An Essay on *Pinocchio*

I

When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child:
when I became a man, I gave up childish ways
[1 Corinthians 13.11].

"Oh, I'm sick and tired of always being a puppet!"
cried Pinocchio, rapping himself on the head.
"It's about time that I too became a man"
[chapter 25].

Astoundingly, psychology turns to the child
in order to understand the adult, blaming adults
for not enough of the child or for too many remnants
of the child still left in adulthood
[James Hillman, "Abandoning the Child"].

THE BRIEF TALE that has made Carlo Lorenzini's pseudonym and the name of his puppet household words was written between July 1881 and January 1883, during which time it appeared serially and sporadically in the *Giornale per i bambini*—one of Italy's first periodicals for children.[1] While it did not create a great critical stir among the literati in the first forty or fifty years following its publication as a volume in 1883, it did enjoy ever-increasing popularity as a book for children. The appeal of Collodi's puppet has proven to be universal,

1. Carlo Lorenzini was born in Florence on November 24, 1826. Between 1856 and 1859 he began to use the pen name Collodi, after his mother's place of birth, a village just outside the town of Pescia in Tuscany. *Le Avventure di Pinocchio* started to appear under the title *Storia d'un burattino* with the first issue of the *Giornale per i bambini*. Although the weekly *Giornale* was published in Rome, the enterprise was in the hands of fellow Tuscans who had migrated after the capital of the newly unified country was transferred from Florence to Rome.

but of especial interest is Giuseppe Prezzolini's remark, in 1923, that "*Pinocchio* is the testing ground for foreigners; whoever understands the beauty of *Pinocchio*, understands Italy."[2] That *Pinocchio* is the literary text that more than any other has been read by Italians in the twentieth century must make one wary about dismissing Prezzolini's judgment as a mere *boutade*. It is also true, however, that no other work of Italian literature can be said to approach the popularity *Pinocchio* enjoys beyond Italy's linguistic frontiers, where its only rivals—but only among cultivated readers and scholars—are *The Divine Comedy* and *The Prince*.

Despite its popularity, *Pinocchio* is not understood as well as it deserves to be, at least in Prezzolini's sense—that is, as an expression of the Italian character. For outside Italy Collodi's tale is still taken almost exclusively as a story for children, who, though unlikely to miss the didactic message the author meant for them, are hardly capable of fully appreciating the tale's underlying linguistic sophistication and narrative strategy, its various levels of irony and sociocultural innuendo, or its satirical thrusts against adult society. Nor do the numerous translations or *rifacimenti* indicate much awareness of these nonchildish features; such versions are so monolithically reductive that most non-Italian adults are unlikely to suspect the book's subtleties and multifaceted context.

But Prezzolini's early remark is clearly intended to call our attention to the virtues of *Pinocchio* as a book for adults, a point upon which he expands fifty years later in an aphoristic pocket history of Italian literature. There, in an appended paragraph, Prezzolini singles out two works that, although outside Italy's primary and

2. *La coltura italiana* (Florence, 1923), p. 185; my translation, as are the translations of all Italian texts cited in this essay, unless otherwise noted.

almost exclusively elitist literary tradition, seem to him so representative of the spirit of the Italian "people" as to merit special attention:

> There are two books that I would say have neither a date nor an author, although both the one and the other are known. *Pinocchio* is a book given to children to read, but it is full of a citified wisdom, worldly and adult, that shows the world as it is—led not by virtue but by fortune guided by astuteness. *Bertoldo* is a triumph of pessimistic rustic wisdom sharpened on the whetstone of experience and on the diffidence of the poor vis-à-vis the rich, and of the ignorant vis-à-vis the pompousness of the so-called cultivated classes. Whoever would understand Italy should read these two books—the one a key of gold, the other a key of iron—that permit entry into the spirit of Italians.[3]

It is clear from this that Prezzolini not only sees *Pinocchio* as a book for adults, but that he also sees in it a Machiavellian vision of the world. The question remains whether that is enough to make it a key to understanding the national Italian character, a concept no less elusive and multiform than the Italian national language.

