo che qualcuno venisse ad aprirmi." Clearly, then, the ability to escape these spatial and temporal enclosures by crossing through a mirror or a painting into vast, limitless lands represents a strong fantasy on the part of the (bourgeoisie) child reader who has experienced similar frustrations. In both books, the children explore magical lands characterized by infinite, open space and by a kind of atemporality. In Vivanti's story, the Gnu explains that in the painting it is always 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, while the images behind Bontempelli's mirror retain forever their appearance exactly as they were the first time they looked at their reflection: characters who looked in the mirror a hundred years ago interact with characters who have newly arrived.

More than offering an imaginary way out of particular frustrations and momentary losses of liberty typical of a bourgeoisie childhood, these fan-

tasy voyages represent a kind of vicarious escape from the frustrations of childhood itself. The particular episodes of punishments and cancelled trips become figures for the constraints, dependency, and powerlessness of childhood in general. Indeed, in Bontempelli's tale, the limits of the boy's small physical stature are mentioned several times, such as his difficulty in seeing his own reflection in the high mirror. Waiting for mother to return from the concert or to release us from a punishment, then, becomes a synecdoche of waiting to grow up and possess the liberty and power of the adults we are subject to.

While the *topos* of the fantastic voyage may appeal to the child reader's frustrations and allow her to indulge in escape fantasies, stories that adhere to this model often convey a conservative rather than subversive message. The wandering child-protagonists often find that the utopian world holds more threats than pleasures and ultimately long to return to the security and familiarity of home and parents. Both Vivanti's and Bontempelli's stories enact this shift from a fantasy of freedom to a desire for security. Driven by the fear (and in the case of Bontempelli's protagonist, the boredom) encountered in their fantasy worlds, the children happily return home. The last scene of *Sua Altezza!* takes place in the intimacy of the children's bedroom, now portrayed not as a restricted, stifling space but as comforting and secure. It would be reductive, however, to dismiss the textual "enchanted voyages" as merely an adult strategy of allowing children to indulge momentarily in an escape fantasy only to show them that they are better off right where they are. The array of characters and landscapes encountered by Tina and Bobby, often quite overtly allegorical, each carry a lesson for protagonists and readers. Thus while the children do return home at the end, they return having "grown."⁷ In a letter to Bemporad remarking on an early proof of the text, Vivanti emphatically insists that the subtitle must be "favola" and not "fiaba." The distinction lies in the pedagogical thrust of a *favola* which "contiene un ammaestramento morale," where the *fiaba*, a "racconto fantastico, per lo più di origine popolare," does not necessarily convey such lessons.⁸ While the story conveys its

⁷Pino Boero and Carmine de Luca note "dentro il quadro il tema del viaggio, sempre presente nella letteratura per l'infanzia, assume tutti i connotati della scoperta, dell'esperienza, del processo di crescita. Tina e Bobby torneranno alla loro dimensione domestica più ricchi e più grandi, sempre propensi però a credere alla logica delle fiabe" (191-192). The authors briefly discuss *Il viaggio incantato* and *La scacchiera* in a section entitled "zona franca."

⁸Letter of 2 May 1923. "Sono desolata – il titolo 'Fiaba' non va! *Perchè* non mi avete mandato le bozze mille volte richieste? ...Attendo immancabilmente la

lessons for its juvenile audience in thinly veiled allegories, we can detect more subtle messages aimed at the adults who may be reading the story to their children.

The otherworldly, guided voyage eliciting moral growth has, of course, its Italian prototype not in *Pinocchio* or *Cuore*, but in the *Divine Comedy*.⁹ Indeed, Vivanti's letters make it clear that she hoped her children's novel would be taken seriously by literary critics and her own (adult) readers, and not dismissed with the superficial attention afforded most illustrated children's books. It was with an eye to the book's "seriousness" that Vivanti decided the first edition should be released without illustrations (she asked that even the cover be left unillustrated, though that desire was not fulfilled) and should not be included in Bemporad's "ragazzi" line.¹⁰ As I will discuss in greater depth, the abridged version that appeared in 1933 as *Il viaggio incantato* deleted precisely the story's most "serious" aspects—the most psychologically complex, dark, "dantean" moments—revealing that the public did not consider this kind of seriousness appropriate for a juvenile audience.

While we see the clear influence of children's classics such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, and, particularly in the opening chapters, Vamba's *Il Giornalino di Gian Burrasca*, adult

bozza della copertina e del frontispizio, con 'favola candida' al posto di 'fiaba candida'." Definitions from Garzanti's *Grandi Dizionari Italiani*, 1998.

