

Articoli

«Rodari the educationist» today, and the rights of the child

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Abstract. The purpose of this contribution is to explore the educationist thinking of children's writer Gianni Rodari and assess its relevance to today, approaching the centenary of his birth (1920), and with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) now in its thirtieth year. The question is whether, and how, the ideas of Rodari the educationist and his vision of what a good educationist might be — as clearly stated and analyzed by Franco Cambi in *Rodari pedagogista* (1990) — have been embraced and promoted.

Keywords. Culture of childhood – education – fantasy-creativity – Rights of the Child – Rodari

Lettera ai bambini

È difficile fare
le cose difficili:
parlare al sordo
mostrare la rosa al cieco.
Bambini, imparate
a fare le cose difficili:
dare la mano al cieco,
cantare per il sordo,
liberare gli schiavi
che si credono liberi¹

1. Why revisit Rodari now?

Why revisit Rodari now? Not only to celebrate the centenary of his birth (23 October 1920), but because his principles, his writings and teaching actions, his educational themes for adults and his appeal to the young as a “children’s writer” seem to be more topical than ever, given the need to effect a change of direction for the sake of a childhood

¹ G. Rodari, *Parole per giocare*, in «Biblioteca di lavoro. Periodico a cura del Gruppo sperimentale coordinato da Mario Lodi», VIII, 101-102, 1 September-10 October 1979, p. 31.

which, as observed in many quarters, appears increasingly violated², destined to vanish, robbed of its becoming, of its future. And this, as we celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC - 1989), which demonstrates how, beyond the hot air and promises, there are still a great many actions that must be taken in order to provide every child with real opportunities for self-fulfilment.

In the quest to sustain growth with respect throughout childhood, Rodari is therefore a true ally, having emerged as a writer able to revolutionize the relationship between author and child³, but also — through his poetry and story-telling — ready to expose our inattention to the rights of every individual child: a person and a citizen, active and involved. And indeed he addresses topics that in his time were deemed extraneous to childhood: participation, listening, freedom, peace, war and death. This he did without resorting to moralisms, rhetoric and populism. He shows how children can be extremely able and skilled, if given the conditions in which to flourish. What Rodari does is to liberate the child in the truest sense, making the most of his readers' imagination and creativity to help them secure their freedom, in a spirit of *lifelong education*, given that the imagination is a component indispensable to the process of life fulfilment, not only for the young but for adults too, in different settings and situations.

And children have the right to be taught creativity not only at school, but in the home and in society as well. Rodari thus makes the case for what would become the promotion of non-formal and informal learning, precursor to the modern concept of *lifewide education*, recognizing the importance of environments that reach beyond the schoolroom, to discover *Una scuola grande come il mondo*:

C'è una scuola grande come il mondo.

Ci insegnano maestri, professori,
avvocati, muratori,
televisioni, giornali,
cartelli stradali,
il sole, i temporali, le stelle.

Ci sono lezioni facili
e lezioni difficili,
brutte, belle e così così.

Ci si impara a parlare, a giocare,
a dormire, svegliarsi,
a voler bene e perfino
ad arrabbiarsi.

Ci sono esami tutti i momenti,
ma non ci sono ripetenti:
nessuno può fermarsi a dieci anni,

² M. Contini, "Non" c'era una volta l'infanzia. E oggi?, in M. Contini, S. Demozzi (edited by), *Corpi bambini. Sprechi di infanzie*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2016, pp. 15-45.

³ M. Argilli, in M. Argilli ... [et al.], *Dire, fare, giocare con Gianni Rodari. Luoghi, personaggi, animali, invenzioni della fantasia dei bambini*, Florence, Fatatrac, 1990, p. 4.

a quindici, a venti,
e riposare un pochino.

Di imparare non si finisce mai,
e quel che non si sa
è sempre più importante
di quel che si sa già.

Questa scuola è il mondo intero
quanto è grosso:
apri gli occhi e anche tu sarai promosso⁴.

This vision led Rodari, by the way, to denounce the school institution when it claimed to be the sole source of learning, hence running the risk that it would become all-encompassing and self-referential⁵, as underscored on several occasions by Frabboni and Pinto Minerva, who indeed shared Rodari's concerns and recorded what he had to say on the question in *Il giornale dei genitori*⁶:

Whatever children learn in school, it is but the hundredth part of what they learn from their parents, relatives and friends, from the physical and social environment in which they grow up, from the streets, from the television, from games, from objects, from everything and everyone. They learn by absorbing words and notions, images and values: not passively, but rather, always reacting with the force of their personality, assimilating what is new into patterns that went before, and changing these patterns continuously. An intense activity, without pause or let-up, about which in truth we do not even know very much on the practical level, but see only its impact on ideas and customs we are not especially prepared to renew. [...] A child, every child, should be accepted as a new event, with which the world starts again from the beginning each time. This is the main thing that manuals on home education should explain to parents, and that treatises on pedagogy and education should convey to teachers⁷.

Whilst in the article mentioned, significantly entitled *Dalla parte del bambino*, Rodari focuses in particular on the school environment, he nonetheless sets out his general vision of childhood as having rights, based on the consideration of children as persons and citizens⁸, capable of and skilled at identifying their needs and their original expectations, living life and experiencing interaction in different social situations⁹.

⁴ G. Rodari, *Il libro degli errori*, Turin, Einaudi, 1997, pp. 161-162.

⁵ G. Leo (edited by), *La scuola italiana sulle orme di Gianni Rodari*, Siano, Centro Studi Fantasilandia, 2001.

⁶ G. Rodari, *Dalla parte del bambino*, in «Il giornale dei genitori», n. 7, 1976, in G. Rodari, *Scuola di fantasia*, (edited by C. De Luca), Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1992, pp. 59-60.

⁷ G. Rodari quoted in F. Frabboni, F. Pinto Minerva, *Manuale di pedagogia e didattica*, Rome-Bari, GLF Laterza, 2013, p. 259.

⁸ A.C. Moro, *Il bambino è un cittadino*, Milan, Mursia, 1991.