3. *Storia tascabile della letteratura italiana* (Milan, 1976, 5th ed. 1977), pp. 169–70. *Bertoldo*, written by Giulio Cesare Croce, is an early seventeenth-century seriocomic story, laden with maxims and proverbs reflecting the folk wisdom of a clever rustic who rises to power and subsequently pines away and dies because he can no longer eat his former staple food of beans. Prezzolini (1882–1982) was an influential force in shaping the direction of Italian culture in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century; from 1920 until his death, he assumed the dual role of an indefatigable divulgater of Italian culture to Americans and of American culture to Italians. In 1930 he came to the United States and taught at Columbia University for twenty years. Throughout his long life he harbored a love-hate attitude toward his native land, but his affective nationalism, which led him to accept Fascism, remained constant.

Independently of Prezzolini, and in a quite different way, *Pinocchio* has in recent years been appropriated by the Italian intelligentsia, a radical reversal of the more common circumstance in which a book originally intended for adults becomes a favorite of children or juvenile readers. And without any mention of Prezzolini, the question that arises from his statement concerning *Pinocchio* and the national character has recently been addressed by a panel of more than sixty contemporary writers, who were asked whether they agreed that this "'puppet-people-Italy,' matured through grief and misfortune, represents one of the truest searches into the national identity."[4]

In response to the recent flood of comparisons between Collodi's puppet and heroes or antiheroes—including Ulysses, Aeneas, Christ, and Dante the wayfarer to Don Quijote, Candide, Renzo (of Manzoni's *Promessi sposi*)—and the scores of interpretations and claims made by specialists whose interests range from the sociopolitical, the psychoanalytical, and the mythopoetic to the philosophical, the theological, and the generically allegorical, one is tempted to cry out a recurrent phrase from Collodi's little book—"Poor Pinocchio!" And yet, if it is hard not to sympathize with

4. *Le "Avventure" ritrovate: Pinocchio e gli scrittori italiani del Novecento*, ed. Renato Bertacchini (Pescia, 1983). Predictably, not even the Tuscans among those replying are in agreement among themselves; and for some writers from southern Italy, where Collodi's tale was late in having any impact and where more local literary or theatrical personages were taken as representative of the national or regional character, the suggestion seems an odd one.

For a sensible discussion of the arbitrary distinctions that critics are wont to make between children's literature and adult literature, see Glauco Cambon's "Pinocchio and the Problem of Children's Literature," *The Great Excluded* (Journal of the Modern Language Association Seminar on Children's Literature) 2 (1973): 50–60.

a recent editor of Collodi's tale who complains that *Pinocchio* has been so "institutionalized" that one can say anything one wishes about it, the fact remains that there is in the story and its telling something that allows for seeing so much in it. Consequently, one can rightfully be attracted to the view of yet another recent editor of the story who observes that anyone undertaking to write a fable for children cannot be sure of where he may be led. While the author may consciously be engaged only in the invention of witty sayings or amusing adventures, the ancient, mysterious spirit of Fable takes possession of him and involves him with the spirits of air and wood, with the images of the Father and the Mother, with adventures of death and rebirth, with the problematics of sin and redemption.[5]

It is not necessary to think that Collodi was consciously writing a fable or an allegory in the manner of Kafka's stories or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in order to feel that his tale reveals something more than first meets the eye. Though the imagery and narrative pattern of *Pinocchio* are suggestive enough to make the tale immediately appealing to children and adults, even those who read it in naïve translations, its telling, despite its apparent simplicity, is at the farthest remove from naïve or primitive art. Collodi frequently and deliberately echoes a wide range of literary and cultural traditions: from the classics of antiquity to fairy tales and romantic operatic libretti, from the most popular forms of folk

5. The two editors referred to are Giovanni Jervis and Pietro Citati; see Jervis's preface to *Le Avventure di Pinocchio* (Turin, 1968), p. xix; and Citati's introductory note to *Le Avventure di Pinocchio* (Milan, 1976), p. vi. Two of the more curious "interpretations" of Collodi's tale include a theological exegesis by the auxiliary bishop of Milan, Giacomo Biffi, *Contro Maestro Ciliegia* (Milan, 1977), and a Steinerian anthroposophical commentary by a physician of Rome, Marcello Carosi, *Pinocchio, un messaggio* (Rome, 1983).

