

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON BIBLIOTHERAPY AND FOLKLORE: *STORIES IN TRANSIT AS A CASE STUDY*

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The so-called ‘paradox of fiction’, discussed by philosophers at least since Plato, but more recently revitalized by Colin Radford and Michael Weston’s article ‘How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?’,¹ has highlighted the apparent philosophical contradiction that human beings seem to emotionally react in the same way when they experiment both ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ worlds. Neuroscientific studies, on the other hand, discovered that neurons and brain regions that are activated when someone performs a specific action are also associated with the reading of the description of the same action, such as in a book, or the vision of its representation, such as on a screen.² Given these premises, the traditional distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’ appears increasingly blurred, as it is not easy to distinguish between psychological, neural, and endocrine responses arousing from ‘real-life experiences’ and those triggered by immersive media, such as books, movies or virtual reality.³ This process also reflects on the way ‘realistic’ and ‘fantastic’ literature (the prototypical ‘fictional’ activity, as a form of shaping and moulding rough material, words, into something completely different and new) can be defined and explored. Far from being two incommunicable worlds, the real and fantastic one(s), seem now to intertwine and support each other in new and promising interdisciplinary fields, such as those of Medical Humanities and Neuroaesthetics.

¹ Colin Radford and Michael Weston, ‘How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 49 (1975), pp. 67-93.

² See, for an overview: Vittorio Gallese, ‘Embodied Simulation. Its Bearing on Aesthetic Experience and the Dialogue Between Neuroscience and the Humanities’, *Gestalt Theory*, 41, 2 (2019), pp. 113-28.

³ For some empirical results, see Franziska Hartung et al., ‘When Fiction Is Just as Real as Fact: No Differences in Reading Behavior between Stories Believed to be Based on True or Fictional Events’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1618 (2017), pp. 1-14; Thalia R. Goldstein, ‘The Pleasure of Unadulterated Sadness: Experiencing Sorrow in Fiction, Nonfiction, and “In Person”’, *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 3, 4 (2009), pp. 232-37.

This note wishes to call for the necessity to draw a new geography and cosmology of the real-fantastic universe, beginning with a new approach to two of the main ‘kingdoms’ of the fantastic world: fantastic literature and folklore, especially fairy tales, legends, folk-songs and myths. How could they be differentiated among themselves and from their realistic counterparts? Is folklore something still alive, or just a relic from the past? Is fantastic literature a specific genre, a particular perspective, a stylistic choice, or a mere abstract label? Is the fantastic a universal human need, that anyone can experience and understand anywhere in the world, or just an intellectual hobby or a form of escaping the hurdles of life? Eventually, can literature and the arts help people live better, on a physical, psychological and emotional level?

Bibliotherapy, defined as the creative and reasoned use of literature and narratives by a bibliotherapist in order to achieve specific objectives of well-being, emotional and mental health for a patient or a group, is a discipline and a technique capable of merging the immense treasure of the world literature and poetry with the exact needs of a scientific treatment modality.⁴ However, it is far from easy to explain how such apparently ethereal objects as words and stories can be able to influence human life so deeply, and to empirically prove it in an academic and medical environment. There seems to exist an insurmountable abyss between the so-called ‘two cultures’, sciences and humanities, as defined by Sir Charles Percy Snow in 1959.⁵ But things are changing rapidly. Inspired by the past and supported by the most recent results of many interdisciplinary studies, we can suggest that a fruitful collaboration between humanities and sciences is not only feasible, but also much more fruitful than when the two ignore one another.

To accomplish such an ambitious goal, however, it is worth starting from the very basis of the problem, from how the keywords of the debate are understood and used. Etymologies, of course, can be treacherous. They show meanings that can be misunderstood, and it is easy to give in to the temptation that what the ancients thought and felt should be unconditionally accepted. But they also contain precious hints to understand how concepts and ideas appeared in the first place and how they evolved. The words I would like to focus on are: ‘reality’, ‘fantasy’, and ‘fiction’.

⁴ Marco Dalla Valle, ‘Esiste davvero la Biblioterapia? Analisi della disciplina e possibili applicazioni nelle biblioteche’, *Biblioteche oggi*, 32, 8 (2014), pp. 43-49, p. 45.

