

PINOCCCHIO

WITH REFLECTIONS ON A FATHER'S LOVE
BY FRANCO NEMBRINI



CARLO COLLODI

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REFLECTIONS ON A FATHER'S LOVE



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TO THE PARACLETE

VENI SANCTE SPIRITUS, VENI PER MARIAM

PINOCCHIO

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REFLECTIONS ON A FATHER'S LOVE

BY FRANCO NEMBRINI

TRANSLATED BY MARIANGELA SULLIVAN

ILLUSTRATIONS

BY GABRIELE DELL'OTTO



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A WORD FROM MARCIE

I've heard it said, "You don't find a book, a book finds you." Several years ago, while visiting friends in Italy, I asked if I could use their computer. In the family's book-lined back office, one particular book caught my eye: Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*, with notes by Franco Nembrini.

Aware of Nembrini's work on Dante, and always more interested in books than checking emails, I was unable to contain my curiosity and pulled *Pinocchio* off the shelf. Within moments I was lost in wonder. Surprisingly, the commentary was not for children; it was for me. Somehow, this tale of a wooden puppet illuminated the journey of my life.

When my friends gave me the book as a gift, I devoured the story—and Nembrini's accompanying wisdom—on my ten-hour plane ride home to Minnesota. Since then, this story about the adventures of a puppet has continued to be my companion.

While Italians know this beloved novel well, most Americans are only vaguely familiar with children's versions of the tale and have never read the original classic.

It is our privilege at Well-Read Mom to bring this work—*Pinocchio: A Journey to the Father*, with Collodi's tale and Franco Nembrini's expanded commentary woven together—to American readers for the first time.

It's not by chance that you are holding this classic work. I hope that you discover—as was the case for me—that you didn't just find the book, the book found you.

Marcie Stokman
Founder, Well-Read Mom



CHAPTER I

*HOW IT CAME TO PASS THAT MASTER CHERRY THE CARPENTER
FOUND A PIECE OF WOOD THAT LAUGHED AND CRIED LIKE A CHILD.*

THERE was once upon a time . . .
'A king!' my little readers will instantly exclaim.
No, children, you are wrong. There was once upon a time a piece of wood.

This wood was not valuable: it was only a common log like those that are burnt in winter in the stoves and fireplaces to make a cheerful blaze and warm the rooms.

I cannot say how it came about, but the fact is that one fine day this piece of wood happened to be in the shop of an old carpenter of the name of Master Antonio. He was, however, called by everybody Master Cherry, on account of the end of his nose, which was always as red and polished as a ripe cherry.

No sooner had Master Cherry set eyes on the piece of wood than his face beamed with delight; and, rubbing his hands together with satisfaction, he said softly to himself:

'This wood happens to be here at the right moment; it will just do to make the leg of a little table.'

Having said this he immediately took a sharp axe with which to remove the bark and the rough surface. Just, however, as he was going to give the first stroke he remained with his arm suspended in the air, for he heard a very small voice saying imploringly, 'Do not strike me so hard!'

Picture to yourselves the astonishment of good old Master Cherry!

He turned his terrified eyes all round the room to try and discover where the little voice could possibly have come from, but he saw nobody! He looked under the bench—nobody; he

looked into a cupboard that was always shut—nobody; he looked into a basket of shavings and sawdust—nobody; he even opened the door of the shop and gave a glance into the street—and still nobody. Who, then, could it be?

‘I see how it is,’ he said, laughing and scratching his wig; ‘evidently that little voice was all my imagination. Let us set to work again.’

And taking up the axe he struck a tremendous blow on the piece of wood.

‘Oh! oh! you have hurt me!’ cried the same little voice dolefully.

This time Master Cherry was petrified. His eyes started out of his head with fright, his mouth remained open, and his tongue hung out almost to the end of his chin, like a mask on a fountain. As soon as he had recovered the use of his speech, he began to say, stuttering and trembling with fear:

‘But where on earth can that little voice have come from that said Oh! Oh!? . . . Here there is certainly not a living soul. Is it possible that this piece of wood can have learnt to cry and to lament like a child? I cannot believe it. This piece of wood, here it is; a log for fuel like all the others, and thrown on the fire it would about suffice to boil a saucepan of beans. How then? Can anyone be hidden inside it? If anyone is hidden inside, so much the worse for him. I will settle him at once.’

So saying, he seized the poor piece of wood and commenced beating it without mercy against the walls of the room.

Then he stopped to listen if he could hear any little voice lamenting. He waited two minutes—nothing; five minutes—nothing; ten minutes—still nothing!

‘I see how it is,’ he then said, forcing himself to laugh and pushing up his wig; ‘evidently the little voice that said, Oh!

Oh! was all my imagination! Let us set to work again.'

But as all the same he was in a great fright, he tried to sing to give himself a little courage.