and popular art and literature, including the Aesopian apologue, to the Bible, Dante, Voltaire, and Manzoni. Critics are not mistaken in finding parallels between this most fortunate of Italy's minor classics and works of vaster critical fame and scope. Along with the many literary and cultural allusions, the text also offers a rich catalogue of archetypal patterns and images.[6] For this reason, I have in the present essay cast my critical net wide, even at the risk of catching in it some things that may not seem at one with what appears in other parts of it. This will put the reader in mind of the Green Fisherman, who draws up his net and is elated to find a bounty of various fish; but the net also contains Pinocchio, whom he takes to be a crab. In Italian this suggests an irony depending on a play on words, for "to catch a crab" (*prendere un granchio*) means to make a blunder. With some help from a dog he has befriended, Pinocchio will manage to escape, just in the nick of time, the fate of the fish. So too will Collodi's work continue to defy and elude any single or reductive interpretation. Though this marionette is hewn out of a single piece of wood, he and Collodi's tale are not all of a piece. The fault is in great part Collodi's, but in great part it is a fortunate fault.

Like Charles Perrault, whose sophisticated fairy tales he had translated in a colorful Tuscan-flavored prose that anticipates the style of *Pinocchio*, Collodi frequently

6. The exploration of the archetypal imagery and the symbology in *Pinocchio* has been particularly intense in recent years, although much of it is scattered in the myriad articles dealing with the tale from different perspectives. For example, see Elémire Zolla, "Miti arcaici e mondo domestico nelle *Avventure di Pinocchio*," in *Studi Collodiani*, Fondazione Nazionale Carlo Collodi (Pescia, 1976), pp. 625–29; the volume of essays: *C'era una volta un pezzo di legno: la simbologia di 'Pinocchio'*, Fondazione Nazionale Carlo Collodi (Milan, 1981); Antonio Gagliardi, *Il burattino e il laberinto* (Turin, 1980).

winks at his adult readers, the parents, counting on them as accomplices in a pedagogic strategy aimed at inculcating in children a particular behavior. Whatever else may be said of it, *The Adventures of Pinocchio* is an exemplary family drama that, though told with unique verve and inventiveness, follows the nineteenth-century pattern of children's stories in serving as a vehicle of social instruction and, it would seem, of character building in the name of a productive, middle-class ethic. Indeed, the particular relevance of nineteenth-century children's literature to Collodi's Italy compels us to situate *Pinocchio* in its historical and cultural context.

When Collodi was writing his masterpiece, Italy was in the precarious childhood of its modern existence as a unified country under a single monarch. But far from being the *Italia felix* of the nostalgic mythmakers, its problems were immense and, in the final analysis, beyond the solutions of its ruling classes. Chief among the problems was the need to provide education for the children of both the bourgeoisie and the appallingly poor masses. Of course, even before actual unification in 1860 (1870 if one waits for Venice and Rome to become part of Italy), during the years known as the Risorgimento, when Italians struggled for freedom from the governments of the several independently ruled states of the peninsula, signs of social awareness were evident in periodicals and novels.

At the beginning of this period of heightened social and political consciousness stands Alessandro Manzoni's new kind of historical novel, grounded in a profound ethical realism, *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*, 1827–1840). In choosing a humble working-class couple as his protagonists and in setting them against and within the grave historical events of seventeenth-century Lombardy, Manzoni swept away the elitist preju-

dice of both high literature and history, which had traditionally concentrated attention on the "important" figures. Literary elitism was further jarred by his use of a nonaristocratic lexicon and a nonclassicizing syntax appropriate to his protagonists and to everyday contemporary reality. Moreover, Manzoni, a Lombard, deliberately chose as the language for his novel a Tuscan-based colloquial idiom—that of Florence—a choice predicated on two beliefs. First, Manzoni thought that the Florentine tongue purged of its most extreme dialectal elements was the language most readily accessible to literate Italians in all regions of the peninsula; second, he felt that linguistic unity could be a cohesive force in the cause of national unity, and he hoped his work would give "Italy" a model of a national language.