⁹One of the earliest letters in the Vivanti dossier is a hand-written note from Turin dated 29 January 1923 and addressed to "gentile e cara amica" (almost certainly Silvia Bemporad, Enrico's wife). In it, Vivanti suggests the title "*Novilunio*: Favola candida" and asks "Le piace? Mi par meglio della citazione Dantesca." Apparently, then, an earlier title under consideration had been a quotation from Dante.

¹⁰Letter from Vivanti to Bemporad, 10 March 1923. "Non sarebbe bene che una prima edizione del libro — quella che va in mano ai critici — uscisse senza illustrazioni? Certo l'opera verrebbe allora letta con diversi intendimenti e giudicata con la dovuta serietà e non con quella superficiale incuranza accordata sempre ai libri illustrati per fanciulli." The letter is typed, with "illustrati" inserted by hand. Letter from Vivanti to Bemporad, 12 March 1923: "Se il libro si pubblica dapprima senza illustrazioni non faccia neppure la copertina illustrata, bensì una edizione perfettamente seria e semplice; un po' diversa, sì, dai Suoi altri romanzi, ma tenuta tuttavia nella stessa linea di perfetta sobrietà. Con questa edizione ci assicureremo anzitutto, almeno in gran parte, i miei lettori soliti. La prego poi ardentemente di non pensare a mettere il libro nella collezione!" (I understand the last sentence to be referring to the "Biblioteca per i ragazzi" collection.)

works such as Dante's *Comedy* and Pascoli's *Il fanciullino* also provide important models. In each case Vivanti's debts range from general conception to particular details, but the common thread in the nexus of literary precedents is the theme of *meraviglia*. The word "meraviglia" with its various forms appears on almost every page of the story and designates the capacity of vision particular to children.¹¹ This marvel and wonder often result from an appreciation of the exceptional and surprising physical beauty of the natural world. However, Vivanti most effectively dramatizes this capacity through an emphasis on the child's use of language itself. The scores of linguistic plays, which not only adorn the text with comic and touching effects but drive the plot forward, speak directly to the adult readers. The jarring effect of encountering literal renditions of clichés and dead metaphors reveals the forgotten luminosity of language. Thus while the child returns from the literary voyage having grown, the adult reader is rejuvenated.

In the opening chapters, set in the children's bourgeois home, the knowing adults alternately scold and tease Tina and Bobby for taking expressions too literally. The children clearly have yet to grasp the concept of "parlare figurato." When, for example, Zia Celeste points out that Bobby is not too bright by remarking that he is "no eagle", the children are befuddled as to why they should expect a boy to be a bird. Similarly, Tina immediately assumes that the "Anima dell'artista," as a thing rare and winged, must be not some abstract concept but a kind of butterfly. Their apparent inability to understand metaphor and figurative language in general not only provides these chapters with their humorous effect, but also seems to imply that children, in their literal-minded immaturity, are barred from understanding art and poetry. Following Pascoli, however, Vivanti turns this notion on its head.¹²

Beginning with Bobby's naively astute observation that "quando i bambini dicono una cosa non vera è una bugia e sono puniti; ma quando le cose non vere le dicono i grandi, allora è un 'parlare figurato', e va benissimo" (7), Vivanti's narrative uses the child characters as foils of the adult

¹¹Vivanti draws not only from Pascoli, but from Romanticism in general. In discussing Blake's poetry, for example, Alan Richardson notes, "children are natural visionaries, and the child's naïve perception of an innocent world provides the foundation for imaginative life" (126).

¹²Pascoli, *Il fanciullino*: "I fatti che [il fanciullino] raccontava, gli parevano già assai mirabili così come erano" (p. 29). For an interesting comparative analysis of the poetry of Vivanti and Pascoli, see Emmanuela Tandello, "Tradition and Innovation."

bourgeois world. Their frankness and simplicity reveal the various kinds of adult hypocrisy masquerading as polite manners and sophisticated conversation. These chapters strongly recall Vamba's comic *Giornalino di Gian Burrasca*. For example, Vamba's impish Giannino Stoppini innocently humiliates his older sister Ada and ruins her marriage possibilities with the wealthy Capitani by copying passages of Ada's diary into his own, and then handing over his journal to Capitani to read aloud:

Ecco qui, sono andato su in camera di Ada, ho aperto la cassette della sua scrivania le ho preso il suo giornale di memorie e ora posso copiare in pace.

"Oh, se quel vecchiccio del Capitani non tornasse più! Ed invece, è venuto anche stasera. È impossibile! Non mi piace! ...La mamma ha detto che è molto ricco; e se mi chiedesse in moglie, dovrei sposarlo. Non è una crudeltà, questa? Povero cuore mio!"...