⁹ M. Argilli, *Da Rodari oltre Rodari*, in C. De Luca (edited by), *Se la fantasia cavalca con la ragione. Prolungamenti degli itinerari suggeriti dall'opera di Gianni Rodari*, Bergamo, Juvenilia, 1983, pp.146-154.

2. Rodari and the rights of children

Childhood presents an active energy of imagination and creativity such that the rights due to minors cannot be defined once and for all, since it is they themselves who are tasked with renewing these rights, by living them in person:

The 'rights of the child', beyond primary and elementary rights (the right to a home, childhood, play, schooling) cannot be set in stone: it must be accepted that children themselves will be the ones who assert and delineate their rights, giving them substance and pertinence [...] Parents and teachers can be of use to a child only if prepared to renew themselves continuously, to adapt to the youngster's growth, to question their own cultural and technical knowledge, and the view they have of the world¹⁰.

The message sent by Rodari appears revolutionary because, in the most natural of ways, attention is shifted from the teaching action of the adult directed at the child, and the child is made the actor, promoting an "advanced active teaching" model¹¹, making the most of the ability and maturity the child possesses.

This same approach seems also to reflect the methodological process of care and concern for the child discernible in the transition from the *UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child* of 1959 to the *Convention* of 1989, in particular by way of articles 12 and 13, regarding the right of minors to be heard and to enjoy freedom of expression and participation, and article 14:

Art. 12: «States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child». Art. 13: «The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice». Art. 14: «States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion».

Thus, the 1989 document develops a perspective that sees childhood becoming less an object of protection, as still comes across to an extent in the *Declaration* of 1959, and more a subject of protection and participation, acknowledging the methods, times and spaces for growth necessary to development, and avoiding the risk that early lives should be misapprehended or rushed into adulthood. Recognizing the rights of children in a spirit of constant review, and on the basis of what children themselves demand, seems to be a cardinal requirement, as this equates to respecting the dignity of their status as persons, hence *their right to have rights*. Possessing and exercising rights means being recognized and having a voice, hence emerging as childhood in the true sense of the definition.

Rights are important because those who possess them can take significant actions on the political front. Those who have rights are able to take decisions. They are persons who can negotiate with others, alter relations or decisions, change convictions or social constructs. It is clear by now that even the youngest among us can do this.[...] As free agents, holders of rights can

¹⁰ G. Rodari, *Scuola di fantasia*, quote, p. 60.

¹¹ F. Cambi, *Rodari pedagoga*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1990, p. 86.

participate; they can build their own life by themselves, instead of entrusting it to someone else. Participation is a fundamental human right, and it allows us to claim other rights. This obviously becomes a more realistic possibility in situations where there is freedom of speech, so that received opinions (for example concerning children and what they are able and not able to accomplish) can be put to the test; likewise where there is freedom of association, so that minds can be nurtured; and again, where there is freedom of information. These three freedoms are commonly denied to children¹².

Around forty years ago, Rodari had already identified the problem of childhood undergoing adultization before time, of its life space being taken away, and consequently its rights as well. With this in mind, among the many educational issues addressed by Rodari still having pertinence today, it is not our intention to dwell here specifically on that of the child-school relationship and the right to education, but rather on the more general question relating to the “anthropological” recognition of childhood, with the aim of taking cues from his thinking and his action to change the somewhat unsatisfactory methods employed currently in looking after the young.

The teaching commitment he expects of adults, to support the growth of the child recognized as a free and independent person, is considerable and at the same time eschews any kind of paternalistic and spontaneous approach, as he himself states.

Anyone relying on spontaneity does not have the child’s best interests at heart: leave the child to its own devices, wherever that may lead. Focusing on the child is different. It calls for attention, spirit of service, a constant commitment to being all the things the young person has need of. The companion of growth, play and discovery. The inspirer, the expert, the power that procures children the tools they need. The adult who spurs children on, reveals new horizons and new directions of movement. We are the steps of the stairway the child has to climb. There is nothing mystical in all this. Indeed we are those steps even when unaware of the fact – which means that, as steps, we are uneven, precarious and dangerous¹³.

Thus it happens that the growth of the child, and the emergence of creativity, occurs through a non-repressive kind of education, whereas education provided in the home, at school, likewise in society, can indeed be repressive, and in ways that are often insidious. Rodari therefore suggests that children should be given the conditions in which to experiment their true role as researcher, actor and producer, evaluating each successive action by trial and error. In this way, a pedagogy of error is constructed, incorporating amusement as an element in dialogue with commitment.

Is it worth it, that children should learn with tears what they can learn with laughter?

If we were to collect the tears shed across the five continents as a result of spelling mistakes, we should have a waterfall big enough to produce hydroelectric power. As a source of energy however, it would be too costly in my view. Errors are necessary, useful as bread is useful, and often attractive too: like the Tower of Pisa for example¹⁴.

¹² M. Freeman, *Perché resta importante prendere sul serio i diritti dei bambini*, in V. Belotti and R. Ruggiero (edited by), *Vent’anni d’infanzia: retorica e diritti dei bambini dopo la convenzione dell’ottantanove*, Milan, Guerini, 2008, p. 73.

¹³ G. Rodari, *Scuola di fantasia*, quote, p. 61.

¹⁴ G. Rodari, *Il libro degli errori*, Turin, Einaudi, 1997, p. 7.

The same message is conveyed in his poems:

Le storie nuove

Ho conosciuto un tale
di San Donà di Piave
che voleva raccontare
la storia di... BIANCANAVE.

Cacciato con vergogna
scappò fino a Terontola
e cominciò a narrare
la storia di... CENERONTOLA.

Di là fuggì in Sardegna
si fermò a Bordigali
e cominciò la storia
del... MATTO CON GLI STIVALI.

Girò tutta l'Italia,
la Francia e l'Ungheria
sempre a sbagliare storie
e a farsi cacciar via.

