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## LETTERATURA INFANTILE

*Giacobbe O. Letteratura infantile [Children's Literature].  
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Russian literature is among the richest in Europe for educative content, not least because nearly all her leading writers thought of themselves, under the Tsarist regime, as heralds of a new era of freedom, and this covert aspiration encouraged them to cultivate close contact with the people, with a view to educating them and bettering their condition, even if in so doing they risked deportation to Siberia, or even the death penalty. However, even as translations of works dealing with complex and tormented aspects of art and life have begun to proliferate here in Italy, there is a lack of studies dedicated to this apparently humbler and more modest side of Russian writers' activities, which would not only help us to grasp many unexplored facets of their powerful originality, but also to get a handle on the complicated and obscure psychology of their mysterious and distant lineage, which today other peoples may well feel pressing at the doors of their history in the form of a dark threat of hegemony and empire.

The first writer of children's stories we meet in Russian literature is the poet VASILY ZHUKOVSKY (1773–1852), whose own life was something of an unusual fairy story. He wrote *The Tale of Iván Tsarévich and the Grey Wolf* [*La storia del principe Ivan e del lupo grigio*], *The Sleeping Princess* [*La principessa addormentata*], *The War of mice and frogs* [*La guerra dei topi e delle rane*] and *The Tale of Tsar Berendei* [*La fiaba dello zar Berendei*], which was penned for a private competition between himself and his friend Pushkin.

Just as in the summer gardens that Peter the Great created in St Petersburg each of the numerous fountains represented one of Aesop's Fables, with texts from Theophan Prokopovich's translation, so the treasury compiled by IVAN KRYLOV (1769–1844), revives nearly all of the mythical elements that produced his fables, songs and poems, and which are linked to a great many European traditions and to the most ancient surviving texts, such as the *Panchatantra*. Krylov is the author

of about 170 fables, more than thirty of which are imitations of foreign originals, and they exemplify the transition between the old and the new Russian literature. In them we find for the first time descriptions of the different classes of Russian society with all their defects and merits, from the muzhik to the prince, from the priest to the tsar, a procedure that would be taken up in numerous works first by Gogol and then by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. The style of Krylov's beautiful fairy tales has a slightly archaic flavour, although the content is enlivened by a degree of modernity. The impulse to produce fairy tales may have come from the success enjoyed by his translation of two tales by La Fontaine which were published in the *Moscow Spectator*. His great love for fables and moral tales made him the author of unforgettable short stories and fairy-tales for which he was immortalized in a monument erected in those same gardens in St Petersburg where the original creations of the Phrygian poet and educator are remembered. We are lucky in having a good Italian translation of his fables by Umberto Norsa<sup>1</sup>.

ALEXANDER SERGEYEVICH PUSHKIN (1799–1837), in the brief intervals between his work as poet and imperial historian, also tried his hand at fantastical tales of an accessible popular nature, four of which have been translated into limpid and sonorous Italian verse by Federico Verdinois<sup>2</sup>: *The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Knights* [*La storia della reginotta morta e dei sette cavalieri*], *The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish* [*La leggenda del pescatore e del pesciolino d'oro*], *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel* [*Il galletto d'oro*] and *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* [*La leggenda del re Saltan*], notable for their innate naivety and a spontaneity of feeling that imbues even the fast-moving passages, time changes and childish repetitions in which they abound with an air of fresh and appealing primitive poetry.

ALEKSEY REMIZOV, who masterfully succeeded in capturing the Slavic character of his people, which permeates all his works — their lives, customs and habits, their superstitions, traditions and legends — wrote a series of *Tales of Asseka, the Monkey King* [*Fiabe di Asseka, re delle scimmie*] for children.

DMITRY MAMIN (1852–1912), better known by his nom-de-plume SIBIRYAK, wrote hunting stories set among the wild Ural Mountains, as well as an astounding novel *Fireflies* [*Lucciole*].

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<sup>1</sup>Krylov G. *Le favole*. (Interlinear Russian/Italian text, translated by U. Norsa). Palermo: Sandron, 1919.

<sup>2</sup>Puškin A. *Le fiabe*. (First Italian edition translated by F. Verdinois). Milan: Sonzogno, 1906.

A highlight of Russian literature is a section of *The Brothers Karamazov* that is well known in Italy under the titles *Precocious children* [*Precoci*] or *The Boys* [*Ragazzi*], in which FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY (1822–1881) anatomizes the huge and painful emotional and intellectual life that unfolds in the souls of little ones no less than in those of grown-ups, perhaps more heartfelt in the former, because of their sweet innocence. Fyodor Dostoevsky is also the author of a magnificent short story with a child protagonist, which can be enjoyed by all age-groups, for all that the author's subtle psychological analysis is more aimed at an adult readership: *A Little Hero* [*Il piccolo eroe*], which has recently been published in a scrupulous Italian translation by Olga Resnevic<sup>3)</sup>

NIKOLAI GOGOL (1809–1852), one of the greats of Russian literature, penned *Taras Bulba* and *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* [*I racconti della fattoria di Dikanka*] for younger readers.