⁵ Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

The Online Etymology Dictionary tells us that ‘reality’ comes from the Latin *res*, meaning ‘property’, ‘goods’, ‘matter’, ‘thing’, and *res*, in its turn, would derive from the Proto-Indo-European *Hreh-i*, meaning ‘wealth’, ‘goods’.⁶ Reality, therefore, at least in its primitive uses, seems to carry in it a strong sense of ownership and material goods, something you hold, something you have at your fingertips. ‘Fantasy’, on the other hand, is a word that, already from its most recent ancestor, the Old French *fantaisie*, carries the meaning of ‘vision and imagination’, directly deriving from the Latin *phantasia* and the Greek *phantos*, which meant ‘visible’, containing the related word ‘phaos’, the ‘light’.⁷ The primordial origin of the word ‘fiction’, finally, could be traced back to the Latin *figere*, meaning ‘to shape’, ‘to form’, ‘to devise’, ‘to feign’, and also, originally, ‘to knead’, ‘to form out of clay’.⁸ In this case, therefore, there is an action at the root of the word, a manipulation of an external material, similar to what the potter does with the shapeless clay in order to turn it into a piece of fine ceramic.

In these three simple words are hidden extremely profound meanings and implications: we have two of our most precious senses, touch (reality) and sight (fantasy), and the very foundation of our action in the world, the capacity of ‘fiction’, that is, of shaping what we meet or receive in our life.⁹ Far from being opposite terms, reality and fantasy strengthen each other describing key parts of our nature and representing the strategies we use to deal with what is near to us, what is real, and what is so distant to us that we can only ‘see’ through the eye of our mind, through fantasy.¹⁰ Fiction, on the other hand, is what we choose to do with what we reach through touch and sight, the degree of our manipulation. These etymological coordinates help us to bring some order to the misty confusion that has often lingered upon the debate about what is real and what is fictional, what is fantasy and what is its nature, if beneficial or dangerous.¹¹

⁶ ‘Reality’, in *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/reality#etymonline_v_7331> [accessed 4 July 2022].

⁷ ‘Fantasy’, in *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=fantasy>> [accessed 4 July 2022].

⁸ ‘Fiction’, in *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=fiction>> [accessed 4 July 2022].

⁹ A similar idea of the difference between ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ in fiction is exposed in R. D. Salter, ‘The Place of Reality and Fantasy in Fiction’, *Critical Survey*, 5, 4 (1972), pp. 285-91.

¹⁰ For a classic argument on this, see John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-Stories’, in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. by C. S. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947).

¹¹ A review of the debate over the distinction between fantasy and reality in literature can be found in Syed Mikhail Mohamed Roslan et al., ‘Fantasy versus Reality in Literature’, *Arab World English Journal*, 4 (2016), pp. 212-23.

From a neuroscientific point of view, a fundamental milestone of the reconciliation between ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ was set by the discovery of mirror neurons by Professor Giacomo Rizzolatti (1980s-1990s) and his team, who found that neurons previously associated only to performed actions are activated also when the subject simply observes those actions or reads an account of them, replicating them inside the brain. Therefore, the difference between real-life actions and their fictional representations appears more subtle than imagined before. Neuroscience, we can assert, is building a bridge between our body and our imagination, our ‘physical world’ and our ‘artistic one’. But how can we travel this bridge to bring principles, methodologies and tools from the ‘hard sciences’ to the aid of the artistic and literary parts of ourselves, and vice versa?

