

Le fiabe sono vere... Storia popolare italiana

Fairy Tales Are True... Italian Folk History

In Depth (summaries)

11. LEAVING THE VILLAGE, SETTING OUT ON A JOURNEY: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

“A” for Axis Mundi

During ethnographic research in Calabria, the anthropologist Ernesto de Martino experienced a rather peculiar situation. While travelling by car with some colleagues, he asked a shepherd for directions, offering him a lift to guide them to the correct crossroads. The shepherd accepted hesitantly, but once in the car, his anxiety quickly escalated. During the short drive, the shepherd grew increasingly agitated, continuously scanning the landscape for the bell tower of Marcellinara—the essential reference point of his familiar space-time. The further away the bell tower receded, the more anxious he became, until anxiety turned into outright terror. Losing sight of this visual reference made him feel completely disoriented, as if he had lost his “homeland”. De Martino, alarmed, immediately brought him back to the starting point. As soon as the bell tower reappeared, the shepherd’s expression relaxed. Yet his disorientation had been so intense that he didn’t even wait for the car to stop fully before jumping out, without saying goodbye. De Martino compared this reaction to the anguish experienced by astronauts when they lose sight of Earth. This story has since become an exemplary myth in Italian anthropological studies.

Alpine Pastures

Alpine grazing involves a seasonal migration of animals such as cows, deer, buffaloes, sheep, and goats, accompanied by their herders. In winter, grass is scarce in the mountains, whereas in summer, lowland pastures cannot adequately support the animals, compelling them to migrate towards higher elevations. Alpine grazing occurs in various forms (transhumance, temporary settlements, or annual summer migrations with fixed structures). It marks a cyclical rhythm of life: in winter, life shrinks into a few dark rooms and stables; in spring, it awakens with blossoming meadows and the beginning of grazing; in summer, the livestock move to mountain pastures as villages gather hay for the coming winter. The mountain expands and contracts like a breathing lung, following the rhythm of animals and seasons.

... and Transhumance

Transhumance is a pastoral practice involving the seasonal migration of livestock between two grazing areas, typically occurring in spring and autumn. Shepherds and their families guide large herds of animals along established routes known as *tratturi*. There are two forms of this pastoral

method, shaping relations between people, animals, and the environment: horizontal transhumance across lowland regions, and vertical transhumance in mountainous areas. Transhumant shepherds possess profound knowledge of ecological balance and climate patterns, making their practices sustainable and effective. Transhumance also fosters artisanal skills, culinary traditions, and seasonal festivities, establishing settlements, workshops, inns, and sanctuaries along the routes to offer refreshment and protection.

Fairground and Funfair People: Between Settled Life and “Elsewhere”

Fairs, markets, and amusement parks are rich in narratives encompassing both contemporary aspects—such as the trades of market vendors and the families who manage them—and historical roots connected to princely gardens, court entertainment, and ancient games. Ritual and playful elements, collective and individual practices—such as dances, theatre performances, lotteries, tavern games, and attractions brought by travelling vendors—coexist in these spaces. These practices either represent settled cultures/natures and so, if introduced by travelling merchants and fairground people, express connections with their original cultures and natures, while, for local communities, these encounters provide an opportunity to engage with the otherness that lies beyond their own cultural and natural horizon.

Carlo Levi, excerpts from *Christ stopped at Eboli*, 1945

This was the region whose green trees had seemed to me mild and welcoming as we passed rapidly by in a car, but now under the fierce morning sun the green appeared to have melted into the dazzling gray of walls and earth. A group of houses stood in untidy fashion on either side of the road, surrounded by shabby vegetable gardens and a few sparse olive trees. The houses were nearly all of only one room, with no windows, drawing their light from the door. The doors were latched because the men were in the fields; in the doorways young women dandled their babies or old women spun wool. They waved and looked after me with wide-open eyes. Here and there was a house with a second story and a balcony, where the front door was not made of worn black wood, but had a conspicuous coat of shiny varnish and was decked out with a brass doorknob. Such houses belonged to the Americans. Among the peasants' shacks stood one narrow, long, single-story building of recent construction, in so-called modern or suburban style. This was the barracks of the carabinieri. Around the houses and on the road, several sows, surrounded by their progeny of piglets, with the wizened faces of greedy and lustful old men, grubbed suspiciously and savagely in piles of rubbish and garbage. Barone drew back, growling and curling his lips, his hair standing on end in a sort of strange horror... To the left a path wound up an adjacent olive-covered slope to an iron gate between two pillars, which marked either side of the beginning of a low brick wall. Behind the wall stood two slender cypress trees and through the gate one could see tombstones, white in the sun. The cemetery was the highest point of the territory where I was allowed to circulate. Here the view was wider and less squalid than from any other place. I could not see all of Cagliano, which lay hidden like a long snake stretched out among the stones, but the yellowish-red roofs of the higher part of the village, seen among the gray leaves of the olive trees as they moved in the breeze, appeared less motionless than usual and almost alive. Behind this colorful foreground the wide desolate stretches of clay seemed to wave in the heat, as if they were

suspended in mid-air, and above their monotonous whiteness passed the shifting shadows of the summer clouds.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il canto popolare" (1952-1953), in *Le ceneri di Gramsci*, 1965

