

**Elda Talka**

“Aleksander Xhuvani”, University

## **Patterns of the Technical Elements of Calvino’s Folktales - a Perfect Play of Combining Words**

### **Abstract**

*Calvino - one of the masters of the contemporary literature and rewriter and transcriber of Italian folktales used an original way of narration, with combining and straightforward findings at the limits of the literary game and functional to fulfilling his inquisitive, coherent and literary journey. This article will specifically focus on analysing, basing on scientific criteria, the features of the Italian folktales, the patterns of its technical elements as well as the ways it has been concerted, rewritten and transcript by Italo Calvino. The writer has wisely selected the most beautiful, original and rare versions of the Italian folktales. He translated them from different dialects enriching them with a variety of approaches from the selected version while preserving their character and inner unity untouched so rendering them more complete and articulable. He managed to integrate, with a mastery hand, the invention of words in case of ellipses or in cases of disintegrations of the lines, by organizing narration with a dexterous language which reflects the dialect roots while avoiding “cultivated” expressions. The elastic language used by Calvino is well- intertwined with the dialect, the images, and the expressed rephrasing. In some of its folktales Calvino changed names and lines from the original or changed narration while still respecting the traditions of the original region, or named anonymous characters in order to incite readers’ curiosity. Patterns of the technical elements of the Calvinian folktales have been realized with technical intelligence and artistic mastery.*

**Key words:** *Folktales, fantastical, fabulous, version, transcription.*

## 1-Introduction

Italo Calvino is a modern apologist (Asor Rosa, 2009, 423), and the most important narrator of the first half of the XX century, both in the Italian and international literature, for his bringing and contribution into the European literature. The French newspaper *Le Monde* dated 19 September 1985 would write: *The Italian writer Italo Calvino – author of Visconte dimezzato Barone rampante e il Cavaliere inesistente should be considered as one of the masters of the contemporary literature* (Corriere della sera, 2010). As a contemporary writer, Calvino considered literature as a cultural unifier and the means to experiment various narrations as well as new ways of interpreting reality. According to Giulio Nascimbeni, Calvino was a lyrical –epic writer, an ethnologist, anthropologist and heraldic, the writer of space and geometry. Umberto Eco would name him as the writer of his generation; Geno Pampaloni would name him as the fantasy writer, the Balzac of the human comedy and scientist. Calvino has been a new Von Braun. However, the one discovering Calvino’s talent would be another writer, called Cesare Pavese, who spotlighted the fantastic and fabulous tone of Calvino’s stories. Italo Calvino himself (Ghidetti, 1985, 871), in the introduction of his novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno/The path of the spider’s nest* wrote; “*Cesare Pavese has been the first to speak about the fantastic and fabulous tone of my style, whereas until that moment I had not made it out and later I tried to reinforce this definition*”.

At the beginnings of his art Calvino enters into the Italian literary landscape as a neo-realist narrator in a quite original way. He managed to find a new linguistic and stylistic code (Rosa, 2009, 554), with combining and straightforward findings at the limits of the literary game, as never before in the Italian literature. This prerogative of the code – according to the judgment of Rosa, the literary critic, (2009, 555-558), *sources from the tangling of different mental factors, each of them considered on its own, which is very rare in the contemporary Italian literature, but their relation is unique in its own kind, in the European and even in world level, rendering an unforgettable distinction of this Italian writer.*

Adaptation of this new linguistic and stylistic code is functional to the literary writing, namely, it served to express what Calvino could not have achieved to evince with the previous criteria in literature (*Autografo*, 1985). The code was associated with the taste of fantasy and

irony which managed to transfer reality, basing on the folktale model, the apologist's one, (narration of morality) and utopia. Calvino is the figure of the ethnologist, anthropologist who, as a specialist of folktales managed to collect, rewrite and interpret the Italian folktales, paying a special attention and passion to them. These folktales were, later on transferred to a bestseller in the remote continent –the USA and, in these terms, he should be considered as a second Ariosto for the Italian literature.