E ancora gira e spera
ancora di trovare
qualcuno che abbia voglia
di starlo ad ascoltare,

qualcuno che capisca
che sbagliando, per prova,
con una storia vecchia
si può fare una storia nuova¹⁵.

Rodari therefore advocates interaction with children by stimulating the imagination, since this is the path he sees as providing a genuine and effective answer for their right to grow.

By using stories and those fantastic methods that produce them, we help children to enter reality through the window instead of through the door. It is more fun. Therefore, it is more useful. [...] There can be no doubt that, above all and more than anything else, they want to grow. We recognize their right to grow, in fact, only with words. Each time they take us at our word, we risk our entire authority if we hinder them from growing¹⁶.

In this educational process, the adult is expected

¹⁵ G. Rodari, *Filastrocche in cielo e in terra*, Turin, Einaudi, 1972, p. 143.

¹⁶ G. Rodari, *The Grammar of Fantasy. An Introduction to the Art of Inventing Stories*, New York, Teacher & Writers Collaborative, 1996, pp. 20-21.

always to respect the child within the child: never to expose children abruptly and without preparation to feelings and discoveries that could upset the delicate balance of their equilibrium; never to use the superiority of our adulthood inappropriately, as a means of forcing the young to accept our ideas, our attitudes, or — let us call them by name — our passions¹⁷.

But when he wrote down these thoughts in 1966, Rodari had already sensed the degradation of a society with people ‘breathing an air that sends them to sleep’, looking for compromise, and seeking to carve out an individualistic niche in which to pass the time. Accordingly, he considers that respect for the young also involves teaching them the ‘right kind of passion’, associated with the ability to ‘dream big’, change for the better; moreover, not always and in any event to do as everyone else does. It is therefore equally important that educators avoid teaching resigned acceptance; indeed their duty consists in helping youngsters «not only to speak the truth but to be ‘passionate’ about the truth», making them not simply «attentive witnesses, but participants in the things of this world».

Children need those things that were once called ‘things bigger than they are’ — they need to take part in ‘real things’. They need to measure their strength on a broader scale than that offered by the school and the family. They need to conceive ideals and to learn to love them, above all else. Whatever we do to encourage them in this direction is right: whatever we do to hold them back is wrong¹⁸.

In today’s educational crisis, where the recurring loss of childhood is accompanied by a regression of educational responsibility on the part of adults, and thus restricts the entitlement of the young to cultivate a prospect and a hope for the future, the words of Rodari seem decidedly topical. He pursues his ideal of social improvement along a path of humanization that begins with childhood, not so much presenting child personalities to be taken by way of example, but encouraging us to enter and understand their world, the way they are and the way they do things. This he does with words, stories, listening and dialogue.

Just as Loris Malaguzzi had asserted, in *being with children* employing the medium of words, Rodari sets in motion a provocative and reforming action that is yet to be fully accomplished, because still today the child is *infans*, without the ability to speak, someone who must be led in toto to assume, not least, conformist and consumeristic models of behaviour. In the eyes of Rodari, by contrast, the child is seen as having rights to

grow, play, understand, enter the world of the future and *think big* [...] And we do not know how many other writers might know, like him, how to observe, look deep into the behaviours and the explicit and implicit thoughts of children and record them in such a sensitive and remarkable manner: making them the subject of long and ceaseless reflection; reusing them later in fairy tales and stories, magazine and newspaper articles. An exact and meticulous plan whereby he gave back to children what he had borrowed from them¹⁹.

¹⁷ G. Rodari, *Scuola di fantasia*, quote, p. 5.

¹⁸ Ivi, pp. 8-10.

¹⁹ L. Malaguzzi, *Che posto c’è per Rodari?*, in C. De Luca (edited by), *Se la fantasia cavalca con la ragione. Prolungamenti degli itinerari suggeriti dall’opera di Gianni Rodari*, Bergamo, Juvenilia, 1983, pp. 65-67.

3. The right to creative imagination

Respect for the child leads Rodari to apply himself, in pursuit of his development, using the tools most commonly associated with minors, their peculiarities, including play and imagination. These are placed at the service of all humankind, and always in a context of *lifelong education*.

The child is a personality identifiable as complete and open in all directions, before becoming adapted to society through the process of socialization and education we bring to bear, a process that focuses only on the qualities needed for this adaptation and branding as unsuitable any child who does not commit to this one line of action and does not accept the idea of being made for a world that wants only a part of him, or her, rather than everything he or she could be²⁰. And this is the same unhappiness felt by the great majority of adults who are called on in life to employ only a part of the make-up that could give expression to their personality because the other part, creativity, is of no use for the purposes of production²⁰.

Guided by his democratic principle of respect for all human beings — and in particular for the ‘common man’ — with their talents, their points of excellence, Rodari is led to set his sights on the provision of a material and cultural environment, not only of schooling, such as will stimulate individuals, be they children or adults, and give them the chance of liberation; of inventively and imaginatively planning the life course they believe best suited to their way of being; of cultivating creativity.

‘Creativity’ is synonymous with ‘divergent thought’, that is, is thinking that is capable of continually breaking the schemes of experience. A mind that is always at work is creative, a mind always asks questions, discovers problems where others find satisfactory answers. It is a mind that prefers fluid situations where others only sense danger, a mind that is capable of making autonomous and independent judgments (also independent from the father, the professor and the society), that rejects everything that is codified, reshapes objects and concepts without letting itself be hindered by conformist attitudes. All these qualities are manifested in the creative process. And this process – it should be stressed – has a playful character. Always²¹.

It is a question of potential, of possibilities that are available to every individual, as already intimated, and these must therefore be uncovered and cultivated in every child with even greater care:

The creative function of the imagination belongs to common people, scientists, and technicians. It is just as essential for scientific discoveries as it is for generating works of art. It is absolutely a necessary condition for daily life.[...] But exactly because the imagination constructs only with materials from real life (and therefore the adult can construct to a much greater extent) it is necessary that children be able to grow up in an environment rich in impulses and stimuli to nurture their imaginations, and to apply the imagination to appropriate tasks that reinforce its structures and expand its horizons²².

