How Pinocchio Learned to Read

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¿Sabeis leer?
... No por cierto
ni tal se probará que en mi linaje
haya personas de tan poco asiento
que se pongan a aprender esas quimeras
que llevan a los hombres al brasero
y a las mujeres a la casa llana.

Cervantes, *La elección de los alcaldes de Daganzo*

I read Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* for the first time many years ago, in Buenos Aires, when I was eight or nine, in a vague Spanish translation with Mazzanti's original black and white drawings. I saw the Disney film some time later, and was annoyed to find a multitude of changes: the asthmatic Shark that swallowed Geppetto had become Monstro the Whale; the Cricket, instead of disappearing and reappearing, had been given the name Jiminy and kept pursuing Pinocchio with good advice; grumpy Geppetto had turned into a nice old man with a goldfish called Cleo and a cat called Figaro. And many of the most memorable episodes were missing. Nowhere, for instance, did Disney portray Pinocchio (as Collodi did in what was for me the most nightmarish scene in the book) witnessing his own death when, after refusing to take his medicine, four rabbits "as black as ink" come to carry him off in a small black coffin. In its original version, Pinocchio's passage from wood to flesh and blood was for me as thrilling a quest as that of Alice for a way out of Wonderland or of Ulysses for his beloved Ithaca. Except the ending: when, on the final pages, Pinocchio is rewarded by becoming "a handsome boy with chestnut brown hair and light blue eyes," I cheered and yet felt strangely unsatisfied.

I didn't know it then, but I think I loved *The Adventures of Pinocchio* because they are adventures in learning. The puppet's saga is that of a citizen's education, the ancient paradox of someone who wants to enter common human society while trying to find out, at the same time, who he really is, not as he appears in the eyes of others but in his own. Pinocchio wants to be "a real boy" but not just any boy, not an obedient little version of the ideal citizen. Pinocchio wants to be whoever he really is under the painted wood. Unfortunately (because Collodi stopped

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Pinocchio's education short of this epiphany) he never quite succeeds. Pinocchio becomes a good little boy who has learned to read, but Pinocchio never becomes a reader.

From the very beginning, Collodi sets up a conflict between Pinocchio the Rebel and the society of which he wants to be a part. Even before Pinocchio is carved into a puppet, he proves himself a rebellious piece of wood. He doesn't believe in "being seen and not heard" (the nineteenth century motto for children), and provokes a quarrel between Geppetto and his neighbour (yet another scene deleted by Disney). He then throws a tantrum when he finds that there is nothing to eat but a few pears, and when he falls asleep by the fire and burns off both his feet, he expects Geppetto (society's representative) to carve him new ones. Hungry and crippled, Pinocchio the Rebel doesn't resign himself to remain unfed or handicapped in a society that should provide him with food and health care. But Pinocchio is also aware that his demands from society must be reciprocated. And so, having received food and new feet, he say to Geppetto: "To pay you back for all you've done for me, I'll start school right away."

In Collodi's society, school is the beginning-place for proving oneself responsible. School is the training-ground for becoming someone able to "pay back" society's concerned care. This is how Pinocchio sums it up: "Today, at school, I'll learn how to read right away, tomorrow I'll learn how to write, and the day after tomorrow I'll learn arithmetic. Then with my skill I'll make lots of money, and with the first money that I get in my pocket I'll buy my father a beautiful woollen jacket. But what am I talking about, wool? I'll get him one all of silver and gold, with diamond buttons. And the poor man really deserves it, because, after all, in order to buy me books and have me educated he's left in short sleeves... in the middle of winter!" Because in order to buy a spelling-book for Pinocchio (essential for attending school) Geppetto has sold his only jacket. Geppetto is a poor man but in Collodi's society, education requires sacrifice.

The first step, then, to become a citizen, is to learn to read. But what does this mean, "to learn to read?" Several things.

- First, the mechanical process of learning the code of the script in which the memory of a society is encoded.
- Second, the learning of the syntax by which such a code is governed.
- Third, the learning of how the inscriptions in such a code can serve to know, in a deep, imaginative and practical way, ourselves and the world around us. It is this third learning that is the most difficult, the most dangerous, and the most powerful — and the one Pinocchio will never reach. Pressures of all sorts — the temptations with which society lures him away from himself, the mockery and jealousy of his fellow students, the aloof guidance of his moral

preceptors — create for Pinocchio a series of almost insurmountable obstacles for becoming a reader.