Dunque io ero in salotto col mio giornalino in mano quando ad un tratto [Capitani] mi dice con quella sua vociaccia di gatto scorticato: Cosa legge di bello il nostro Giannino? Io naturalmente gli ho dato subito il mio libro di memorie ed egli stesso si è messo a leggerlo forte davanti a tutti (3).

Creating a similar *scenata* of social mortification for his unmarried Aunt Celeste, Bobby re-evokes his uncle's quip about husband-fishing in the company of an eligible bachelor. During a discussion of the family's summer plans, the possibility of going to Alassio is proposed:

Ad Alassio? – saltò su Bobby colla vocetta stridula. – È lì, vero? Che si tengono nell'acqua i mariti?

— I mariti? Nell'acqua? Ma che cosa ti viene in mente? – esclamò la mamma. – Anche tu, Bobby, hai sempre qualche nuova stoltezza da dire....

— Ma zia! Non te l'ha ditto ieri lo zio Camillo? "Tu che ci tieni tanto a trovar marito, vai a Alassio che forse lo pescherai?"

Un glaciale silenzio accolse questa uscita; lo zio Camillo parve strozzarsi e si coprì la bocca col tovagliolo.

Ma con feroce logica Bobby continuò:

— Allora, per poterlo pescare, il marito, bisogna pure che sia dentro all'acqua! Vero?

La zia Celeste si era fatta di nuovo tutta rossa e poi tutta bianca in faccia (12-13).

Beyond its role as critical instruments of bourgeoisie manners, the children's literal understanding of language is revealed not as a deficiency but as a deeper, more profound, more marvellous vision. Tina's seemingly naïve evocation of the butterfly, in fact, takes the word "anima" back to its

roots, recalling the original double meaning of the Greek word "psyche" which denoted both "soul" and "moth." In the realm of the painting, all speech is literalised. The children's very entry into the painting literalises their mother's earlier assertion that "l'opera d'arte non va osservata così... superficialmente, dal di fuori. Bisogna proprio meditarla, direi quasi 'penetrarla', per poterne comprendere l'intimo significato" (13-14). The children see that adolescence is actually a bridge to adulthood, boring stories literally dry you out (in a direct nod to *Alice in Wonderland*) and Bobby really does become an eagle. As in Dante's many encounters with sinners through his otherworldly voyage, each encounter for Tina and Bobby teaches them a particular lesson: have faith in yourself, do not lie, do not be too demanding, be generous, and so forth. But the over-all effect of this strategy of materialization is to de-familiarize language, and reawaken dead metaphors. The wonderland of the child and of childhood enacts the Romantic notion of poetry by stripping the veil of familiarity from the world to foster a re-appreciation of its wonders. In particular, readers of all ages are invited to recall the marvel and wonders of relationships. Simple acts of compassion and generosity are repeatedly vindicated and the mundane ritual of moving from the formal to the familiar mode of address is re-visited and literalised in a celebration of emotional intimacy:

È uggioso questo modo di parlare, - osservò l'animale precedendoli con passo lento su pel sentiero. - Se credete, andremo alle Quattro Fontane per poter poi conversare meno cerimoniosamente.

— Che fontane sono? - domandò Bobby.

— Ce n'è una di scioppo, - spiegò la Gnu, - una di caffè-latte, una di cacao, e una di tè. Noi ci daremo a vicenda del tè; e questo faciliterà la nostra conversazione.

— Del "tè" - fece Bobby: - Lei vuol dire forse del "tu?".

— Del te o del tu, non fa lo stesso? — ribattè l'animale un po' secato. — I bambini pedanti sono detestabili (47).

— Ti piace? - domandarono i fanciulli lieti di questo più intimo modo di parlare.

— Sì, mi piace....

Ed ora i bimbi (tale è la magica virtù dell'amicizia!) guardando la bestia non la trovavano più così brutta; anzi, osservandola meglio, la trovavano di forme piuttosto aggraziate (52).

The familiar is here truly de-familiarized so that we may re-encounter it as does a child or a non-Italian speaker, truly feeling the difference between *Lei* and *tu*. Vivanti suggests that the transition of mode of address does not merely modify verb forms, but allows the interlocutors to see each other differently, and more intimately.