²⁰ G. Rodari, *Scuola di fantasia*, quote, p. 74.

²¹ G. Rodari, *The Grammar of Fantasy*, quote, p. 114.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 112-113.

The imagination of a child is fuelled by uninhibited use of the possibilities offered by language, indeed by the very stuff of fairy tales, which

do not seem to be useful, just like poetry and music, like theater and sports. They help the complete human being. If a society based on the myth of productivity (and on the reality of profit) needs only half human beings – loyal executors, busy imitators, and docile instruments without a will of their own – that means there is something wrong with this society and it needs to be changed. To change it, creative human beings are needed, people who know how to use their imaginations²³.

And so, Rodari defines an image of childhood that

stands essentially at the crossroads between creativity and commitment, between ‘fantasy’ and emancipation, and offers us a dialectical model with which to interpret the innermost depths of the childhood spirit, thereby providing pedagogy and anthropology with a tool that helps to understand man ‘per se’ — his initial and fundamental ‘se’ (since every man was once, and therefore will always be, a little boy as well) — and likewise his innate (though not immediately given) possibilities²⁴.

4. The right to play and the right to be, in the writings of Rodari

This approach of representing childhood dynamically, through interaction and dialogue with adults, means that Rodari can be identified as a children’s writer *sui generis*. His first writings for children appeared in a newspaper that was socially committed and working class oriented, as he found himself addressing issues from which he did not exclude children and their keen curiosity. Accordingly, it can be said that he was writing for children, or more exactly, in dialogue with children.

This business of writing became more and more a question of writing amongst children, with children, playing with them, mingling the images of my fantasy with the images of their fantasy [...] Mastering a way of writing, for children, directly engaged with their changeable world [...] enabled me to change and revise my opinions on children, on school, on the world, in short to keep on reappraising my studies, to let myself be re-educated continually by children²⁵.

Which means truly giving a voice to children, turning them into citizens and, at the same time, learning from them and respecting their identity²⁶. Rodari believes that the interpretation of childhood must be ‘continually updated’, expressing a pedagogical paradigm that we have acquired today not without difficulty — albeit more theoretically than factually — namely that there are

²³ Ivi, p. 113.

²⁴ F. Cambi, *Collodi, De Amicis, Rodari: tre immagini d’infanzia*, Bari, Dedalo, 1985, p. 126.

²⁵ G. Rodari, *Scuola di fantasia*, quote, p. 177.

²⁶ As expressed in article 8 of the actual CRC, which envisages a commitment «to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference».

many children, and many ways and methods of fostering their growth. Childhood must be understood in its ecology, its multiple life settings, the situations in which children find themselves and participate. In effect, the new knowledge on childhood, emerging from the latest research, places the child in an environment: no longer and not only the family, but a plurality of milieux and institutions²⁷.

It is in this scenario that the child abides, not as a specimen to be kept separate and shut away from the rest of the adult world, or subjected to sector-specific 'analysis' conducted 'in vitro', through the eyes of single disciplines such as pedagogy, psychology and psychoanalysis. Rather, what is needed is a holistic view of the child, as Rodari himself had well understood: «At least I learned one thing. If one has something to do with children and wants to understand what they are doing and what they say, pedagogy is not sufficient, and psychology is not able fully to represent all their expressions and actions»²⁸. Thus, it is Rodari himself who warns against trusting in a charter of rights for children that might come across as legislative window dressing or an engaging slogan: attractive, but unable to connect permanently and on a daily basis with the child as a living being:

Last to arrive, we also have the UN, first publishing a charter for the rights of the child, then organizing the International Year of the Child. Personally, I believe that children are entitled not just to one year of attentions, problems, shows and exhibitions, but to permanent attention that grows day by day, year by year, in every country. So as I see it, every year is the year of the child, and yes, I welcome the year of children²⁹.

Rodari appreciated the significance of children's rights precisely by combining a notion of *provision* and *protection* with that of *participation*:

Meeting with boys and girls as persons worthy of being individuals has everything to do with the dimension of participation, with that complex of rights consisting, first and foremost, in relational rights (*participation*): the right to be heard and the right to autonomy. Or if we want to flip the adult point of view: that which I, a child, would like to do; that which I, a child, am capable of doing³⁰.

To Rodari, children and adults are of equal value. He draws from the one generation and the other and creates a linguistic universe that reflects his aspiration to see a political, social and educational change in which human, social and educational relations appear different, that is to say improved, humanized. And indeed his writing bears witness to this:

Rodari is a children's author, and perhaps it is a role he chose precisely because, writing about children and for children, it was easier for him to write about and speak the truth for everyone. It is as if the world of children were an allegory — not an ideal however, but a practical allegory, extremely human and concrete — for the world of grown-ups, and at the same time a bid on

²⁷ A. Bondioli, *Bambini, infanzia, educazione*, in «Pedagogia oggi», XVI, 2, 2018, p. 18.

²⁸ G. Rodari, *The Grammar of Fantasy*, quote, p. 119.

²⁹ G. Rodari, *Scuola di fantasia*, quote, p. 178.

³⁰ E. Macinai, *Infanzia, diritti fondamentali, educazione*, «Pedagogia oggi», XVI, 2, 2018, p. 24.

his part to strip away myth and rhetoric, in pursuit of a truth: a truth that the ingenuity and the imagination of little ones, linked to their natural good sense, enable us to see more clearly than is possible when relying on the words of scientists, intellectuals and politicians³¹.

This is not the place to engage in any argument as to where Rodari might stand in the panorama of Italian literature. The point to be made here is that by way of writing, not least, be it for or with children, one can perceive the emergence of an approach to childhood education that uses the appropriate tools, able to build intergenerational relationships marked by mutual respect. Indeed Rodari considers that children are serious-minded people and must be taken seriously, as likewise their expressions of playfulness, creativity and imagination must be taken seriously. Play, especially in the writings of Rodari, is

the key that opens the door beyond which there is a possible common world for the adult and the child [...]. Rodari was one of those who play with children and, as far as he was able, taught them to play using language and its elements as playthings and the imagination as a playground. [...] Playing and joking, there is common ground on which child and adult can step out together, without adults having to forgo the function and responsibilities of their seniority, and without children having to give up their 'natural' child-like characteristics: no childish behaviour by grown-ups, and no apery of adulthood by children³².