Reading is an activity that has always been viewed with qualified enthusiasm by those in government. It is not by chance that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, laws were passed against teaching slaves to read, even the Bible, since (it was correctly argued) whoever can read the Bible can also read an abolitionist tract. The efforts and stratagems devised by slaves to learn to read are proof enough of the relationship between civil freedom and the power of the reader, and of the fear elicited by that freedom and that power in rulers of all kinds.

But in a so-called democratic society, before the possibility of learning to read can be considered, the laws of that society are obliged to satisfy a number of basic needs: food, housing, health care. In a stirring essay, Collodi himself has this to say about the republican efforts to implement a system of obligatory schooling in Italy: "As I see it, until now we have thought more about the heads than the stomachs of the classes that are needy and suffering. Now let us think a little more about the stomachs." Fifty years later, Brecht would declare: "First comes the grub, then the morals." Pinocchio, no stranger to hunger, is clearly aware of this primary requirement. Imagining what he might do if he had a hundred thousand coins and were to become a wealthy gentleman, he wishes for himself a beautiful palace with a library "chock-full of candied fruit, pies, panettoni, almond cakes and rolled wafers filled with whipped cream." Books, as Pinocchio well knows, won't feed a hungry stomach. When Pinocchio's naughty companions hurl their books at him with such bad aim that they fall in the sea, a school of fish hurries to the surface to nibble at the soggy pages, but soon spits them out, thinking "That's not for us; we're used to feeding on much better fare." In a society in which the citizens's basic needs are not fulfilled, books are poor nourishment; wrongly used, they can be deadly. When one of the boys hurls a thick bound *Manual of Arithmetic* at Pinocchio, instead of hitting the puppet the book strikes another of the boys on the head, killing him. Unused, unread, the book is a deadly weapon.

Even as it sets up a system to satisfy these basic requirements and to establish a compulsory education system, society offers Pinocchio, at the same time, distractions from that system, temptations of entertainment without thought and without effort. First in the shape of the Fox and the Cat who tell Pinocchio that school has left them blind and lame; then in the creation of Funland which Pinocchio's friend Lampwick describes in these alluring words: "There are no schools there; there are no teachers there; there are no books there ... Now that's the sort of place that appeals to me! That's how all civilized countries should be!"

Books, quite rightly, are associated in Lampwick's mind with difficulty, and difficulty (in Pinocchio's world as in our own) has acquired a negative sense which it did not always have. The Latin expression, "*per ardua ad astra*," through difficulties we reach the stars, is almost incomprehensible for Pinocchio (as for us) since everything is expected to be obtainable with the least possible expenditure

But society does not encourage this necessary search for difficulty, this increase in experience. Once Pinocchio has suffered his first misadventures and accepted school and become a good student, the other boys begin to attack him for being what we would today call "a nerd" and laugh at him for "paying attention to the teacher." "You talk like a printed book!" they tell him. Language can allow the speaker to remain on the surface of thought, mouthing dogmatic slogans and commonplaces in black and white, transmitting messages rather than meaning, placing the epistemological weight on the listener (as in "you know what I mean?"). Or it can attempt to re-create an experience, give shape to an idea, explore in depth and not only on the surface the intuition of a revelation. For the other boys, this distinction is invisible. For them, the fact that Pinocchio speaks "like a printed book" is enough to label him an outsider, a traitor, a recluse in his ivory tower.

Finally, society places in Pinocchio's way a number of characters who are to serve him as moral guides, as Virgils in his exploration of the infernal circles of this world. The Cricket, whom Pinocchio squashes against the wall in an early chapter but who miraculously survives to assist him much later on in the book; the Blue Fairy who first appears as to Pinocchio as a Little Girl with Blue Hair in a series of nightmarish encounters; the Tuna, a stoic philosopher who tells Pinocchio, after they have been swallowed by the Shark, to "accept the situation, and wait for the Shark to digest us both." But all these "teachers" abandon Pinocchio to his own suffering, unwilling to keep him company in his moments of darkness and loss. None of them instructs Pinocchio on how to reflect about his own condition, none encourages him to find out what he means by his wish of "becoming a boy." As if reciting from school textbooks without eliciting personal readings, these magisterial figures are merely interested in the academic semblance of instruction in which the attribution of roles — teacher versus student — are meant to suffice for "learning" to take place. As teachers, they are useless, because they believe themselves accountable only to society, not to the student.

In spite of all these constraints — diversion, derision, abandonment — Pinocchio manages to climb the first two steps of society's learning ladder: learning the alphabet and learning to read the surface of a text. There he stops. Books then become neutral places in which to exercise this learned code, in order to extract a conventional moral at the end. School has prepared him to read propaganda.