At the close of this period, during the 1880s and the uncertain aftermath of unification, stand the stark narrative masterpieces of Giovanni Verga, in particular the novel *I Malavoglia* (1881), which depicts the bitter and desperate struggle for survival of a family of fishing folk in a remote Sicilian village. In turning to a reality and to protagonists even humbler than Manzoni's, Verga, a Sicilian, wrote his experimental novel using the lexicon of the "national" language within the syntactical modes of a "dialect" of his native island. Besides being an obligatory touchstone in any discussion of modern Italian narrative, *I Malavoglia*, like *I promessi sposi*, shares important thematic elements with Collodi's tale.

Meanwhile, during the decades spanned by the two novels, educators and writers of children's literature were concerned with creating a unifying social and national consciousness in the young, as reflected in the ever-increasing number of journals for parents and educators and a plethora of books for children. But this aim required them to face the problem of the poor,

which, as Dina Bertoni-Jovine notes, so troubled the conscience of the liberals that it was present in their every act and statement. To find a compensatory comfort for the poor and to instill a sense of social responsibility in the poor and the middle class alike by appealing to the values inherent in moral principles, religion, and civic concern was the basic purpose, even when not overtly stated, of children's literature.[7]

During the heroic years of the Risorgimento, Collodi had fought in the field as a volunteer with republican principles. His checkered literary career throughout those years and until 1875 included work as a journalist, a theater and opera critic, and a writer of literary caricatures, sketches, and some not very successful comedies. Only after the unification did he try his hand at children's literature, first by translating the fairy tales of Charles Perrault and a selection of those of Mme D'Aulnoy and Mme Leprince de Beaumont, then in a series of books of scholastic intent and use that won him a sizable reputation. Of these, *Giannettino* and *Minuzzolo* were written shortly before *Pinocchio*, while others were written during the almost fortuitous and drawn-out writing of his masterpiece. Although they have a story line of sorts and include the figures of live children, these are unequivocally "schoolbooks," with child protagonists who ask questions for the purpose of being instructed. Narrative line is also subordinate to cultural and educational content in the sequels to *Giannettino*, although the narration is not without its lively moments. Surely, these child protagonists, Giannettino above all, have enough of the scamp about them to be precursors of Pinocchio, but so different is *Pinocchio* that it can almost be mistaken for a polemical anti-

7. Bertoni-Jovine, *Storia dell'educazione popolare in Italia* (Bari, 1965), p. 93.

schoolbook, though it was certainly written, primarily, for schoolchildren.

Perhaps Collodi's scholastic books are best exemplified by Edmondo De Amicis's *Cuore*, which appeared in 1886, just three years after *Pinocchio* was completed, and was soon translated into English as *A Boy's Heart*. *Cuore* and *Pinocchio* remain the most popular books that Italy has produced for children. Indeed, although *Cuore* has gone into eclipse in recent decades, for the first fifty years after its publication it enjoyed a success far greater than that of Collodi's little classic. While this programmatically scholastic, character-building text seems nothing other than a book for children, its stunning international editorial success suggests that adult readers found in it a gratifying presentation of those middle-class values and ideals that transcend nationalistic antagonisms.

Cuore itself is not an instructional text of the traditional kind, yet it is so much a schoolbook that its main setting is an elementary school classroom and its main character a third-grader whose diary records the events of the school year, including the monthly edifying stories dictated by a schoolteacher who is a champion of interclass harmony. Intended to illustrate the idea that heroism, patriotism, sacrifice, and love of family know neither age nor social barriers, the stories take for their protagonists children from Italy's various regions and classes. In this way, the privileged child of the bourgeoisie can learn from the child belonging to the less-fortunate economic strata. De Amicis would like the middle class to be "better," but he is careful not to discredit it. *Cuore*'s ultimate purpose is to invite the inhabitants of Italy's distinctly different regions to a national and fraternal solidarity.