Storytelling, that is, the capacity of telling stories, defined as narratives referring to distant times and places, has been considered as one of the few human capacities that truly distinguish our species from other animals, deeply influencing and supporting human progress and evolution.¹² Narratives, as a matter of fact, are the cognitive tools through which humans manage to give an order to the otherwise chaotic realities they inhabit and a meaning to their past experiences, future hopes and fears. Fairy tales and fantastic tales, moreover, represent imaginative tools through which humans manage to share values and traditions impossible to be conveyed through ‘realistic words’, but also to explore their inner natures, wondering about the great questions of their existence, true selves, ethics and meaning in life, considerations that lay at the foundations of human cognitive and emotional balance and wellbeing, and that appear particularly pivotal in moments of danger, suffering, and crisis, as writer and journalist Giovannino Guareschi pointed out in its *Favola di Natale*, written as imprisoned in a German camp after the armistice between Italy and the Allies: ‘La nostalgia l’hanno inventata i prigionieri perché in prigionia tutto quello che appartiene al mondo precluso diventa favola, e gente ascolta sbalordita qualcuno raccontare che le tendine della sua stanza erano rosa’.¹³ As Bruno Bettelheim explained from a psychoanalytic point of view:

¹² Walter R. Fisher, ‘Narration as a human communication paradigm, the case of public moral argument’, *Communication Monographs*, 51 (1984), pp. 1-22.

¹³ Giovannino Guareschi, *La favola di Natale* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1971) eBook p. 5. ‘Nostalgia was invented by prisoners, because in prison everything that belongs to the forbidden world becomes a fairy tale, and people listen in amazement to someone telling that the curtains in his room were pink’ (the translation is mine).

In a fairy tale, internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events. This is the reason why in traditional Hindu medicine a fairy tale giving form to his particular problem was offered to a psychically disoriented person, for his meditation. [...] The fairy tale is therapeutic because the patient finds his *own* solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to imply about him and his inner conflicts at his moment in his life. The content of the chosen tale usually has nothing to do with the patient's external life, but much to do with his inner problems, which seem incomprehensible and hence unsolvable.¹⁴

Bibliotherapy, as said before, could represent a way to travel between these worlds, and, in it, the role of narratives and fiction is crucial. However, it is also true that traditional folklore and fairy tales are often regarded as too distant from 'real problems' for the patient to take advantage of. It is generally believed that modern people can't really learn something useful from stories, metaphors, and traditions so imbued with values and beliefs apparently relegated to people who lived centuries and even millennia ago. This is not what Professors Marina Warner and Valentina Castagna thought when they developed the project: *Stories in Transit/Storie in transito: Storytelling and arrivants' voices in Sicily*. The major purpose of the project was "To establish the right of refugees to cultural expression, to encourage displaced and dislocated individuals to tell stories, and to inspire them to draw on their own traditions and faculty of imagination".¹⁵ Run in collaboration with the University of London, the University of Palermo, and Oxford University, the project offered an answer to:

some crucial questions on the rights of migrants to cultural expression in conditions of deprivation and uprootedness when even one's identity becomes faded: can myths, legends, and stories provide alternative shelter, literary *lieux de mémoire* where a refugee, a migrant, or a wanderer might feel at home? Can poetry be 'strong enough to help'?¹⁶

¹⁴ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 25.

¹⁵ Marina Warner and Valentina Castagna, 'Stories in Transit/Storie in transito: Storytelling and arrivants' voices in Sicily', in *Migration and the Contemporary Mediterranean*, ed. by Claudia Gualtieri (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), pp. 223-43 (p. 223).

¹⁶ Warner and Castagna, p. 224.

Embracing the idea that every man and woman is a *homo narrans*, as famously claimed by Kurt Ranke and Walter R. Fisher, and that folklore and traditions represent the basic, often subconscious undergrowth from which the trees of our conscious life-stories germinate, the authors of the project decided to take action in front of the critical situation that migrants and asylum seekers, especially young ones, live when they are forced to leave their country, family and friends to look for a better life in foreign and often hostile countries.¹⁷ Deprived not only of material goods, but of personal bonds and a shared culture in the country they happen to be forced to dwell (as frequently Italy is for migrants who would prefer to continue their journey towards the North of Europe), they almost inevitably fall in a state of ‘narrative poverty’. As Warner and Castagna highlight: ‘The dominant form of storytelling that arrivants are encouraged to adopt is autobiographical, and their legal situation requires them to tell this story in a way that will meet the regulations for asylum’.¹⁸ The only stories of shared interest that they are allowed to tell, therefore, seem to be those of their painful journeys and bureaucratic odysseys, with no space for creativity or self-expression. To challenge this narrow, suffocating condition, a series of workshops was held in Palermo, involving artists, scholars and activists from the UK, Italy, Iraq, Lebanon, and other countries.