Putting the axe aside he took his planar, to plane and polish the bit of wood; but whilst he was running it up and down he heard the same little voice say, laughing:

'Have done! You are tickling me all over!'

This time poor Master Cherry fell down as if he had been struck by lightning. When he at last opened his eyes he found himself seated on the floor.

His face was quite changed, even the end of his nose, instead of being crimson, as it was nearly always, had become blue from fright.



A PIECE OF WOOD IS JUST A PIECE OF WOOD . . .



There is something strange about this tale from the start. The adventure of the piece of wood begins in the shop of a carpenter named Master Cherry. Master Cherry then gives the wood to someone else, and only at this point does the story really begin.

Couldn't the story have simply begun in Geppetto's shop, with him carving the wood? Why does Collodi start with this first chapter, which seems to add nothing to the plot? Why open with a character with such a strong personality (Master Cherry), only to have him disappear? There must be a reason. It is only a matter of discovering what it is.

Like all respectable fairytales, *Pinocchio* begins "Once upon a time." But Collodi immediately shakes off the usual formalities:

*There was once upon a time . . .
“A king!” my little readers will instantly exclaim.
No, children, you are wrong. There was once
upon a time a piece of wood.*

This twist is more than just a clever line—it has a profound meaning. The expression “once upon a time” touches on the question of origins, as Biffi lays out very clearly in his book. “There was once upon a time” takes us to the questions all of us have: *What was there in the beginning? How do our stories begin? Where do they originate?*

The classic expression, “Once upon a time, there was a king,” answers this question in a clear and explicit way. It recalls John’s Gospel, which opens with the line, “In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1). At the beginning of all history is God, the creator: *Being*, who gives life to all other things. That is the classic answer.

But Collodi’s twist on the classic opening is deeply meaningful. This is because, in reality, we do not perceive the question of God as primary, from the existential point of view. When we are fourteen or fifteen years old, and we begin to feel life’s wounds, and the true questions that arise from them, the first question we raise is not whether or not God exists. That is the second question. Of course, when it comes to the order of things, it is the first, because everything depends on the presence or the absence of God. But from the existential point of view, from the point of view of real human experience, when you open your eyes to life and begin to grapple with it, the first question that arises is not the question of God’s existence, but has to do with other things: *Why do we have to die? Why is there so much suffering? What is the mysterious attraction I feel toward that girl,*

which demands total devotion of me and makes me think that if I cannot be with her, then life is nothing? What does it mean to really love? And is forgiveness possible? What is the purpose of time? And what is beauty? These are the first questions. And because we want to answer them, the question of God bubbles up. Because if we die—and it is a fact that we do—then we must face the question: *Is there anyone who does not die? Can there be any truth to the rumor that's been going around for two thousand years that one of us died and then rose from the dead?* The question of God comes later.

Collodi opening with the piece of wood is wonderful for this reason: reality comes first. What comes first are questions about the things we see, about our lives. This is where a true religious sense creeps in little by little (and must then be educated). A religious sense, that is, the question of God and existence.

Collodi then starts telling the story. And, in the very first lines, he uses an expression that immediately seizes our attention: “One fine day, this piece of wood happened to be in the shop of an old carpenter.” “This wood happens to be here at the right moment.” In the space of a few lines, the verb “happens” appears twice. This verb instantly captures the attitude of Master Cherry: reality *happened*. What does its origin matter? What does it matter where it came from? Who cares? It doesn’t matter if reality was willed into being, created—it *is*, and that is all there is to it. What is here just happened to be here. We might say that it is here by chance.

Collodi mercilessly describes Master Cherry as lacking imagination. For him a piece of wood can only be a piece of wood. It is useful to burn for heat, or, at best, it can become a table leg. That is to say, it is nothing but an object, which I can use to build something that I have in mind—something

that I imagine and design.

Master Cherry gets to work to carry out his plan. But then, “he heard a very small voice saying imploringly, ‘Do not strike me so hard!’” He freezes on the spot, with his arm suspended in the air.

Master Cherry stands frozen in place, mouth open in shock, because he finds himself face to face with the unexpected. He discovers that reality is bigger than what he had in mind. I can describe things in scientific terms: I can measure, and weigh, and work to get something out of it all. But there is more. There is more in everything. The line from Montale comes to mind: “Everything bears the inscription: ‘further on.’”¹⁰ There is more than what I know how to measure and weigh. The little voice is that “more” which is inside everything, that “more” of which things are just a sign and of which everything speaks. “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps 19:2). We can study the heavens, of course—we have to study them. But we cannot have exhaustive knowledge of either the piece of wood or the starry sky just by measuring them and explaining them scientifically. There is more, much more.