The perspective of the non-native speaker of Italian joins that of the child as a privileged lens through which to appreciate familiar, native qualities. The tale, in fact, includes markedly cosmopolitan characteristics, not surprisingly given Vivanti's own multinational heritage and life experiences.¹³ The author dedicated the book, we remember, not to an Italian but to the Danish Prince Valdemar, in whose veins "scorre azzurrissimo il sangue di nordici re" (v). Vivanti chose conspicuously Anglo names, "Tina" and "Bobby," for her protagonists and used a short, tight, English style sentence structure throughout the tale. The presence of Mamose, whose Swiss origins are repeatedly emphasized, lends an international flavour to the children's upbringing. Vivanti compliments these northern elements with the endearing character of the Gnu. The magical painting, we learn, represents a Tuscan spring at twilight, entitled *Primavera nei Colli Toscani*. The artist had at first intended to paint an African landscape, to be called *Inverno nella Giungla Equatoriale*, but changed his mind and therefore attempted to erase the equatorial Gnu, now conspicuously out of place in Tuscany. When asked why she does not go home, the Gnu replies that, like so many other foreigners, she has fallen in love with Italy and does not want to leave (42). Through the foreign eyes of the Gnu, then, we are invited to see again the enticing beauty of the peninsula.

Eugenio Cherubini's *Pinocchio in Affrica* provides an interesting point of contrast to Vivanti's African Gnu in love with the Tuscan landscape.¹⁴ In this tale, one of several "sequels" to Collodi's classic, the well-intentioned but ever-mischievous puppet is distracted from his studies by a touring circus. Peeking into a tent, he asks if anyone is there, to which he hears the response: "Qui non ci sono nè uomini nè donne: qui ci sono affricani d'Affrica che funzionano da bestie feroci a due lire e cinquanta al giorno" (23). Pinocchio travels to the fascinating continent where he is elected emperor, but ultimately decides to return home.¹⁵ We witness here again

¹³See especially Graziella Parati's study "Maculate Conceptions: Annie Vivanti's Textual Reproductions" for a discussion of Vivanti's strategies of "hybridization" and her incorporation of political tensions, especially concerning colonization, into her popular (adult) fiction.

¹⁴Issued in its fifth edition in 1922 (the year before *Sua Altezza!* appeared), Cherubini's book was included in Bemporad's Biblioteca per i ragazzi, with illustrations by G.G. Bruno. (The second edition of Vivanti's book contains an advertisement for this and six other *Pinocchio* sequels on the back page.)

¹⁵Cherubini repeats Collodi's endearing style of lengthy and detailed chapter titles: "Capitolo XXX Gli uomini selvaggi vedendo scaturire P. dalla bocca del

the *topos* of a fantastic voyage framed by quotidian home life, but this time Italy's contemporary aspirations for African colonization seem to inform the details of the protagonist's exploits. In many respects this tale exemplifies what Margery Hourihan calls a "hero story," constructing sets of dualities that are hierarchically valorized. Mobilizing the theories of Roland Barthes on myth, Edward Said on Orientalism, and Ferdinand de Saussure on signification and difference, Hourihan argues "The meanings of hero stories depend upon these related pairs of signifiers which express the dualistic structure inherent in Western thought, a pattern of values which naturalizes the dominance of the European patriarchal elite and the subordination of other cultural groups, other social classes, women and nature" (16). Though a kind of quest narrative (as are many of the paradigm stories Hourihan analyses), Vivanti's text does not seem to construct this kind of cultural duality (although, as I will discuss, a gender duality does ultimately emerge). Rather, the reader is offered a culturally heterogeneous world in which characters strive to find fulfilment and belonging within, and beyond, the strictures of their identities.¹⁶ Bobby and Tina struggle with the limitations of childhood, and the Gnu insists on remaining in her beloved landscape in spite of her "foreignness." The *Babao*, simultaneously comic and poignant, epitomizes the struggle to negotiate happiness within a prescribed identity. He desperately yearns to be loved rather than feared, even though he knows that the moment he ceases to elicit terror, he will cease to exist.¹⁷

Though set in a literal "landscape," the story does not refer "Italianness" only to the peninsula's natural beauty. Bobby's education, as directed by the painter, starts with Cicero and ends with Dante, and in between includes the major figures of Greek and Roman classics. Readers are reminded, then, of Italy's privileged role in the literary and philosophical heritage of western culture. These pages, which clearly stress to the

coccodrillo lo credono una divinità e prima gli tirano colle frecce avvelenate, poi lo eleggono imperatore."

¹⁶This is not to say that the text free from reinscriptions of power dynamics. Mamosel, foreign and female, is the bourgeois family's servant. Later in the tale, when offered three wishes, Bobby considers asking for "un servitore Negro vestito di raso rosso con un turbante in testa" (pp. 62-63). Bobby's desire for a servant, like the other selfish wishes he and Tina contemplate, are foiled in this lesson about true happiness.