Because Pinocchio has not learned to read in depth, to enter a book and explore it to its sometimes unreachable limits, he will always ignore that his own adventures have deep literary roots. His life (he doesn't know this) is in fact a literary life, a composite of ancient stories in which he might one day (when he truly learns to read) recognize his own biography. And this is true for every fully-fledged reader. *The Adventures of Pinocchio* echo a multitude of literary voices. It is a book about a father's quest for a son and a son's quest for a father (a subplot of the Odyssey that Joyce would later discover); about the search for oneself, as in the physical metamorphosis of Apuleius's hero in *The Golden Ass* and the psychological metamorphosis of Prince Hal in *Henry IV*; about sacrifice and redemption as taught in the stories about the Virgin Mary and in the sagas of Ariosto; about archetypal rites of passage, as in the fairy-tales of Perrault (that Collodi translated), and in the earthy Commedia del'Arte; about voyages into the unknown, as in the chronicles of the sixteenth-century explorers and in Dante. Since Pinocchio does not see books as sources of revelation, books don't reflect back to him his own experience. Vladimir Nabokov, teaching his students how to read Kafka, pointed out to them that the insect into which Gregor Samsa is transformed is in fact a winged beetle, an insect that carries wings under its armoured back, and that if Gregor had only discovered them, he would have been able to escape. And then Nabokov added: "Many a Dick and a Jane grow up like Gregor, unaware that they too have wings and can fly."

Of this, Pinocchio as well would remain unaware if he happened upon *The Metamorphosis*. All Pinocchio can do, after he learns to read, is parrot the textbook speech. He assimilates the words on the page but does not digest them: the books do not become truly his because he is still, at the end of his adventures, incapable of applying them to his experience of himself and of the world. Learning the alphabet leads him, in the final chapter, to be born into a human identity and to look upon the puppet he was with amused satisfaction. But, in a volume Collodi never wrote, Pinocchio must still confront society with an imaginative language which books could have taught him through memory, association, intuition, imitation. Beyond the last page, Pinocchio is finally ready to learn to read.

Pinocchio's superficial reading experience is exactly opposed to that of another wandering hero (or heroine). In Alice's world, language is restored to its essential rich ambiguity and any word (according to Humpty Dumpty) can be made to say what its speaker wishes it to say. Though Alice refuses such arbitrary assumptions ("But 'glory' does not mean 'a well-rounded argument,'" she tells him), this free-for-all epistemology is the norm in Wonderland. While in Pinocchio's world the meaning of a printed story is unambiguous, in Alice's world the meaning of "Jabberwocky," for instance, depends on the will of its reader. (It may be useful to recall here that Collodi was writing at a time when the Italian language was being set down officially for the first time, from a choice between numerous dialects, while Lewis Carroll's English had long been "fixed" and could be opened and questioned in relative safety.)

When I speak of "learning to read" (in the fullest sense I mentioned earlier), I mean something that lies between these two styles or philosophies. Pinocchio responds to the strictures of scholasticism which, up to the sixteenth century, was the official learning method in Europe. In the scholastic classroom, the student was meant to read as tradition dictated, according to fixed commentaries accepted as the authorities. Humpty Dumpty's method is an exaggeration of the humanist interpretations, a revolutionary viewpoint according to which every reader must engage with the text on his or her own terms. Umberto Eco usefully limited this freedom by noting that "the limits of interpretation coincide with the limits of common sense"; to which, of course, Humpty Dumpty might reply that what is common sense to him may not be common sense to Eco. But, for most readers, the notion of "common sense" retains a certain shared clarity that must suffice. "Learning to read" is then to acquire the means to appropriate a text (as Humpty Dumpty does) and also to partake of the appropriations of others (as Pinocchio's teacher might have suggested). In this ambiguous field between possession and recognition, between the identity imposed by others and the identity discovered by oneself, lies, I believe, the act of reading.