Moreover, the prevailing spirit in *Cuore* is not idyllic; rather, like *Pinocchio*, it depicts an encounter with con-

temporary reality that is dramatic and even traumatic, a feature that sets both books apart from most of the preceding tradition of Italian children's literature, in which painful encounters with reality tended to be underplayed or avoided. In making this important point, Alberto Asor Rosa notes that such traumatic encounters are inherent in any true story of initiation and character development.[8] But for all that, the enormous misery of so much of Italy's population is portrayed sentimentally by De Amicis. Poverty never appears as an unmitigable condition in his pages, where the middle-class gentry stands ready to assist the needy by way of charity and good works. The farthest De Amicis goes is to try to awaken in middle-class children an awareness of the unhappy condition in which the poor live. To see how limited his vision is, one need only read the page on which Enrico's mother explains to him that starving beggars prefer to receive alms from children rather than from grown-ups because then they do not feel humiliated. Besides, she says, it is good to give the destitute something, because then they bless us, which is bound to stir in us a feeling of meltingly sweet gratitude.

Although not all the boys in *Cuore*'s classroom are Good Good Boys, only one, Franti, represents a serious threat and offense to their fierce virtue. Franti, who derides all that is good, noble, and pathetic, shoots paper arrows at the timid substitute teacher, bullies his smaller classmates, steals when he can, lies with a bold face, laughs at disabled soldiers or at the motionless form of a worker who has fallen from the fifth floor, and is even able, alas, to smirk at the schoolmaster's moving account of the funeral of Vittorio Emanuele II, the first monarch of a unified Italy. As the type of the Bad Bad Boy who will be the death, quite literally, of his mother,

8. Asor Rosa, "La Cultura," in *Storia d'Italia* (Turin, 1975), 4:926.

he is appropriately labeled *infame* (infamous) and *malvagio* (wicked), a foil to the chorus of Good Good Boys and a reminder to them of the sort of wicked person who is best dealt with by being detested and removed from society. *Pinocchio* has its own type of Bad Bad Boy in the figure of Lampwick; and Pinocchio himself—a scamp but not a reprobate—could be dubbed a Good Bad Boy.[9] But how much more true to life they both are drawn. And although both didactic tales advocate post-Risorgimento ideals of honesty, family, and the work ethic, all under a paternalistic cloak, in *Pinocchio*, unlike *Cuore*, these values are not connected with God and fervent patriotism; nor does Collodi make any appeal, sentimental or otherwise, to a solidarity of the classes. And although he will bring his willful puppet to heel, he does not spare adult society. Thus, while *Cuore* now strikes us as outdated, *Pinocchio* has never seemed more vital.

The irony of Collodi's Good Bad Boy is that even from the author's somewhat ambiguous point of view, Pinocchio's serious shortcoming is his effort to run away from adulthood, a social and psychological status that his apparently prepubescent age alone in no way barred him from attaining. The lateness in general of the concept of "childhood" in the European consciousness has been asserted by Philippe Ariès: "In the Middle Ages, at the beginning of modern times, *and for a long time after that in the lower class*, children were mixed with adults as soon as they were considered capable of doing without their mothers or nannies, not long after a tardy weaning (in other words, at about the age of seven). They immediately went straight into the great community of man, sharing in the work and play of their

9. I borrow the two expressions from Leslie Fiedler's 1955 essay "An Eye to Innocence: Some Notes on the Role of the Child in Literature," in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler* (New York, 1971), 1:471–511.

companions, old and young alike." One of the earliest critics to appreciate the importance of *Pinocchio* was Paul Hazard, who noted that the superiority of writers from the North in children's literature results from their having what Latins lack—"a certain feeling for childhood, for childhood understood as a fortunate island where happiness must be protected, like an independent republic living according to its own laws, like a caste with glorious privileges. The Latins begin to relax, to breathe, really to live only when they have reached man's estate. Before that they are merely growing, a process that the Latin children themselves finish gladly. . . . For the Latins, children have never been anything but future men."[10]

In nineteenth-century Italy, thus, the child—the child of the poor, at any rate—was not perceived as belonging to a world inviolably apart from the world of grown-ups. Collodi, while not himself a member of the most destitute classes, chose a child of poverty as his protagonist, and he would have the child be a diminutive adult or an adult-in-the-making. Though born of a poor family, Collodi had the rare advantage of an education, supported first by the Marquis Lorenzo Ginori, in whose employ his father was a hard-working cook, and later by a maternal uncle. He seems to have chafed considerably throughout his school years, revealing a desire for freedom and an independence of spirit that