¹⁷The *Babao* appears to each child in the aspect he or she fears most. Thus, when he removes his hood, Tina and Bobby each see him differently. Once a child no longer fears the Babao, he disappears.

young readers the importance of education and study, do not, however, dwell on the particular content of the books that make up Bobby's curriculum. Rather, the text emphasizes the emotional attributes of the process of studying: stamina, commitment, focus, and dedication. With the completion of each book, Bobby sprouts another feather until at last he is able to soar away. This particular focus on education for the sake of growth contrasts with much of the literature being produced for Italian children in the period. Vamba's *O Patria Mia*, for example, intended for the education of Italian children living abroad, offers its readers a portrait gallery of great Italians from antiquity to the present. A sculptor from Lucca, having emigrated to Argentina, makes busts of illustrious Italians. He teaches his three children the history of their heritage by explaining chronologically each sculpted figure. The three-volume work first published in 1911 was updated and reissued several times after Vamba's death in 1920 to include the history of fascism in its pantheon of Italian heroes.¹⁸ The explicit goal of the text is to inculcate both knowledge of, and pride in Italy's glorious past and present.

The titles advertised on the back cover of the 1923 edition of *O Patria Mia* reveal the importance afforded history, heroism, and national pride in the production of children books in the period: *Ragazzi fascisti*, *Il libro degli eroi*, *Italia eroica*, *Storia dei Mille*, *Storia di Dante*, and *Umili eroi della patria e dell'umanità*. In a letter dated 18 April 1923, the Fascist editorial house Imperia requested books from Bemporad to disseminate Italian culture.¹⁹ In response, Bemporad sent a list of titles that included such children's books *Guerre senza sangue*, *Un fanciullo alla guerra*, and *Camicia Rossa Camicia Nera*. Vivanti's story, by contrast, values the imaginative, timeless world of art over the history of military heroism. To be sure, not every book written for Italian children in this period aimed to promote patriotism by glorifying past military exploits.²⁰ For example, editions of the fables of both Capuana and Vamba appeared in these same years, keeping alive the rich fairy-tale tradition, and A. Cuman Pertile's *Per i bimbi d'Italia: Poesie* (1921) offers young readers a collection of brief, illustrated

¹⁸The 1933 edition, updated by Ettore Allodoli, includes thirty illustrations. The first depicts Dante completing the *Comedy*. He sits at his desk with pen in hand, a second figure in the background. The last image depicts Mussolini and the Pope, sitting a desk, pens in hand, signing the Lateran accord.

¹⁹Florence, Archivio storico Giunti, Secretarial correspondence, fasc. 164.2.1.i.

²⁰On the importance of establishing a national foundation myth, and the young Italian State's various efforts promote italianità, see Doumanis, especially pp. 86-106.

rhymes on mostly domestic topics.²¹ However, the proliferation of historical narratives shows that Vivanti's book stood outside a concerted effort to construct an image of a culturally and militarily heroic Italy for children at home and abroad in the early years of fascism.

In the magical painting's timeless realm, we find a jarring reference to the text's particular historical moment. In the laboratory where Sua Altezza burns and cuts the hearts he has stolen, "il Dominatore" offers Tina her choice of hearts. Gazing around the infernal laboratory full of menacing instruments and overflowing with hearts waiting to be "fixed," Tina remarks, "Quanta gente c'è al mondo senza cuore!" (150). After considering several, she notices the heart of a young fascist student of literature (156), the only one that elicits her interest. However, whether the young man's *fascismo* or his studies in *belles lettres* tempts Tina is left unclear. In spite of his promise, Sua Altezza, whose cruelty and deceit become ever more apparent, will not give it to her because he has already promised it to a distinguished lady. The desirability of the heart of a fascist, like the African bestia in love with Italy, does not stage an overt challenge to the regime; however, neither do such details promote contemporary imperialist or nationalist agendas. More importantly, the text does not forge any exclusive construction of pure Italian identity. Instead, readers are given the image of a multinational community (Valdemar, Bobby, Tina, Mamosel, la Gnu) sharing in the beauty of Italy's landscape and the richness of its humanistic contributions.

The editorial changes made to the 1933 edition demonstrate the importance of promulgating the history of Italy as a heroic, martial narrative. The later Mondadori edition deleted the entire dedication to the little Nordic Prince and in its place added a biographical sketch of the author. This new preface emphasizes her family's ties to Garibaldi. In particular, it narrates the visit that the leader of the Red Shirts purportedly made to the Vivanti home and the kiss he bestowed on Annie's brother Italo in reverence of the boy's name.²² Thus the revised edition infuses into Vivanti's tale some of the myth of heroic Italy so prevalent in other children's books of the period.