Likewise in this instance, how can one not discern an appeal to certain fundamental articles of the CRC, first and foremost article 31?

Art. 31: States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

Rodari looks to engage all children and every single child, so that he can learn the original points of view held by them all. This is the key to interpreting the educational message of emancipation that emerges from his poems and his stories, which are not irrelevant to the world and to the times, indeed they come across as provocative precisely because they succeed in denouncing situations and scenarios that undermine freedom, independence and respect for the individual, especially children, effectively calling for political and social change. As noted by Lucio Lombardo Radice, perhaps the Rodari presented in textbook anthologies is too often dulcified, homogenized and dumbed down, given a goody-goody and sermonizing flavour that was never the author's intention³³.

And whilst it must be said that in this revolutionary vision of childhood there is an air of 'prudishness' tending to exclude any mention of the body in terms of its physi-

³¹ A. Asor Rosa, *Gianni Rodari e le provocazioni della fantasia*, in M. Argilli, C. De Luca and L. Del Cornò (edited by), *Le provocazioni della fantasia. Gianni Rodari scrittore e educatore*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1993, p. 20.

³² G. Bini, *Fantasia e ragione*, in F. Ghilardi (edited by), *Il favoloso Gianni*, Florence, Nuova Guaraldi editrice, 1982, pp. 161-162.

³³ L. Lombardo Radice, *Introduzione*, in F. Ghilardi (edited by), *Il favoloso Gianni*, quote, p. 5.

cality, its connotation of gender³⁴ – retrieved only in part in *The Grammar of Fantasy* – it should be emphasized on the other hand that there are explicit references aplenty to the visibility of childhood in other areas, including that of play and playfulness, which affords a powerful device and tool for human development.

5. Playfulness of words and human development

The educational potential of playfulness is expressed by Rodari in the poetry of the word which, especially in his later work, establishes a “brain game” in which he plays with words to train the mind with allusions to the world of reality, although his focus is primarily on the logical-cognitive structures of thought. Testament to this idea is the novel *C’era due volte il barone Lamberto*, which Rodari conceived, not least as he reveals in the presentation, in the course of his numerous encounters with schoolchildren. «On each occasion I received critiques, suggestions, proposals. Each time, I enriched the story with new episodes, discovered new meanings, even finding new (fantastical) problems to solve»³⁵. The methodology adopted by Rodari reflects the level of participation and expression he hoped for from minors, making the point that they should see themselves not as passive performers and readers, but in a participatory and free creative role. Among the numerous interpretations elicited by the tale — «there are allusions in the story to questions of our world and of our time: some exposed, some hidden, buried deep under the words. Anyone willing to dig a little will find them without too much trouble, since digging around under words is much less tiring than tunnelling through mountains, or digging the soil. Anyone not interested in hidden meanings is free to ignore them and will miss nothing; as I see it, the story has its substance entirely in the visible words and in their associations. And so, enjoy»³⁶ — what undoubtedly emerges is the principle of writing as a process capable of freeing the mind, developing creativity, enabling individuals everywhere to problematize and build their own truth. «Always think with your head. [...] Never be frightened by the word»³⁷. But the story of Baron Lamberto is also a metaphor on the ages of life, on the chance to turn back the years and face the age of childhood and adolescence with freedom, with the ability to fantasize, at the same time conducting a sort of apprenticeship of the world. It allows us once again to appreciate the value of play and amusement as elements motivating a flexible construction of the childhood life plan, with its expectation of utopia.

And even when Rodari constructs a more refined and complicated game, apparently leaving little room for the spontaneous and juvenile play of the children, he seems to do so purposely, precisely to combat the very disappearance of childhood, «its expiry as an age separate from that of adulthood, characterized by a slow and filtered apprenticeship of the world and of culture, and by a maturing of its most natural and pure abilities, typically imagination, which is at once a process of learning and deforming the real, or at all events, exercising control over reality with a view to securing a satisfaction of basic childhood needs»³⁸.

³⁴ F. Cambi, *Rodari pedagogista*, quote, p. 64.

³⁵ G. Rodari, *C’era due volte il barone Lamberto ovvero I misteri dell’isola di San Giulio*, Turin, Einaudi, 1979, p. V.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. VI.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

³⁸ F. Cambi, *Rodari pedagogista*, quote, p. 69.

6. The words of Rodari in lifelong education

It has become a familiar refrain: following the 20th century, the century of childhood, during which this part of life was studied, learned about and categorized³⁹, childhood is again being eliminated; children are cosseted, doted on, regarded apparently as being at the heart of the educational process, but they are being moulded to fit the anthropological-cultural model advocated by adults; their genuine nature is ignored, as it could turn out ultimately to be in conflict with existing social models. In effect, people do not know how to listen to children, because in a frenetic and calculating society like that of today, listening to and interacting with a child equates to a waste of time; consequently, the child falls gradually into the habit of saying nothing, and becomes that passive or 'difficult' individual we see in so many young people nowadays.

Rodari, by contrast, addressing the subject in an educational reflection of Marxist origin, sets forth a dialectical image of childhood, which he manages to outline in its different dimensions and keep continually 'updated', as it unites the specific readings and dimensions of childhood — linguistic, psychological, philosophical, social — and places them in dialogue with the authentic child so that he can be acknowledged and liberated, establishing a constructive and enriching relationship both for the adult and for the minor. Even his *Manuale del pioniere* of 1951, which earned him the opprobrium of the Catholic world — albeit adopting a still linguistically and pedagogically unrefined register, and perhaps overly collectivist and conformist in tone — nonetheless points out the need for childhood to blaze its own trail of growth and realization. Indeed this experience would serve precisely as a way of approaching and becoming sensitive to the world of the young; as a method of adult learning in the educational interaction between adult and child.