PAVEL MELNIKOV (1819–1883) was a distinguished scholar who dedicated his hours of idleness to literature and wrote *Grandpa Polycarp* [*Nonno Policarpo*] and *Olden Times* [*Vecchi anni*] for children.

We should not of course forget the name of another great writer, IVAN TURGENEV (1818–1883) whose *Prose Poems* [*Poemetti in prosa*] and *Hunter's Sketches* [*Ricordi di un cacciatore*] can be read with pleasure and profit by the young.

Yet another great writer was ANTON CHEKHOV (1860–1904) who wrote the enchanting stories *Vanka* [*Il piccolo Ivan*] and *Kashtanka* [*Castagnetta*] for children.

Among lesser-known names, we should remember MARKO VOVCHOK and her *Marussia*, VASILY N. DANCHENKO for his story *The Falcon's Nest* [*Nidi di falchi*], T. SHCHEPKINA-KUPERNIK for *The Knight Lionheart and Other Tales* [*Il cavaliere cuor di leone e altri racconti*] and MIKHAIL OSORGIN for *The Little Swallow Natasha* [*Rondinella Natascia*].

Valuable books of childhood memoirs are NIKOLAI MIKHAILOVSKY's *Tyoma's Childhood* [*La fanciullezza di Tioma*] and ZHELIKHOVSKAYA's *How I was as a Child* [*Com'ero da bimba*].

An original example of particularly profound children's literature, for both meaning and message, and no less for its purity and clarity of expression, is that contained in LEO TOLSTOY's (1828–1910) *Gospel Parables* [*Novelle evangeliche*]. The product of the last years of his life, these imbue powerful descriptions of contemporary life, in which

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<sup>3)</sup>Dostoevskij F. M. *Cuor debole. Il piccolo eroe*. (Translated directly from the Russian by O. Resnevic). Florence: La Voce, 1921.

the unfamiliar life of poorest people is compassionately dissected, with the Christian message of Good News. A deep love for humanity flows through the story of the devout and generous cobbler, while a profound knowledge of the human soul is revealed in that of the angel cast out of heaven who learns in his long years of earthly experience what there is to men, what is given them and what they make of it. A collection of his easier folk tales has been adapted for Italian schoolchildren by Angelo Colombo...<sup>4)</sup>

In Colombo's versions, the great Russian writer's stories lose nothing of their luminous purity or their profundity, but they are skilfully reworked for young minds, who will certainly draw much profit from the numerous simple beauties they contain.

Tolstoy was always ready to put his talents as a writer at the service of his teachings. As Alexander Veselovsky notes in his *History of Russian Literature*<sup>5)</sup>, the heretical aesthetic that Tolstoy would eventually formulate in his treatise *What is Art?*, proposing not beauty as the basis of artistic creation but what morally ennobles, what unites men around the eternal principle of love, found concrete expression in his works. He wrote numerous stories that were circulated in millions of copies throughout the years of political upheaval, hammering into the popular consciousness the concepts fundamental to his teachings, in the accessible form of the apologue.

A collection of Russian folk tales in which the spirit of the people is best revealed, selected and transcribed in French by Admiral Dabnour, has recently been translated from that language by Bianca Vigna dal Ferro and published in the collection *Classics for Little Children* [*Classici del fanciullo*] in two volumes<sup>6)</sup>. The same series also boasts a translation from the Russian of originally Persian fables, in which the splendid and mysterious figures of Viziers and Shahs never fail to fascinate children, as they find themselves in close company with the great and the powerful alongside the humble and the hardworking<sup>7)</sup>.

*Translated by John Francis Phillimore. Edited by Raffaella Vassena*

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<sup>4)</sup>Tolstoj L. N. *Storie* (adapted by A. Colombo). Florence: Bemporad-Rome: Mondadori, 1920.

<sup>5)</sup>Veselovskij A. N. *Storia della letteratura russa* (transl. by E. Damiani). Florence: Vallecchi, 1926.

<sup>6)</sup>D'Abnour C. *Favole popolari della vecchia Russia*. (Translated from the French by B. Vigna dal Ferro). Lanciano: Carabba, 1933. (Classici del fanciullo).

<sup>7)</sup>Koržinskij O. M. *Favole tartare*. (Translated from the Russian by K. Tcancenko). Lanciano: Carabba, 1923. (Classici del fanciullo).