More substantially, the later version removed the character of Sua

²¹Other than its title, the book does not make direct reference to Italy or Italian history. The front cover is illustrated with colour images of the *Commedia dell'arte* figures. The short compositions celebrate the values of home, family, and school.

²²Vivanti's father Anselmo was an exiled "friend of Mazzini and supported of Garibaldi" (Merry, p. 441).

Altezza not only from the title, but from the book completely. The entire section devoted to the Garden of Love (chapters XVIII through XXXVI in the original) was cut from Mondadori's *Il viaggio incantato*, where the character of Sua Altezza disappears completely along with all the horrors encountered by Tina in his realm. Thus the abridged, illustrated version does not merely shorten the story but, as it were, cuts out the very heart of the book.

While Vivanti depicts children as possessing a particular capacity for marvel and insight, she does not exclude darker potentials from her representation. In fact, her book takes its very title from the antagonist, none other than Eros, "the terrible" and the "Dominator." At first appearing as an adorable *putto*, a "little angel," Eros easily seduces Tina, but soon after shows his true nature as deceitful and uncaring. While wandering through his realm, Tina encounters creatures capable of terrible cruelty (particularly the scene of the *pesce azzurro*, 170) and confronts the reality of Death and the inexorable nature of Time (179). Ultimately, lost in a dark forest, she discovers a clearing, only to realize that it is a field of insects, frogs, flies, serpents, and rats. Surrounded by threatening creatures, her terror and despair reach a climax and she faints. The culminating chapters of the book, then, depict the allegory of the Garden of Love, replete with its deceptions and foibles. Eros appears as a child might see it — *meraviglia* becomes *paura*, and adult readers are invited to take another look, through Tina's eyes, at the life of the heart.

The inclusion of any depiction of romantic love (we find nothing overtly "sexual" in Vivanti's allegory) in a book for young children courted disapproval, as Vivanti herself was well aware. In a letter to Bemporad, she discusses ideas for the title, and explicitly warns against alienating parents (and harming sales):

Il titolo "Sua Altezza l'Amore" è bellissimo. Ma temo, nonostante l'aggiunta di "Favola Candida," che quell' "Amore" possa far paura ai genitori e danneggiare la vendita. (Una maestra di scuola mi disse ieri che "qualunque ne fosse il contenuto non si darebbe mai ai bambini un libro con quel titolo".) Vogliamo dunque omettere "l'Amore"? lasciando semplicemente "SUA ALTEZZA!" ... Mi pare che vada benissimo. Ed è anche intonato alla scena culminante del libro, allorchè Amore, ridendo dei fanciulli terrorizzati, esclama: "Avete paura di Sua Altezza?... Ma Sua Altezza...sono io!" (Dicendolo già prima, toglierebbe ogni effetto di sorpresa.)²³

²³Letter of 10 March 1923.

She playfully broaches the subject again in a newspaper article entitled “Come si scrive un libro,” admitting that Love had sneaked into the story in spite of its inappropriateness for youth. Indeed, she, like Tina, is seduced by the cherub:

Amore! Ma come? In un libro per fanciulli? L'amore non ci dovrebbe entrare. Difatti — mettendomi, (non senza trepidanza) davanti al primo foglio di questa *Favola Candida* mi sono detta: Ecco! In questo libro l'Amore non ci deve entrare.

Senonchè, per gli scrittori — e fors'anche per le scrittrici — l'Amore è un argomento di straordinaria risorsa, di sempre rinnovata ispirazione. Come dunque escluderlo da una nostra opera? Come?²⁴

Vivanti goes on to explain that she kept two piles of papers while composing the novel: one for the children's story itself, and a separate one to write down all her ideas about Love as they came into her head. Somehow, the two piles got shuffled together and now Love has taken over the story. The amusing (and surely invented) anecdote attests to the seductive power love has for writers, but also seems playfully to critique the notion that love can be censured out of children's experiences. The ridiculous and artificial strategy of keeping two separate stacks of paper in order to keep Eros out of the story implies that adults who attempt to sterilize experience and protect children from “Amore” are engaging in a similarly artificial (and fruitless) endeavour.

More than simply appearing in the book, Eros gives it its very title. Vivanti even describes the revelation of Amore's identity as the “culminating scene” of the book. Clearly, this character and his allegorical meaning play a central role in the tale, in spite of the reservations about the appropriateness of this theme for children. Romantic love emerges as the antithesis of childhood because of its duplicity and dissimulations, whereas children, as the early chapters comically indicate, are always (if sometimes painfully) sincere and spontaneous — *candidi*.²⁵ Tina's premature initia-

²⁴Vivanti, “Come si scrive un libro.” An advertisement on the back of the newspaper clipping indicates the publication date as sometime soon after 29 June 1923, but there is no record of the newspaper's title. The article is devoted to a discussion of *Sua Altezza*!