These are elements found in *Un signore maturo con un orecchio acerbo*:

Un giorno sul diretto Capranica-Viterbo
vidi salire un uomo con un orecchio acerbo.
Non era tanto giovane, anzi, era maturato,
tutto, tranne l'orecchio, che acerbo era restato.
Cambiai subito posto per essergli vicino
e poter osservare il fenomeno per benino.
"Signore, gli dissi dunque, lei ha una certa età,
di quell'orecchio verde che cosa se ne fa?"
Rispose gentilmente: "Dica pure che son vecchio,
di giovane mi è rimasto soltanto quest'orecchio.
È un orecchio bambino, mi serve per capire
le cose che i grandi non stanno mai a sentire:
ascolto quel che dicono gli alberi, gli uccelli,
le nuvole che passano, i sassi, i ruscelli,
capisco anche i bambini quando dicono cose
che a un orecchio maturo sembrano misteriose..."
Così disse il signore con un orecchio acerbo
quel giorno sul diretto Capranica-Viterbo⁴⁰.

³⁹ F. Cambi, *Rodari e l'infanzia*, in «Scuola e città. Rivista mensile di problemi educativi e di politica scolastica», 11, 1980, pp. 478-481; F. Cambi, S. Ulivieri, *Storia dell'infanzia nell'Italia liberale*, Scandicci, La Nuova Italia, 1988.

⁴⁰ G. Rodari G., *Parole per giocare*, quote, p.19.

But

the idea that continuous adult re-education should be a prerequisite for all educational activity is difficult to accept in practice. It creates the impression that there are no firm points of reference. The sensation of a stairway allowing ascent only, with no possibility of descent, and no landings to provide resting places. But this is life, unless we wish to deceive ourselves: a job from which there is no retirement, other than when at an end⁴¹.

There is difficulty in coming to terms with the idea that one can and must “grow again”⁴², by engaging and interacting with minors. At the same time, adults find it hard to question the vision of childhood they have assumed and permanently absorbed: a vision that is, however, often fossilized and stereotyped.

And so, for Rodari, it is important to approach children with respect if fruitful relationships are to be created. «Knowing children and their problems means being able to get close to them, win them over and educate them: and one has to be convinced of this at every step, on every occasion. Studying children and learning from them is therefore the number one duty of an educator»⁴³.

Making the most of a child, and giving space in this process to the imagination, to fantasy, creativity and play, as already intimated, does not mean assuming an air of ingenuousness in respect of childhood, and therefore of ‘limited commitment’. On the contrary, Rodari sets out an educative process — one that is also a process of revealing the child — which gradually becomes more and more sophisticated precisely because it follows the path by which a society, a just and equitable civil community, is humanized, democratized and cultivated⁴⁴.

The work, *The Grammar of Fantasy*, which definitely should not be seen as a collection of tools and expedients for inventing stories, as is the custom in certain school environments, confirms the multi-faceted and cultured vision embraced by Rodari, one that is conducive — as stated in the CRC⁴⁵ — to the development of a pluralist, critical and democratic mind. His writing can be associated with a veritable manifesto proclaiming the rights of children to explore universes which, albeit different to those of adults, are considered no less relevant, given that children represent the future of humankind, hence the resources capable of managing a world as complex as the one we know today.

The language used by Rodari in representing childhood, a living language aligned with a definite social, political and cultural perspective, is one full of profound meaning. His linguistic experimentation is not literary to the exclusion of all else: in his words, there are also “things” and “secrets” that the child actively explores, experiences and adapts. Thus, the act of narrating to children and making up stories with them carries with it the aim of entertaining them, but also of opening their minds, teaching them

⁴¹ G. Rodari, *Scuola di fantasia*, quote, p. 60.

⁴² D. Demetrio, *Tornare a crescere. L'età adulta tra persistenze e cambiamenti*, Milan, Guerini, 1991.

⁴³ G. Rodari, *Manuale del pioniere*, Rome, Edizioni di cultura sociale, 1951, p. 23.

⁴⁴ F. Cambi F., *Quando l'intreccio si fa gioco*, in «Il pepeverde. Rivista di letture e letterature per ragazzi», 43, January-March 2010, pp. 5-7.

⁴⁵ Art. 27: «States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development».

how to be acute observers and critics, through the use of open reason, with respect to the world around them; in short, with the aim of liberating them. Accordingly, there are at least two planes of interpretation identifying Rodari as a promoter of childhood and children's rights: it is he who makes children play, and more besides, using words, getting them to be the main author and originator of their growth, rescuing them from the shadows, from prejudice or from simply doing what adults tell them.

But he is also the poet narrator, he who through the medium of words pinpoints the content, denounces the social wrongs by which the child is affected, examining and discussing themes such as war, social injustice, bullying, equality, democracy, freedom... At first glance these are themes and values that appear to have historical connotations, with the post-war period, but immediately one realizes that there is a wider importance, regarding how the human takes shape.

In effect, between the two intersecting planes, elements emerge and are reaffirmed which today can be seen as fundamental and universal rights of the child: the right to identity, to a home and a family, to education, instruction and expression, the right to choose, to be healthy, to play, to leisure time, but before all else, the right to be recognized and respected, and to participate in building the world.

Rodari seeks to render children 'operative' in a team game that promotes their genuine identity. Education as envisaged by Rodari can therefore be defined as an education of emancipation, of childhood, but also of adults: his narratives and his poems are not only for children, but also for the 'whole' man, for every individual, because they help to 'awaken' the subject and redeem him, where society is concerned.

Taking up a dialectically open educational paradigm of Marxist stamp, Rodari undoubtedly brings unusual personalities into literature for the young:

in reality his pages are invaded by the experiences, fantasies, hopes and emotions of working class families, in short, the product of the great social struggles that came in the wake of the war. As an approach it is both human and poetic, but also clearly ideological, that is, ideological in terms of how the world is conceived. Writing in the thick of the workers' movement, he combines poetry and ideology in the most imaginative forms, showing children a hitherto unknown way of viewing — indeed judging — the world, society and everyday life⁴⁶.