The main venue of the project was the Museo Internazionale delle Marionette Antonio Pasqualino, which gave the organizers the idea to create a workshop specially aimed at the composition of a new *opera dei pupi canovaccio* with the students. The *opera dei pupi* represents one of the most fascinating expressions of the variegated Sicilian folklore and culture, also inscribed in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists. The marionette theatrical representations of the *opera dei pupi* usually tell the stories of Frankish romantic poems, such as the *Song of Roland*, or Italian ones, such as *Orlando Innamorato* and *Orlando Furioso*. Stories, therefore, that weave together many different cultural and folkloric traditions, as well as artistic techniques, while keeping open to novelties and change. For those reasons, the organizers of *Stories in Transit* decided to work on the main scenes of *Gilgamesh*, the epic poem so familiar to many migrants from the Middle East, and, taking inspiration from the marionettes of the museum, they created new ones made from recycled materials. The spectators of the new and adapted version of *Gilgamesh* with marionettes,

¹⁷ Kurt Ranke, ‘Problems of Categories in Folk Prose’, trans. by Carl Lindahl, *Folklore Forum*, 14, 1 (1981), 1-17 (p. 4); Fisher, p. 6.

¹⁸ Warner and Castagna, p. 236.

children and adults, were delighted by the improvised musicians, puppeteers and actors, and the young refugees were glad to meet local children and entertain them. The performance, therefore, was a successful attempt to use art and storytelling, taking inspiration from such ancient narrative traditions as those of *Gilgamesh* and *opera dei pupi*, to change the perception of the young migrants in the communities of arrival, as well as to give them voices, stories, and metaphors to truly represent their deep and multifaceted dreams, hopes and fears for the future.

In the Italian cultural landscape, the concept of ‘the fantastic’ was object of critical interest only starting from the last decades of the twentieth century, despite the many masterpieces of the genre in the Italian literature, from the countless wonders of the *Legenda Aurea*, to Ludovico Ariosto’s magical irony, from the fairy tales of the *Pentamerone*, to Italo Calvino’s *Fiabe italiane*, from Guareschi’s *Favola di Natale* to a new generation of ‘Spaghetti Fantasy’ novelists.¹⁹ It is an extremely rich and ever-increasing cultural, artistic and imaginative heritage, that patiently awaits to be discovered or re-discovered, and used with its full potential to the benefit of people, as many storytelling and bibliotherapy programs based on fantasy works around the world are showing us, of which *Stories in Transit* is a shining example and model. It is to be hoped, therefore, that new studies seek to employ materials and images from fantastic tales and literature to help people temporarily distance themselves from their daily lives and find new meanings for them. The fantasy genre, as a matter of fact, presents some peculiar qualities that make it especially suitable for the (biblio)therapeutic purposes. As Professor Brian Attebery highlights: ‘[...] fantasy does impose many restrictions on the powers of the imagination, but in return it offers the possibility of generating not merely a meaning but an awareness of and a pattern for meaningfulness. This we call wonder’.²⁰ To find meaning in life is, according to psychotherapist Viktor Frankl, founder of logotherapy and Holocaust survivor, the deepest need and desire of every person, capable of protecting against the most painful psychological dangers deriving from the most extreme life-conditions, such as that of the concentration camp, but also of a psychological trauma or a life-threatening illness.²¹ In fact, according to Frankl ‘any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him

¹⁹ Stefano Lazzarin, ‘Gli scrittori del Novecento italiano e la nozione di “fantastico”’, *Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana*, 37, 2 (2008), pp. 49-67.

²⁰ Brian Attebery, ‘Fantasy as Mode, Genre, Formula’, in *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, ed. by David M. Sandner (Westport: Praeger, 2004), pp. 293-309 (p. 309).

²¹ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s search for meaning, an Introduction to Logotherapy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 115-17.

— mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp'.²² But to give meaning, as it has been shown, means to create a narration, showing how stories, if wisely employed, can really be what leads people to become conscious, free, and responsible 'readers and writers' of their own lives and the world they inhabit.

²² Frankl, p. 75.