

# Cristina Campo, the Aristocrat of Modern Literature: On Autobiographical Instance in Her Literary Work

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In the present article, the attention is focused on autorepresentational image that can be derived from Cristina Campo's literary language, while analyzing at the same time its genesis, given finalities and reception. It is what can be deduced in filigrain from essayistic-critical writings in *The Unforgivable Ones* (*Gli imperdonabili*) and *Under a False Name* (*Sotto falso nome*), as well as from collections of letters and illuminating lyrical motifs, based on which it will be demonstrated that analogous themes are associated to various literary genres on grounds of principle of inter-genre contamination. By illustrating the founding postulates of autopoetic reflections, the intention is to ulteriorly determine their collocation within the frame of cultural history. To veiled autobiographism contributes pseudonymical practice, as well as subsequent stylistic devices, through which modernistic aspects are highlighted. The autobiographical narration in *The Golden Walnut* (*La noce d'oro*), short story-fairy tale of aesthetic timbre frequently infused with figural tropism, comprises a literary mixture of rievocation and mythography, relying on anthropological premises that are speculatively articulated.

**Keywords:** Cristina Campo, modernity, Italian and comparative literature, fairy tale studies, autobiographism

## Introduction: Premises of Campo's Autobiographism

In the overall constellation of Cristina Campo's literary writings (*nom de plume* of anagraphically named Italian contemporary woman writer Vittoria Guerrini, 1923-1977), her constant and proverbial pseudonymical camouflages make elusive biographical traces that are dispersed a little everywhere in her body of work. It is what is suggested with the chosen title of Campo's book-compendium *Under a False Name* (*Sotto falso nome*, 1998a), cardinal edition aside from prose volume *The Unforgivable Ones* (*Gli imperdonabili*, 1987/1999),<sup>1</sup> and book of verse *The Tiger Absence* (*La Tigre Assenza*, 1991/1997),<sup>2</sup> whose publication was auspicated by the others, belonging to the circle of friends and scholars dedicated to the revalorization of Campo's literary and intellectual *oeuvre* (Farnetti & Fozzer, 1998; Spina, 1993/2002; Pieracci Harwell, 2005; De Stefano, 2002). It should be initially noted that Campo's work is characterized by a propensity toward aristocratic spirit, as defined by M. Zambrano,<sup>3</sup> that does not presuppose however voluntary isolation, nor can it be said that her literary art gets established aside from the impulses of a society. The author does not close herself in front of

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<sup>2</sup> See also Campo (1962) and Campo (1971), now in the volume *The Unforgivable Ones* (Campo, 1987/1999). As for other author's intellectual works pertinent to the topic of the present article, see Campo (1963/2007), Campo (1973, Introduction), and Campo and Draghi (1975).

<sup>3</sup> The lyrical production was in part previously collected in Campo (1956).

<sup>3</sup> See Pertile (2003), and especially p. 437. To be also confronted with Zambrano (1986/2006).

her listeners, but on the contrary engages in storytelling of her own and others' experiences, and in such a way manages to capture most dazzling and unexpected aspects of reality.

### The Golden Walnut: Memorialistic and Mythographical

Regarded as among the most precious autobiographical occasions literarized, and narrated in prose form, *The Golden Walnut* (*La noce d'oro*) is rather short text, but in many ways of fundamental importance, radiating its influence in regard to the rest of her production.<sup>4</sup> An undoubtable centrality associated with this capillary literary essay was perceived by the author herself and reaffirmed on multiple occasions, although its symbolic meanings are very densely interwoven. In such regard, preliminary observation in relation to its structure is that this text comprises essayistic component concerning reality in its multifaceted aspects (examplarily, pertaining to socio-cultural and anthropological domain), and inventive-imaginative component, resulting in an *essay-short story*, accordingly to an explicit author's statement. This autodefinition, illuminating for a posterior interpretation, contains important reading indication, not deprived of its complexity, suggesting in which perspective one can situate this text, thus revealing its basic structure and essential compositional premises. It is therefore significant that it suggests a technique of homogenization and mediation between two types of language made affinitive, the one of a cultural essay grounded in the reflections typical of the epoch and the other concerning autobiographical short story.