*Focus of the research:* this article will specifically focus on the Italian folktales, the technical elements of its pattern as well as the ways it has been perceived rewritten and transcribed by Calvino. *Fiabe italiane – Italian Folktales* is the title of the literary summary of Calvino's Italian folktales. Italian folktales have been perceived in three volumes with 200 folktales. In the summary have been presented all documented types of folktales, whose existence in the Italian dialects, as well as all regions of Italy. They are not collected from oral tradition of the people but from materials compiled and published in books, specialized magazines, etc, which also had unpublished manuscripts from museums and specialized libraries (Zaccharia & Benussi, 2002, 194).

However, why did Calvino undertake the initiative of rewriting folktales?

The reason is that Italy and the literary world panorama needed a new Italian Grimm. The writer himself would state, in the introduction of his volume of *Italian Folktales* that the urge to compile the folktales summary has really come from an Italian inner necessity. Italy needed an edition of the summary of Italian folktales deign to be ranked alongside the great books of foreign folktales and it was precisely the work of Grimm brothers which inciting rewriting and transcription of the Italian Folktales while respecting scientific canons, the folklore, oral lores and the preservation of the stenographic loyalty to oral narration.

Calvino commenced his work by having, as a base scientific material, the scientific work inherited by folklorists who had written folk narrations down, on paper and out of this infinite pile of materials the writer has wisely selected the most beautiful, original and rare versions. He translated them from different dialects enriching them with a variety of approaches from the selected version while preserving their character and inner unity untouched so rendering them more complete

and articulable.

He managed to integrate, with a mastery hand, the invention of words in case of ellipses or in cases of disintegrations of the lines, by organizing narration with a dexterous language which reflects the dialect roots while avoiding “cultivated” expressions. The elastic language used by Calvino is well- intertwined with the dialect, the images, and the expressed rephrasing which in some cases were unusual for the specific dialects and it is in this point that the folktales plots have been completed with specific Calvinian technical elements, as a combining play of words. The folktale, as a magic and wonderful narration, narrates about Kings, beautiful places, palaces, animals, tells stories, local and religion legends, anecdotes, etc. Tales enjoys the great privilege of been translated mostly as compared to the other literary genres and as such, it is accessible by all the world fantasy readers (D’Aronco, 1953) and be they Italian or foreigners. However, their accessibility would have been difficult if they are written in dialects because of the difficulties in deciphering dialectical language. Tales absorb a lot from the place of origin while narrating about landscapes, customs, the moral or a local tincture. At the bottom of each tale is written the name of the respective location in which it was written down and the region it originates from. Precisely the denomination of locations that shows the most beautiful, the reaches and the most narrated version in the folktales rewritten by Calvino.

*Rewritings of the Tales:* In his rewritings Calvino has implemented the Prop’s scheme, placing a positive hero in the center of the plot and opposing him is a negative antagonist, there is an initial positive situation, departure of the hero from home in search of the fate, his denunciation, spying, harming, the function of donor, willing or unwilling reaction to help, providing a magical means, hero’s fight and victory, magic acting in some tales and the conviction of the antagonist and the triumph of justice. It is known that tales are the same everywhere. The international circulation, (using an expression by Vittorio Santoli (1953, XX), *in community does not exclude diversity expressed by selecting or refusing certain motives, preferences for certain kinds, creation of certain characters, the atmosphere around narration, the features of which reflect a certain and formal culture.* Are considered Italian the tales the ones which have been narrated by the Italian people, have become part of their oral tradition of the Italian narrative folklore and are divided according to the locations of origin in Tuscan,

Venetiann Sicilian, etc.

Themes of the Italian folktales rewritten by Calvino are different; serving identity and futurity, suffer, exhaustion and struggle to achieve happiness, the virtue of the good hero and the evil antagonist vices, triumph of justice, unity, solidarity among people and elements of nature, the endless possibilities for change. Heroes in tales are young boys and girls, generous in their spirit but even intelligent, clever, cunning, the ones who always manage to leave home in search of the fate, they either must be freed by the magic or should face strong and perilous trials. These heroes should fight the evil enemy, which might be devil, the magician, the witch or any other *force majeure*. Heroes are destined to win even though old women, water beasts and strong flowing water offer them spontaneous magic support. At the end returning home crowned with the necessary fortune for their happiness and love.