But in later life, Rodari's educational Marxism would give place to a universal dialogue attracting a wider circle of participants — "not only 'communist' youth, but youth tout court"⁴⁷ — so that through creativity and divergence, and counting on growth of the imagination, people could be persuaded not only to engage in rhetoric but to put into practice new forms of liberation and therefore of realization. «There is always a need for someone to make a start, to set out on a new path, to fight for acceptance of their ideas»⁴⁸.

The construction of the image of childhood that derives from all this, in essence, bears witness to «the powerful social commitment of his educational messages»⁴⁹, but also of his regard for and belief in the abilities of children to improve society if they are made active participants in the situation and offered the necessary tools, in other words

⁴⁶ M. Argilli, *Rodari, il diavolo e Don Chisciotte*, in F. Ghilardi (edited by), *Il favoloso Gianni*, quote, p. 16.

⁴⁷ F. Cambi, *Collodi, De Amicis, Rodari*, quote, p. 122.

⁴⁸ C. Marini, V. Mascia, *Gianni Rodari: educazione e poesia*, Rimini, Maggioli, 1987, p. 88.

⁴⁹ F. Cambi, *Collodi, De Amicis, Rodari*, quote, p. 125.

when given respect, as Korczak would say⁵⁰, and educated socially to fulfil themselves, to show the best of themselves in the community.

In effect, article 29 of the CRC reminds us that:

Art. 29: The education of the child shall be directed to:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

The authentic and respectful image of childhood offered by Rodari, and therefore the educational and pedagogical ideas that can be derived from it, does not originate so much in the literary representations of childhood characters and the relative inspirational stories. And in fact his stories "do not present any child psychologies, condensed and emblemized in a character"⁵¹. Rodari's educational potential lies precisely in his ability to understand every aspect of the child, of child psychology, of the needs of children, and in having engaged in dialogue with them, offering them tools and possibilities through the medium of words, making them protagonists of their own true growth, their self-fulfilment.

7. Conclusion

Cosa? Tre lune per un bambino?

Sì, signori, sì, molto onorevoli signori e signore: tre lune, tre. Un bambino non vale forse più di tre lune, di trecento lune, e di trecentomila milioni di missili spaziali?⁵²

There is a section in the Convention on the rights of the child that deals specifically not only with the promotion of protective measures and the promotion of childhood, but also with the identification of action on 'education in rights', in other words cultivating the awareness of rights on the part of minors so that they may exercise them: «Party States undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike» (Art. 42 CRC).

⁵⁰ J. Korczak, *Il diritto del bambino al rispetto*, Milan, Luni, 2004.

⁵¹ M. Argilli, *Con Rodari, oltre Rodari*, in L. Cerutti (edited by), *Rodari e la sua terra*, Omegna, Amministrazione comunale, 1984, p. 76.

⁵² G. Rodari, *Gip nel televisore e altre storie in orbita*, Milan, Mursia, 1983, p. 35.

Rodari had already identified the forms this education might take even in his earlier writing, as witness for example the *Avventura di Cipollino*, his first revolutionary novel of 1951, in which he demonstrates how «one could entertain a child with messages of struggle, of freedom, of revolt against oppression, albeit making use of farcical metaphors placed firmly within the dimension of a childhood imagination one is seeking to renew, while respecting its independence, its creativity and its readiness to understand»⁵³. In fact, Cipollino is a little boy conscious of the wrongs and injustices done to children and grown-ups alike, and struggles to win freedom and justice. In her introduction to the 2018 edition, Michela Murgia describes the context in which «a story for the children of war», was conceived: the dawn of democracy, emerging from a long period of conflict and dictatorship, black shirts and ‘piccoli balilla’ children. In this situation of injustice

Cipollino is not a defenceless and fragile child, however [...] Using countless wiles and without minimum subjection to the powers that be, at every turn he increasingly makes fun of them, derides them more fiercely and leads them by the nose, always managing to benefit everyone by securing, if not actually freedom, at least the will to be free [...] The closing line — “And so be it. Amen” — has always compelled me to read the *Avventura di Cipollino* as a prayer, an invocation aimed at adults begging that liberty should never again come under any threat that might persuade a child to abandon fun and games to become a freedom fighter⁵⁴.

In his later years, as already stated, Rodari shifts his attention onto a more logical than political plane, developing a general education plan which,

purged of the more ‘corporate’ and ‘sectarian’ aspects, looks to serve as a vehicle for general cultural and educational interests with which all of democratic Italian society can identify, since it is a matter of interest to all of society that children should grow up capable of collaboration and solidarity, open-minded, critical and self-critical, with a love for justice, liberty and equality, committed to fighting injustice, inequality, exploitation and slavery⁵⁵.

Perhaps in this very passage it is possible to discern a path consisting no longer in the mere condemnation of failure to recognize the rights of children, but actually in a call for widespread education on the subject of these rights by identifying a basic structure — which indeed we might define as his pedagogical approach — supporting the method of acting *for* and *with* children, i.e. the educational relationship that favours experimentation, through listening and participation:

listening to them is fascinating, not only because it is like listening to life in the pure state (or at all events, the least impure possible), but also because they make their discoveries unwittingly; living ‘directly engaged’ with things as they do, they force you to shed the preconceptions you carry pinned to your eyes or your mind. [...] We need to meet the younger generations with

⁵³ A. Faeti, *Uno scrittore senza il suo “doppio”*, in *Leggere Rodari*, supplement to «Educazione oggi. Bollettino di informazione e documentazione», edited by the Schools Department, Provincial Administration of Pavia, January 1981, p. 57.

⁵⁴ M. Murgia, *Introduzione*, in G. Rodari, *Le avventure di Cipollino*, San Dorligo della Valle, Einaudi ragazzi, 2018, pp. 5-6.