Wanting to pursue traces preannounced by Campo herself, and to add in such a way new substantial pieces to mosaic regarding her autorepresentational image that is being reconstructed in the present article, one can consult an excerpt from correspondence with Margherita Pieracci Harwell, written in spring 1963, in which is also exemplified main thematic motif inscribed in the text. It should be stated preliminarily that Campo is still referring to this text as having another Latin title (*Viaticum peregrinationis*), with which it is mentioned in that epoch. This title gets successively transferred in the first epigraph opening the story, originally attributed to Cicero, in rather amplified version: *Ave, viaticum meae peregrinationis*. According to Campo's epistolary note in *Letters to Mita* (*Lettere a Mita*, 1999): "I have also written *Viaticum peregrinationis* [...] an essay-short story about the presence of fairy tale in the life of seven-year-old child".<sup>5</sup> Her statement also re-echoes Proust's structural formulation about his *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*) as a novel-essay, from a compositional standpoint, which was among Campo's readings. It is parallel to another assertion regarding this Campo's prose text, expressed again by the author herself in the correspondence exchanged with Piero Pòlito, from the volume titled *Infinity in Finity* (*L'infinito nel finito*), on the 26th of March 1963, from which it can also be discerned that at the certain point she needed to interrupt the elaboration of this text, which she continued at a later time (Campo, 1989/1998, 1998b, 2007; Campo & Spina, 2007).<sup>6</sup>

In the present explorational study of *The Golden Walnut*, based on the last mentioned epistolary passage, the attention should be given now to the circumstances which have occasioned it. Initial sketches of *The Golden Walnut* go back to earlier period, to 1951 (although Campo's earliest literary works can be further antedated to the period 1943-1944). She then continues to re-elaborate *The Golden Walnut*, adding annotations and corrections until 1969, when she prepares a revised conclusive version which however she does not give to the

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to *The Golden Walnut* (*La noce d'oro*) in Campo (1998a, pp. 183-196).

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise specified, the translations in English in this article are mine. In the present context, the citation is taken from Campo (1999, p. 177). For English translations of titles of Campo's works, see also Mazzoni (2012a; 2012b).

<sup>6</sup> Since epistolographic opus is constitutive of author's literary expression, see Campo (1989/1998); Campo and Spina (2007); and Campo (2007).

press and the original is still missing. The only version authentically published is thus the one in Spanish, appearing on the pages of Argentine journal *Sur* in 1970.<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of translation, not done by the author herself, she sought the intervention of writer Héctor Murena, whereas current Italian version is a result of a retranslation from Spanish, also in this case done by the others, published inside the volume *Under a False Name*. This essayistic short story draws upon the creative essay *In the Middle of Heaven (In medio coeli)* as a continuation thereof, and is impregnated with favolistic elements in the form of aphorisms. Likewise, it is complementary to essayistic writings *About Fairy Tale (Della fiaba)* and *Park of the Deer (Parco dei cervi)*, in which reappear intimate connections between narrative threads belonging to the spheres of folktale and literature.<sup>8</sup>

Within delineated frame pertaining to this text, whose inspiration is openly autobiographical, although author's personal story is presented in already poeticized way, the core image is that of a golden walnut, which subsequently gave a new title to it (between parentheses should be said that a motif in partially analogous form can be traced to Tuscan version of the folktale, known as *Three Sided Walnut* or in Italian *La noce a tre canti*, in which once again it serves as a defense, as an efficient shield) (Lapucci, 1984). The motif of a golden walnut has a role of viaticum in the peregrination of the little girl-protagonist, who is in reality author's alter ego, toward places of discovery, defining herself, but only in filigrain, "little neophyte, fascinated and terrorized".<sup>9</sup> The structure of this text is autodiagetic. According to the classification established by contemporary French literary theorist and critic Gérard Genette in his three-volume work *Figures* (published between 1966 and 1972), in which he analyzes the status of the narrator, it is not possible to immediately identify the narrator with the personality of the real author, but should be considered as a narrative voice telling the story. In this case, the creator of this short story (Cristina Campo) represents at the same time the narrative subject. It is to be noted that there is a coincidence between the main character and the writer, which recognizes herself in folktale figures, integrated as in the same rang in the presented story, as will be subsequently demonstrated.