*Suddenly nineteen fifty-two
rushes across Italy:
only the people truly feel it —
never stripped from time,
they're not dazed by modernity,
though ever the most modern are they,
the people, scattered
through hamlets and districts,
with ever-new youth —
new to the old song —
repeating naively what once was.*

*The year's first sweet sun burning
on the arcades of small towns,
on villages still scented with snow,
on Apennine flocks;
in the windows of towns shops
new fabrics with new colours,
new clothes like flames
in clear pyres proclaim
a world renewed,
the release of new delights...*

*Ah, we who, in a single
generation, live every generation
which here lived, on these now
humiliated lands,
have no true notion
of those who partake in history
only through oral, magical experience;
and live in purity,
no further than the memory
of the generation where life
is their own peremptory life.*

*In the life that is life because
taken into our reason,
built for our passage —*

*and now become something else,
beyond our stubborn defence —
awaits — singing supine,
camped in our suburbs which he does not know,
yet ready, even from
the freshest and most inert eras —
the people: in them, man alters destiny.*

*And if we turn to that past
which is our privilege,
other tides of people
sing forth: our movement
recovered even from Christian origins —
but the song lags behind, unmoving.
Repeating itself.
In the evenings, no more torches
but globes of light,
and the outskirts seem unchanged,
nor are the new boys truly other...*

*Among the dark vegetable gardens, in the lazy sunshine
Adalbertos komis kurtis!, the kids
From Ivrea they cry out, and for the little valleys
of Tuscany, with the squawks of swallows:
Hor atorno fratt Helya! Sacred violence
the clergy, crude, press onto crude hearts
enslaving them to a fierce childhood
in the provincial fief,
the Empire, God-imposed,
the people sing.*

*A great concert of chisels
rings out on the Capitol,
on the new Apennines,
on the snow-whitened communes of the Alps:
travertine soars in a space
where Man finds his freedom.
And the labourer —
“Where were you last night...” —
repeats with a soul
spilled into his Gothic world.
The world remains slavery*

for the people. And the people sing.

*The rising bourgeois learns the Ça ira,
and trembling in the Napoleonic wind,
to the Hymn of the Tree of Liberty,
flutter the newborn colours of nations.
But, like a starving dog,
the peasant defends his masters,
sings of their cruelty —
Guagliune 'e mala vita! —
in savage packs.
Freedom has no voice
for the people-dog.
And the people sing.*

*Boy of the people who sings
here in Rebibbia,
on the poor banks of the Aniene,
the latest tune — yes,
in singing you boast
the ancient, festive
lightness of the simple.
But what harsh certainty
you raise at once
of imminent revolt,
among unaware shacks
and skyscrapers —
a cheerful seed
in the sad heart of the people's world!*

*In your unawareness
is the awareness
that history wants from you —
this history where Man
has nothing left but the violence
of memories, not free memory...
And now, perhaps,
no other choice remains
but to lend his hunger for justice
the strength of your joy,
and the light of a time just beginning
the light of one who is what he doesn't yet know.*

Rocco Scotellaro, Journey to the city, 1950

*I have lost the peasant servitude,
I will never again drink a satisfying glassful*

*I have lost my liberty.
City of the long exile,
of silence in a white point of rumblings,
I have to tell time by the trams,
I have to unpack my locked bags,
put my tears, my smile in order.
Goodbye—how can I say goodbye?—widespread broom,
you broad shoulders of woods that break the sky's blue face,
common and Spanish oaks tangling in the wind,
sheep round the sleeping shepherd,
yellow cropped earth,
you are the woman who has given birth;
and my brothers and the houses where they live,
and the paths they climb like swallows,
and the women and my mother, goodbye—how can I say goodbye to you?
I have lost my liberty: during the July fair,
so hot the air could hardly carry words,
two merchants bought me, one took out the money and the other came to see me.
I have lost the peasant servitude of burdened skies, oaks,
yellow shorn earth.
The city loomed at night after a whole day of the train's hiccuping.
Our moon was not to be seen,
nor night's black table,
and the mountains got lost along the way*