10. The Ariès quote is from *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, 1962), p. 411 (my emphasis). Hazard is quoted from *Books, Children, and Men*, trans. Marguerite Mitchell (Boston, 1960), pp. 109–10; *Les Livres, les enfants et les hommes* (Paris, 1932). Luigi Volpicelli qualifies Hazard's statement by noting that the precocious candidacy for adulthood of children from the southern European lands derives from a profoundly realistic and dolorous sense of life and that misery and poverty dictate the earliest possible emergence from the dangerous inferiority of childhood; see *La verità su Pinocchio* (Rome, 1954), p. 54.

marked his character ever after. This may explain some of the nostalgia for childhood that the adult reader senses in *Pinocchio*, despite the impression the story often gives that there is no such thing as the innocence of childhood, that children have no rights, only duties summed up under the word *obedience*.[11]

The child protagonists of Collodi's other books—the scholastic texts—are close cousins of the virtuous schoolchildren of De Amicis's *Cuore*, distinguished mostly by the unruliness they share with Pinocchio, although Collodi's treatment of their misbehavior is somewhat forced or mechanical. The puppet's unruliness, in contrast, seems so natural and so pronounced a trait that it serves as the basis for a much more dramatic encounter with the real world—an uncompromisingly egotistical world in which kindness is the exception, not to be banked on outside the formulaic "One good turn deserves another." But this world's essential motto, which Collodi seeks to inculcate in his protagonist and little readers through an ambiguously sadistic admixture of ironic indulgence and severe pedagogical moralism, is the unblushingly un-Christian piece of wisdom: "God helps those who help themselves."

Seen in its historical context, the latter proverb is not merely a cynical slogan justifying the consciences of the greedy and the successful, be they bourgeois or peasant. Rather it is the root exhortation found in popular educational literature of the time—an urgent call to all Ital-

11. As a pedagogue, Collodi is not among the "tenderminded," in the phrase of James Hillman, that is, those "who take their lead from Rousseau, Froebel and the Romantics and their vision from 'childlikeness.'" Rather Collodi is among the toughminded, those "who follow a pattern more Classical, more Medieval, seeing in the child a miniature adult whose waxlike impressionable 'childishness' requires moulding by *Bildung*." See Hillman's absorbing study "Abandoning the Child," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* (1971), p. 397.

ians to better themselves and, thereby, their "nation." In keeping with this hortative proverb, the same literature is replete with appeals to all classes to send their children to school. In this sense above all *Cuore* was so suited to its times. De Amicis propagandized the idea of school as having a great threefold mission—social, political, affective—and therefore as being the place, along with the home, where Italians were to be formed. His optimistic representation of school, complemented by the interwoven story of an equally idealized bourgeois family home, made for his book's huge success. Whatever minor dramas may occur in either setting, the reassuring presence of a benevolent schoolmaster or father, neither of whom has any doubts about what is right and both of whom are always ready with inspiring words, makes both institutions—school and home—secure and sheltered sanctuaries. Surely, one of the most remarkable pages of European nineteenth-century oratory is the letter Enrico's father writes to him, encouraging him to overcome any resistance he might feel about going to school. De Amicis evokes awesome images of the masses of humanity in all stations of life from Italy to the farthest recesses of the world as single individuals and as armies marching to the same goal—the schoolhouse, hailed as the bulwark of civilization, the hope and the glory of the world. Enrico is "a little soldier of the immense army"; his weapons are his books, his squadron is his class, and his battlefield is the whole world.[12]

The vision inspiring De Amicis's purple passage is alien to *Pinocchio*, whose protagonist acquires the most important part of his education "on the road," or so it seems. *Pinocchio*, at any rate, is neither a school story

12. *Cuore* should be read in Luciano Tamburini's excellently annotated edition (Turin, 1974). For the exhortation letter, see pp. 27–29.