A fierce paradox exists at the heart of every school system. A society needs to impart the knowledge of its codes to its citizens, so that they can become active in it; but the knowledge of that code, beyond the mere ability of deciphering a political slogan, an advertisement or a manual of basic instructions, enables those same citizens to question that society, to uncover its evils and to attempt a change. In the very system that allows a society to function lies the power to subvert it, for better or for worse. So that the teacher, the person appointed by that society to open up to its new members the secrets of its shared vocabularies, becomes in fact a danger, a Socrates able to corrupt the youth, someone who must, on the one hand, unfailingly continue to teach and, on the other, submit to the laws of the society that has assigned the teacher's position — submit even to the point of self-destruction, as was the case with Socrates. A teacher is forever caught in this double bind: to teach in order to make students think on their own, but to teach according to a social structure that imposes a curb on thinking. School, in Pinocchio's world as in most of ours, is not a training-ground for becoming a better, fuller child but an initiation-place to the world of grown-ups, with its conventions, bureaucratic requirements, tacit agreements and caste system.There is no such thing as a school for anarchists and yet, in some sense, every teacher must teach anarchism, must teach the students to question rules and regulations, to seek explanations in dogma, to confront impositions without bending to prejudice, to demand authority from those in power, to find a place from which to speak their own ideas, even if this means opposing, and ultimately doing away with the teacher herself.

In certain societies in which the intellectual act has a prestige of its own, as in many native societies throughout the world, the teacher (elder, shaman, instructor, keeper of the tribe's memory) has an easier task in fulfilling his or her obligations, since most activities in those societies are subordinate to the act of teaching. But in most other societies, the intellectual act has no prestige whatsoever. The budget allotted to education is the first to be cut, most of our leaders are barely literate, our national values are purely economical. Lip-service is paid to the concept of literacy and books are officially celebrated, but effectively, in schools and universities for instance, whatever financial aid is made available is invested in electronic equipment (fiercely pushed by the industry) rather than print, with the wilfully erroneous excuse that the electronic support is cheaper and more durable than that of paper and ink. As a consequence, our school libraries are rapidly losing essential ground. Our economic laws favour container over content, since the former can be merchandised more productively and appears more seductive, and therefore our economic thrust is placed behind the electronic technology. To sell it, our society advertises two main qualities: its quickness and its immediacy. "Faster than thought" reads the publicity for a certain powerbook, a slogan Pinocchio's school would no doubt have endorsed. The opposition is valid, since thought requires time and depth, the two essential qualities of the act of reading.

Teaching is a slow, difficult process, two adjectives that have, in our time, become faults instead of terms of praise. It seems almost impossible to convince most of us today of the merits of slowness and deliberate effort. And yet, Pinocchio will only learn if he is not in a hurry to learn, and will only become a full individual through the effort required to learn slowly. Whether in Collodi's age of parroted school texts, or in ours of almost infinite regurgitated facts available at our fingertips, it is relatively easy to be superficially literate, to follow a sit-com, to understand an advertising joke, to read a political slogan, to use a computer. But to go further and deeper, to have the courage to face our fears and doubts and hidden secrets, to question the workings of society in regard to ourselves and to the world, we need to learn to read in other ways, differently, in order to learn to think. Pinocchio may turn into a boy at the conclusion of his adventures, but ultimately he still thinks like a puppet.

Almost everything around us encourages us not to think, to be content with commonplaces, with dogmatic language that divides the world neatly in white and black, good and evil, them and us. This is the language of extremism, sprouting up everywhere these days, reminding us that it has not disappeared. To the difficulties of reflecting on paradoxes and open questions, on contradictions and chaotic order, we respond with the age-old cry of Cato the Censor in the Roman Senate, "Cartago delenda est!," "Carthage must be destroyed!" — the other civilisation must not be tolerated, dialogue must be avoided, rule must be imposed by exclusion or annihilation. This is a language that pretends to communicate but, under several guises, simply bullies; it expects no answer except obedient silence. "Be sensible and good," the Blue Fairy tells Pinocchio in the end, "and you'll be happy." Many a political slogan can be reduced to this inane piece of advice.

To step outside that constricted vocabulary of what society considers "sensible and good," into a vaster, richer and, above all, more ambiguous one, is terrifying, because this other realm of words has no boundaries and is perfectly equivalent to thought, emotion, intuition. This infinite vocabulary is open to us if we will take the time and make the effort of exploring it, and over our many centuries it has wrought words out of experience in order to reflect experience back to us, to allow us to understand the world and ourselves. It is greater and longer lasting than Pinocchio's ideal library of sweetmeats, because it includes it, metaphorically, and can lead to it, concretely, by allowing us to imagine ways in which we can change a society in which Pinocchio starves, is beaten and exploited, is refused the state of childhood, is asked to be obedient and happy in his obedience. To imagine is to dissolve barriers, to ignore boundaries, to subvert the vision of the world imposed upon us. Though Collodi was unable to grant his puppet this final state of self-discovery, he intuited, I believe, the possibilities of his imaginative powers. And even when asserting the importance of bread over words, he knew well that every crisis of society is ultimately a crisis of the imagination.

Mondion, France