Calvino attempted to find “the different” from one folktale to another, the one coming from the way of narrating about location and the individual tone of the oral narrator, whereas, on the other side, eliminating the “different” by means of the ways materials have been collected as well as by means of the direct intervention of the folklorist. In some tales Calvino has changed names and lines from the original, such as in the tales *Il bambino nel sacco- Child in the sack*, *Diavolozoppo-The laming boy*, *Sant’Antonio –Saint Anthony*, he changed narration so respecting the traditions of the Liguria region folktales by supposing the text in dialect. In other cases Calvino gave characters new names, anonymous which incite the readers’ interest and functional to passing from one step to another in the scale of poetic involvement, so realizing patterns of technical elements very well by turning it into a perfect play of words combination. Considering the proverb of the other folktales collector, Gherardo Nerucci “*La novella nun è bella se sopra nun ci si rappella*”- “The novel is worth while being repeatedly added new stuff as it is told again and again”, overall for the new elements added to it by passing from one mouth to the other. In this aspect the writer consider himself as an anonymous hook of the infinite chain of folktales’ transmission. In most cases, tales repeat historical motives and subjects from folk poems from ‘A thousand and one nights’ as for instance, *Il figliol del re di Francia, The boy of the king*, *Paolina da Perugia-Paolina from Perugia* repeat *Andreuccio da Perugia-Andreuccio from Perugia* of Boccaccio, or motives by *Il*

*figlio del mercante di Milano- The boy of merchant from Milan* an ancient tale, since tales are from all the regions of Italy.

However, the most privileged are Toscana and Sicily for the quantity and the quality of the collected material, Venice for the colors of the world of fantasy for places, water canals, etc, whereas Trentino is prone to grotesque and the fearsome as well as the morale from their narration. The Italian tales have their distinctive features, as well, regarding foreign influences; the German world with Grimm brothers and France influence the tales of the North of Italy whereas the South of Italy tales have Arab-oriental influence.

*Characteristics of Italian Tales:* Italian tales do not narrate about castles but about palaces, they never maintain the word 'prince' but 'King's son', 'King's daughter', etc. Denominations of superhuman beings depend on the region, namely, there are different words for 'witch'; *masca* - Piemonte, *mamma draga* - Sicilia, *om salbadgh*- Romagna, *nanni-orcu*- Puglia etc. What is noticed in all tales is the medieval print of the folktale remains still strong. The elements of metamorphosis as in *Ragazza mela, Apple girl, Rosmarina, Rosmarin, Bambina venduta con le pere-The girl sold with pears*, they evoke the metamorphosis of the woman and the fruit, woman and the tree, etc. The secret of the tale is the approach to metaphor, elicited by the fresh image of the apple and the girl or that of the pears, at the end of the basket serving to add more weight. The other element of the Italian folktales is that solutions come as mender of the fate or making justice. The motive of love is found in *Bellinda e il Mostro, Bellinda and the monster* or in *Il pappagallo-Pappagale*, in the pattern of those tales, in which is reflected the technical intelligence shaped by folk narrators and Calvino and which is actualized, in terms of historical meaning, in the parody of the tales. Tales, often give similar actions to various characters or the repetition of functions is glamorous, (Propp, 2004, 27). The techniques tales have been structured is important since it is the correct use of rules and norms alongside the looseness of fantasy and imagination, and this is what the writer did. While considering the theme, there exist a series of mandatory passing to go to the resolution of the "motives" being swapped from one "type" to the other, for instance, the horse's skin picked up by the eagle, the water well in which one can descend to go to the other world, the pigeon girls whose garments were stolen while they were bathing, magic boots and vanished coats taken stealthily from thieves, three

nuts that should be broken, the house of winds where one can find information about his way, etc. It is the narrator's duty to organize them and hold them together just like the bricks of the wall put on the other, passing over lines which have no evolvment, by accelerating in points where there is no narration, especially in case interruptions and narrations takes anew, always using his art masterly and adding hues and content to narration.