Master Cherry is not the kind of person who will easily acknowledge this, however. He looks left and right, taking stock of everything, methodically—scientifically, we might say. But what if, after taking stock of everything, I don’t see anyone, and I’m not willing to admit, even hypothetically, that I may not know everything there is to know about this piece of wood? If I have already made up my mind that it is

10. “Beneath the dense azure / of the sky, a pair of seabirds wheel away; / nor will they ever rest: because all images bear the inscription: / ‘further on!’” Montale, Eugenio, “L’agave sullo Scoglio – Maelstrale,” in *Tutte le Poesie*, Milan: Mondadori (1984), 73. Translation ours.

only a piece of wood, then what are my options? In the end, in order to avoid entertaining a hypothesis that goes beyond what I can observe, I am forced to deny my own experience: *It's clear that I just imagined it. I'm wrong. I must have been drinking . . .*

Here I would like to share something that happened to me some time ago. I was in Central Asia, in a part of what was once the Soviet Union, at a conference for educators. I made some remarks and afterwards an older woman stood up and asked me, somewhat angrily, where I got off talking about God when everyone knows there is no such thing. "Ma'am," I replied, "are you so sure that there is no God?" Seeming somewhat appalled, the woman answered: "So, then it really is true that, in your part of the world, the capitalist culture has told you a pack of lies! Here they told us the truth immediately. As soon as Yuri Gagarin reached space, he said, 'God isn't here!'" She was convinced! Convinced that believing in God is a matter of looking around: if you see him, there he is. If not, he does not exist.

That's Master Cherry. We might say that Master Cherry is the epitome of modern rationalism, of the modern claim supported by a particular notion of science. It is the claim that we understand everything; that mystery is not needed. Reality cannot surprise us. It is not a mystery. At most there are some unknowns, which science will, little by little, come to explain. But there are no mysteries.

When Master Cherry has convinced himself that it was all his imagination and gets to work again, up pipes the little voice. This time, "Master Cherry was petrified. His eyes started out of his head with fright."

The word "fright" appears three more times in this chapter. Because if I approach reality with all the fragility, precariousness, and weakness that I find belong to me,

then it will inevitably frighten me. Because if reality remains closed, and I have determined that there is nothing outside worth knowing and loving, worth giving my life for, then the unknowns outside my door will scare me. Mystery, the mystery that springs from the depths of reality, calls to us. It wounds us perhaps, but it rouses our curiosity. Awareness of the unknown is a good awareness. If, on the contrary, we have already decided that nothing can exist beyond the piece of wood, then we have to close the door and pretend that there really is nothing on the other side. In that case, what might be beyond that door scares us. It scares us because it might repudiate what we think we know, destroying the image we already have of ourselves and the world—that is, destroying us.

This is what happens in Dino Buzzati's tale *Il Colombre*, another story I hold very dear. The story's protagonist spies a mysterious fish, the *colombre*, from aboard a ship. Everyone tells him that the meaning of this vision is that he must stay far from the sea, because the *colombre* will rest at nothing until it destroys him. But the protagonist is drawn irresistibly to the water, so he spends his life sailing the sea, but always fleeing from the *colombre*, which relentlessly pursues him. At the end, when he is near death, he decides to confront the beast. When the two are finally face to face, the *colombre* tells him:

“You made me swim so far. While you fled and fled. And you never understood the first thing.”
“What do you mean?” Stefano asked it, cut to the quick. “I didn't follow you across the world to devour you, as you thought. The King of the Sea had ordered me to simply give you this.” And the shark put out its tongue, offering the old captain

a small, phosphorescent sphere. Stefano picked it up in his fingers and looked at it. It was an enormous pearl. And he recognized the famous Sea Pearl, which brings fortune, power, love, and inner peace to whoever possesses it. But now it was too late. “Alas!” he cried, shaking his head sadly. “How wrong it all is. All I have succeeded in doing is dooming my own life and ruining yours.”¹¹

This is a marvelous parable of the modern age. Ever since the Renaissance, and certainly since the Enlightenment, the dominant culture has understood God to be the enemy of man. If God exists, if Mystery exists, then we conclude that human beings are not free. The existence of God would make them slaves of God, and they could not be themselves, for they would be forced to bend to an external power. For this reason, contemporary life is spent fleeing from God. Only to discover at the very end that the reality is precisely the opposite: God—Mystery—seeks man not to kill him, but to make him happy.