²⁵Echoing the “favola candida” of the title, Vivanti refers to her child readers as “una così candida assemblea” in “Come si scrive un libro.” Though it includes an allegorical representation of romantic love, the text does not imply (as Freud argues in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* of 1905) that children are

tion into the world of Eros, with its joys (she encounters newly engaged girls who are literally in the clouds), fears, and disappointments overwhelms her, so much so that she must be saved by her younger brother and the purity of his fraternal love. The book promises, however, the inevitability of Tina's eventual return to the dominion of Eros. As Bobby flies her to safety, Tina shows herself more than willing to give herself again to the cherub's charms: "Oh bimbo, bimbo splendido e fatale!... Riprendimi!... riprendimi se vuoi!" (220). Once she is safely home, her final, wistful memory of the seductive *putto's* realm once, "Oh Bobby!... Era pur bello quel giardino!..." (225), assure us that she will some day re-enter Amore's garden. These chapters, however inopportune contemporary mores may have deemed them to be, aim to confront adult readers with a de-familiarized representation of their own experiences, and to inaugurate child readers into the darker realities of relationships. Vivanti, as we have seen, would pay for this transgression of expectations. In the later Mondadori edition, instead of rescuing Tina from the clutches of Eros, Bobby must save her merely from the ranks of giddy, prattling girls floating about on clouds.

The canon of Italian *letteratura infantile* up to 1923 included primarily the unification-era texts *Pinocchio* (1883) and *Cuore* (1886). Indeed, copies of *Sua Altezza!* include advertisements for Bemporad's illustrated editions of *Pinocchio*. Vivanti's book, while inheriting various images, themes, and strategies from this canon, seems to signal a shift in emphasis. *Pinocchio* emphasizes the necessity of learning to respect boundaries, of developing self-control, and of following the straight path. While it reveals deep nostalgia for the freedom and energy of "childhood," and certainly launches comic critiques of the adult world, the emphasis remains on navigating the subject through childhood into a responsible and productive adulthood.²⁶ For *Sua Altezza!*, childhood holds marvellous visions and children, as the Gnu asserts, are "divine" (55). Adults, instead, run the risk of wandering through life without heart and without memory, as the prema-

already sexual—the story makes clear that Tina's exposure to Amore comes prematurely.

²⁶My summary of this classic novel underscores the text's overt themes and pedagogical aims. Of course, the story's complexity and richness, including its tendency to call its own overt claims into question, should not be overlooked. See, for example, Nicolas J. Perella's excellent piece, "An Essay on *Pinocchio*," which introduces his bi-lingual edition of the text. Perella elaborates the ambivalence in the story and its readers, particularly the "ambivalence that derives from the regressive pull of the child in us even as we enforce the role of responsible adults upon ourselves" (p. 48).

turely aged Tina is condemned to do. In particular, we can contrast the culminating moments of Pinocchio's and Bobby's education/metamorphoses. The beloved puppet, harnessed to a windlass and walking in circles to earn his glass of milk, trains his body to become part of a machine, his steps literally circumscribed by the circular movement of productivity. Bobby, instead, reaches his potential by smashing open the walls of the attic library with his newly acquired wings and flying away. Pinocchio becomes a real boy by restricting and curtailing his sphere of motion. Bobby realizes his "anima dell'artista" by literally expanding his horizons.

The ideal of obedience, certainly promoted in both *Pinocchio* (with much ambivalence) and *Cuore*, finds direct and forceful expression in the popular 300-page children's novel by Laura Orvieto, *La forza di Roma: Storie della storia del mondo* (1933). In the prefatory "Chapter Zero" of this fictionalized history of Rome from 78 to 68 B.C.E., Orvieto writes:

Ma la forza di Roma che cos'è? In che cosa consiste, voglio dire?

Eh, per saperlo, leggi il libro! Però aspetta, posso dirtelo subito. In che cosa consiste? Nella disciplina, nel rispetto alla legge. Anche se qualche volta e magari spesso i cittadini romani sono turbolenti, la disciplina però la conoscono e la legge la rispettano: sanno ubbidire. Lo hanno imparato fin da ragazzi, e quando marciano sotto l'aquila romana sono formidabili. È questa la loro forza, la forza di Roma (2).