⁵⁵ F. Rotondo, *Sotto il segno dei gatti*, in *Leggere Rodari*, supplement to «Educazione oggi. Bollettino di informazione e documentazione», edited by the Schools Department, Provincial Administration of Pavia, January 1981, p. 116.

trust, well-disposed to their natural impulses, encouraging their natural generosity, *and ready to learn from them*. It is important to talk to them, and even more so to listen to them; helping them clarify their ideas is more important than handing them ready made ideas, of whatever type. They represent huge reserves of energy, in a world with immense problems to address and solve⁵⁶.

An invaluable witness to this vision is provided by the writer Benedetto Tudino who, taking up the baton from Rodari and continuing to campaign for the implementation of children's rights, describes his association with Rodari and the interaction of the Omegna-born writer with the children of the Ferrante Aporti school during a workshop in 1972 prompted by, amongst other things, a reading of the text of *The Adventures of Pinocchio*⁵⁷. What comes across is the seriousness with which Rodari listens to the children, to their interpretations of the 'puppet Pinocchio', their analyses, in which the real and the imagined coexist 'democratically', always giving the fairy tale, but no less the reality, new and different twists, just as the plans offered by Rodari in response to the stimuli provided by the children are new and different.

Educationist and educator, and promoter of children's rights. This is Gianni Rodari. And his approach is educationally asystematic, defined as such by Pino Boero, considering that his methods «refuse the 'risk' presented by the systematic nature of pedagogical reflection, the danger of enunciating general principles; Rodari starts with 'everyday things' and stays with them, not refusing theoretical comparison, but preferring the 'chance' element of trial and error and the practicality of experience, rather than interminable discussion on matters of principle»⁵⁸. But perhaps it is precisely in this characterization that one sees the extent of his efforts in the cause of childhood, for its redemption and support, for the advent of a new utopia in a more human world, starting with the involvement and participation of children. His writings call for a constructive interaction in the educational relationship between adult and child, always new and open to new ideas, and this represents his educationist approach to learning about rights. It is this understanding of the interaction between words, writing and childhood that generates his works, and gives them their unique freshness. Rodari is considered the 'civil poet' by Faeti⁵⁹, and definable as such not least with regard to the liberation of childhood: one who confidently expresses the rights of infants and adolescents placing trust in their words, rich in imagination, which then become his words as a writer, words revealing the heart of childhood experience — collective and personal — and indeed human and social experience. Thus «the work of Rodari is not merely inventive and linguistic funambulism; it is also — and above all — about sticking to the task, skill in formal reasoning, and mastery in writing»⁶⁰.

The images that Rodari brings to his stories and poems are imbued with subversive power, given that in harnessing a fanciful satire derived from situations and scenarios

⁵⁶ G. Rodari, *Libri di letteratura per l'infanzia*, Conference, Treviso 1968, quote in P. Zagni, *Rodari*, in «Il Castoro», Monthly, 100, 1975, p. 32.

⁵⁷ Cf. B. Tudino [nursery rhymes by], *Diritti a Pinocchio*, Bologna, Municipality of Bologna, 2014, pp.87-93. Just as Tudino has told us of his collaboration with Rodari, a similar process of activation and participation involving children is brought about with the drafting of his work *La torta in cielo*, as noted also by M. Argilli (M. Argilli, *Gianni Rodari. Una biografia*, Turin, Einaudi, 1990, p. 90).

⁵⁸ P. Boero, *Una storia, tante storie. Guida all'opera di Gianni Rodari*, Turin, Einaudi, 1992, p. 212.

⁵⁹ A. Faeti, *Mi manca Rodari*, in M. Argilli, L. Del Cornò e C. De Luca (edited by), *Le provocazioni della fantasia*, quote, pp. 131-139.

⁶⁰ P. Boero, *Una storia, tante storie*, quote, p. 234.

of everyday life, they carry a provocation that persuades adults of the need to engage in experimentation and embrace change. Thanks to the resulting stimulus of divergence and creativity, it becomes possible to dismantle distorted or obscured representations of childhood, so that it can then reappear as an extraordinarily alive and creative force in the current social panorama, where hitherto it was as if masked and dissolved.... That same childhood which seems so clearly depicted in the «red Indian in the crib»:

Il pellerossa nel presepe

Il pellerossa con le piume in testa
 e con l'ascia di guerra in pugno stretta,
 come è finito tra le statuine
 del presepe, pastori e pecorine,
 e l'asinello, e i magi sul cammello,
 e le stelle ben disposte,
 e la vecchina delle caldarroste?
 Non è il tuo posto, via, Toro seduto:
 torna presto di dove sei venuto.
 Ma l'indiano non sente. O fa l'indiano.
 Ce lo lasciamo, dite, fa lo stesso?
 O darà noia agli angeli di gesso?
 Forse è venuto fin qua,
 ha fatto tanto viaggio,
 perché ha sentito il messaggio:
 pace agli uomini di buona volontà⁶¹.

As Carlo Pagliarini wrote:

We shall be living creatively with Rodari for a long time, because Gianni will have to help us save the children of today from situations of violence, constraint, layers of anomie and from a state of invisibility and silence. In this effort, this identification with Gianni's work, there are two expressions of his that for me are absolutely fundamental [...] The first, 'think big'; the second, to see ourselves as 'members of a Welcoming Committee for the children of this world'⁶². And finally Rodari:

Un bambino faceva le bolle di sapone
 dalla finestra quando mi fucilarono
 sulla piazza piantata di alberi senza nome
 [...]
 Non ci sono abbastanza plotoni di esecuzione
 in questo mondo e ogni altro
 per fucilare tutte le bolle di sapone⁶³.

⁶¹ G. Rodari, *Filastrocche in cielo e in terra*, quote, p.100.

⁶² C. Pagliarini, *Quando fece il Pioniere*, in M. Argilli, C. De Luca and L. Del Cornò (edited by), *Le provocazioni della fantasia*, quote, p. 221.

⁶³ G. Rodari, *Fucilazione*, in G. Rodari, *Il cavallo saggio. Poesie Epigrafi Esercizi*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1990.

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