Modern man rejects the hypothesis that the Mystery can be his friend, and is, therefore, afraid of it. Fear is the calling card of the irreligious person. Meanwhile, the call of the religious person is: “Do not be afraid.” From the “Do not be afraid” repeated so often by Jesus in the Gospels¹² to the “Do not be afraid!” with which John Paul II began his

11. Buzzati, Dino, “Il Colombre,” in *La Boutique del Mistero*, Milan: Mondadori (1968), 176. Translation ours.

12. See Mt 17:7 and 28, Mt 10, Mk 6:50, Lk 12:7, and Jn 6:20.

papacy, later recalled by Pope Francis.¹³

Master Cherry, when he overcomes his fright, arrives for a moment at the correct theory—that the voice comes from the piece of wood. But he brushes the idea immediately aside with the terrible, icy profession of faith of modern rationalism: “I cannot believe it.” Is it possible that this piece of wood is more than just a piece of wood? That underneath what I can see and touch and measure there is something else? No, I cannot believe it. Why can’t he believe it? Because he has already made up his mind, from the beginning and with an absolute pre-judgment, that things can only be exactly as he says they are.

And so, Master Cherry re-engages the struggle to force reality into the shape he wishes it to take. But the voice speaks up again. Reality overpowers his imagination. And, in the end, he finds himself “seated on the floor. His face was quite changed, even the end of his nose, instead of being crimson, as it was nearly always, had become blue from fright.”

Here it is again: the word “fright.” Fright is the last word of the chapter. Fear is the definition, the calling card of this strange character, who personifies the incorrect human approach toward reality.

Here I cannot fail to point out the parallel with *The Divine Comedy*, in which Dante’s adventure begins with a double departure. At the end of the first canto of the *Inferno* he begins his journey—“Then he set out and I came on behind

13.https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/audiences/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20161022_udienza-giubilare.html. Translation ours.

him.” (Inferno I, 136).¹⁴ Then, at the end of the second canto, we find him setting out once again: “[A]nd when he moved ahead / I entered on the deep and savage way” (Inferno II, 141-2). Why are there two departures? For the same reason that there are two in *Pinocchio*.

Dante uses the double departure to describe the necessary condition for truly living the whole of the adventure. In the second canto, Virgil proposes the journey and Dante gives voice to his fears about it. Virgil replies by telling him that his fear is unreasonable, given the fact that Our Lady herself desires him to take the journey.

In the same way, Collodi builds *Pinocchio*'s trajectory from the starting point of a first chapter that serves only to tell readers: *OK kids, do whatever you want, but know that if you demand to know, measure, and understand everything according to a vexing rationalism—that is, if you live without openness to reality, demanding to understand everything and put it all into categories ahead of time—if you don't face reality with an immense window open onto the mystery, from which so many new things can come, then you are like Master Cherry*. A life like this has no potential for novelty. Every day will not be a new beginning, because at a certain point you will have nothing more to learn, nothing more to enjoy, nothing more to experience. And, inevitably (and this is, perhaps, the most terrible thing about this chapter), you will end up becoming the enemy of the very reality that you claim to love and serve, despite even the best intentions.

14. All citations to Dante's *Divine Comedy* use the English language version translated by Robert Hollander and are freely available online through the website of the Princeton Dante Project, dante.princeton.edu.

Where, indeed, does Master Cherry's reasoning lead after he has rejected the evidence with an absolutely irrational theory (irrational because he heard the voice with his own ears)? He picks up the piece of wood and "commence[s] beating it without mercy against the walls of the room."

This is where all rationalism leads. This is the endpoint of every ideology. Because every form of rationalism, every ideology always ends with needing an enemy to eliminate. The enemy is necessary. Because if you have decided that reality must be a certain way, and then it turns out that the world is not how you have decided it must be, then the only serious hypothesis (if there is no room for mystery, and God does not exist) is this: there must be some enemy trying to trick me. There is an enemy who is disrupting and challenging my perception of the truth. And you end up living to identify that enemy. Always having an enemy to fight is the purpose that drives all power and every ideology.

This is inevitably the case. If the truth is an idea determined by myself, that I have in mind, then anyone who would contest or deny it is an enemy. It's me or you. So, if I am in power, and I declare that religion is a lie, then anyone who prays must be declared criminally insane, must be cast into the Gulag. They must be cast into the Gulag because they are the enemies of the truth defined by me. The little voice, which I refuse to acknowledge as a plausible, unexpected way of reading reality, must be eliminated. All Master Cherrys, all ideologies, end up this way.

And political ideologies are not the only ones susceptible to this end. Ideological shortcuts are always lying in wait for us. We must all, in every circumstance of life, decide what position to take in the face of reality. Either we already know what reality is, how it is made, what we can expect from it, and how to make it work in favor of our plans, blaming

someone else if our plans fail (our spouse, our job, our political leaders. . .). Or else we can recognize that reality is larger, that there is something else behind it, and that the only way we can know it and love it is by following the unexpected suggestions that emerge from it along the way. We must do this even if we want to truly use reality, use it according to its true nature, in accordance with our own good and the good of our object. This is a clear choice that everyone must face. And the latter position is that of the character who enters the scene in the second chapter: Geppetto.