Here, the virtue of obedience goes beyond the family and the schoolroom, finding its model in the martial image of Roman soldiers. Orvieto thus transposes the values promoted by Pinocchio to an overtly political context and drains them of the nuances and ambivalences with which Collodi had suffused them. By contrast, while Vivanti does not debunk the virtue of obedience, neither does she emphasize its importance. *Sua Altezza!* provides no authority figures analogous to the generous Gepetto, the stern Blue Fairy, or to Enrico's wise and beloved maestro. Instead, Tina and Bobby's father is absent and their mother, in a scene that humorously questions her claim to respect, cannot even remember why she was scolding them.²⁷ The artist, the only character who purports to authority, appears briefly, and plays the role more of guide than teacher, explaining to Bobby what he must do to save his sister. Bobby and Tina's minor transgressions

²⁷ — Per questa volta vi perdono. Ma badate di non farlo mai più. — Di non far mai più che cosa? — domandò Bobby. La mamma aggrottò severamente le ciglia. A dir vero, avendo molte cose da fare e da pensare, non si ricordava più in che cosa precisamente consistesse l'ultima iniquità dei due colpevoli" (pp. 19-20).

at home charm the reader and the realm of the painting does not offer any authority figures for them to obey.

Cuore, as is well known, emphasizes the importance of learning and appreciating the grandeur of Italy's recent history and seeks to instill a sense of national unity in its young audience. The appearance of the "ragazzo calabrese" in the Torino elementary school provides the opportunity to emphasize the brotherhood of all Italians, while discourses on Garibaldi and Mazzini aim to forge unity from the diverse regional identities that defined pre-1860 Italy. Vivanti's favola instead stands almost entirely outside of history: the eternity of the painting contrasts sharply with *Cuore's* diary form, a structure which in itself emphasizes the motion of time and announces the story's historical moment.

Finally, in each of these pillar texts, to be a child means to be a boy, whereas *Sua Altezza* allows the brother and sister to share centre stage as protagonists. Tina in many respects plays a more central role than Bobby; indeed through most of the story she appears the more daring and authoritative of the two. Tina, for example, goes through the painting first and only she has the courage to dare to walk on water, while Bobby fears he will fall in. Ultimately, however, the tale reinscribes traditional gender expectations and hierarchies. Tina, swooning in Amore's garden, falls into the role of the helpless damsel in distress while Bobby, who has found his courage, flies in to rescue her. While Tina had taken the initiative in the hunt for the Anima dell'artista, Bobby in the end actually possesses it, allowing him to become the hero. Tina, instead, seems destined to follow her frivolous Aunt Celeste as a protégé of Eros. Early in the story, Tina remarks that she likes her aunt because she is beautiful, "[e] quando sarò grande mi pettinero come lei." Her remark is followed by a particularly dark moment describing Bobby's budding misogyny: "Bobby sentì nascersi in cuore un oscuro senso d'ostilità contro tutte le donne" (22). In spite of the hierarchical duality ultimately suggested by the text, however, Tina's importance in the story already sets it apart from the canonical works of Collodi, de Amicis and Vamba. In regard, then, to the depiction both of childhood and of Italian identity, Vivanti's book departs substantially from the paradigm texts of Italian letteratura infantile, both fascist and pre-fascist.

In their comprehensive survey *La letteratura per l'infanzia*, Pino Boero and Carmine De Luca report various fascist decrees and policies concerning children.²⁸ The Bologna Convention in 1938, for example, declared that the child is considered naturally fascist, and condemned *Alice in*

²⁸See especially chapter six, "Il ventennio fascista (1922-1943)."

Wonderland, among many other classic children's books, as a dangerous foreign text.²⁹ In 1939 Vivanti's name was included in a list of over 900 "non gratis" authors whose books were to be taken out of circulation.³⁰ While Vivanti's Jewish heritage motivated her inclusion in the index, Sua Altezza's attention to the female child, its encouragement of exploration and meraviglia rather than restraint and obedience, its willingness to broach the theme of romantic love, and its depiction of a culturally heterogeneous and timeless wonderland rather than a racially exclusive, martial history of Italy may all have contributed to the text's status as "non gratis" and to its continued relative obscurity.

*Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA*

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²⁹Boero/De Luca, *La letteratura per l'infanzia*, pp. 172-173.

³⁰Boero/De Luca, *La letteratura per l'infanzia*, p. 174. Parati tells us: "Because of the racial laws, Vivanti, who was both a Protestant and a Jew by birth, was sent to forced confinement in Arezzo. She was not deported to a concentration camp because, controversially, she converted to Catholicism. She died in 1942 in Torino, where a zealous clerk, realizing that she was Jewish, omitted her name from the day's obituaries..." (Parati, "Maculate Conceptions," p. 3). According to Caporossi, her confinement was due to her British citizenship, but she was soon freed by Mussolini's direct intercession.

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