The writer should manoeuvre in a fantasy world, e.g. the King in the Sicilian folktales and the King in Tuscan ones. The court of folktales King is in general something abstract, desired symbol of power and fortune. In Sicily the King, the court and nobility are concrete institutions, well consolidated in their hierarchy, with etiquettes and a moral code of their own. In Sicilian folktales Kings do not make important decisions per se, without prior consultations with the Council. In Tuscany, folktales have other features regarding the concepts, mentioned above, there have been no Kings there so, the word King is too general which does not intertwines any kinds of institution, the word simply entails a rich man, referring to him by nystagmus such-like 'as a King' the same in meaning with "as a rich man", with no other shapes of meaning or any royal attributes.; in analogue reasoning is also used for court. In Tuscany, neighbouring gentlemen exchange visits, can wave each-other from their windows as two polite local bourgeois, another world described by Calvino-s folktales is the world of peasantry. Randomly, folktales commence with certain initial situations; (Propp, 2004, 34), some of them beginning with descriptions from the countryside, as a starting point they exhibit the extreme conditions of poverty, famine, unemployment etc, this being a feature of Italian narrative vocabulary which Calvino has complemented and respected. The initial motive in many folktales, especially those from the South, which in Sicilian dialect have been termed as "cavolicid-daru", there is a poor family which has nothing to cook at home and they begin to wander around the village, father the first and then the mother and daughters, "to ask for some soup"; a uprooted cabbage, bigger than the others opens the spiral, the route of an underground world where one can find supernatural grooms or a witch which has imprisoned a girl, a jealous androphagus, (man-eater).

Other scenes might be in the coastal locations, in which, instead of the unemployed and landless villager, is the figure of the unfortunate fisherman, who one day catches, in his net, a big fish which can



speak. However the realistic situation of misery is not only an opening motive the folktales begin with, it also is a trampoline for jumping to the wonderland, a contrasting term with the world of the Kings and super naturals. There are peasant tales, from beginning to the end, in which the peasant, the farmer and the hero keep working with their hoe, until in a certain moment they have been given provisional magic powers, thanks to the force of their arms and the virtue of their persistence.

These rare but even unrefined folktales, entailing distributed traditions, fragments of a meditative epoch which perhaps come out of beings devoid of any forms or shape, borrowing their motives from equestrian events while replacing chivalrous braveries in order to win and reach the hand of princesses, giving up their wooden plough, hoe and their land to live in royal palaces.

Examples for illustrating the aforementioned can be the folktales *Sperso per il mondo – Cast away from the world, or Giuseppe Ciufolo che se non zappava suonava lo zufolo – Jeff the Forelock didn't hoe and played his fife, Il regalo del vento tramontano – a present from the wind overthere, Quattordici - Fourteen, the unfortunate, etc*, which tell the long odyssey of the filthy deeds of the King's girl, her overstrains, as well as in the *Due cugine – Two Cousins* telling about the sufferings and overstrains of the two tailoring girls, etc.

As a conclusion, it can be said that the pattern of the technical elements of Calvinian folktales were realized with proficient intelligence and high artistic mastery. The writer's will to tell people the way out from the research labyrinth of the chaos' logo, to lead history in a way out of the dark magic paralyzing them, remains strong, so both the fabulous transfiguration of the reality, therefore, "the catalogue of the braveries where people are tried and investigated to outdo the nature's condition (Boarini & Bonfiglioli 1976, 565) is functional to achieving the potential success even when this success is not always secured.

According to Calvino, in reality tales are "true", so this is what he writes in the introduction of *"Italian Folktales"*; "all have been taken together, in their fortuity of human events, a general explanation of life which was born in ancient times and has been preserved in this convolution of the peasantry conscience to our times; they are the catalogues of the fate of men and women, especially what belongs



*to the human side and the one related with the destiny; the youth, right from its birth which expresses and keeps in itself a wish or a conviction, far from home, bringing to trials to grow and mature, to be confirmed like a human being. And in this sketch everything has been brought together; the drastic division of beings into kings and poor, yet their equity remains essential; prosecution of the innocent and his compensation as the term of the inner dialectics of life, love met before knowing it in reality and then the pain of sufferings as a missing good; the common destiny of submission to magic, namely, being determined from the complex and unknown forces, the torment to get free and the self-decision understood as an elementary work alongside the liberation of others; loyalty to an engagement and the purity of heart as basic virtues leading to salvation and triumph; the beauty as a sign of grace which can hide, underneath, the ugliness of the frog's body; and overall, the common content of everything men, animals, things, infinite possibilities of metamorphosis of everything persisting..." (Calvino, 2009, XV). These words have been written in the Preface of the book entitled *Italian Folktales*, which isn't merely an introduction of a summary of folktales but a poetic composition and a life program, a personal ethic declaration expressing the genuine serious and original engagement of the Italian writer.*

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