### Favolistic Component as Core Structural Feature

The cited excerpt from the first above-mentioned letter, in referring to main theme (that of a fundamental intuition about the importance of fairy tale, understood as basic pattern which can represent a model of life in miniature, preparing unconsciously in such a way for future experiences, had by the author as a seven-year-old child, presumably in the moment of some of the earliest and most incisive conscious memories), provides us with a hint about structural component of primary importance to be added to the original Campo's definition. That is to say, the fact that this prose text can be naturally associated with fairy tale, here presented in its elementary grammar. The episodes whose intonation is one moment autobiographical and the next favolistic, flow naturally into each other, overlapping one another spontaneously and without predeterminate logic, and

<sup>7</sup> I am referring to Spanish version of Campo's *The Golden Walnut: La nuez de oro*, translated by Hernán Mario Cueva, *Sur*, July-August 1970, pp. 43-45. On the other hand, on her own friendship with Murena, Campo writes to Zambrano (Pertile, 2003, pp. 473-474).

<sup>8</sup> Citing chronologically the genesis of these essays that are now published in Campo (1987/1999): *About Fairy Tale (Della fiaba)*, appearing as a shortened version *Fairy Tale and Mystery (Fiaba e mistero)* in Campo (1962, pp. 5-13), and integrally in Campo (1971, pp. 34-52); *Park of the Deer (Parco dei cervi)*, the first and the second part as *August Diary (Diario d'agosto)*, *La posta letteraria, Corriere dell'Adda*, 1953, successively *L'Approdo letterario, IV*, 9, January-March 1960, pp. 85-90, and in integral version in Campo (1962, pp. 19-43); *In the Middle of Heaven (In medio coeli)*, *Paragone, XIII*, 150, June 1962, pp. 42-53, and afterwards in Campo (1962, pp. 43-59) and Campo (1971, pp. 15-33).

<sup>9</sup> The quotation appears in *The Golden Walnut (La noce d'oro)*, in Campo 1998a, p. 194).

thereby justifying, in my opinion, another relevant conceptual addition to the autodefinition cited, specifically *short story-fairy tale*, that is to say, a narrative choice consisting of a construction of a tale based on one's own life in which intimate episodes have a sapiential flavor.

With this syntagmatic expression (*short story-fairy tale*), it was my intention to indicate the type of literary narration that contains as an integrative part or is correlated to a fairy tale, that is to say, a storytelling presented in the form of legend, depicting protagonist or narrator in the culminant moments as a character in fairy tale, herself participating in this enchanted world, colored with supernatural nuances, evocative of the dimensions of the unknown and the unconscious, associated with favolistic patrimony. In the context of women's literature in the modern Italian panorama, it is interesting to observe that Anna Maria Ortese has defined analogously, as novel-fairy tale, her volume *The Iguana* (*Iguana*) published approximately in those years, in 1965.

In order to specify it on isolated cases, already the incipit of the short story should be observed. The stage of the adventures of author as a little girl refers to Bologna in the 1930's, at the centre of narration since the beginning (Campo, 1998a, pp. 183-184), which captures Campo's imagination, especially as she concentrates on contemplating the elements of the surrounding natural scenery. That is to say, the opening lines of the story bring to the ambiance of family's summer house in Bologna, in the close proximity to the Rizzoli Orthopaedic Institute, also evoked because immersed in the monumental 19th century park San Michele in Bosco (Farnetti, 2002), so spacious to give the impression of being limitless. It is what has inspired her sensation of incommensurability and indefiniteness subsequently characteristic of her approach to literary writing. I am referring in particular to a passage derived from Campo's authorial essayism in *The Unforgivable Ones*, belonging to her text *In the Middle of Heaven*,<sup>10</sup> and demonstrating the possibility of convergent reading in regard to this aspect, although in an indirect manner, since this privileged and comfortable microuniverse, as a place of predilection of family memory, will not be thematized so explicitly by the author anywhere else, with factual spatio-temporal references.

These are already some of the signals for demonstrating ulterior fundamental blending of two narrative levels, that of a short story and that of a fairy tale, enriched with imagination and somewhat lyricized, whereas it was originally envisaged a prose recount. In other words, the narration is refined and aestheticized, because the attention is given to minuscule details and frequently metaphorical discourse, remaining coherent with the truth in its main intent, that is to say, obtaining a type of literary expression presenting itself as inventive essay and chronicle at the same time, and even history of costumes of the epoch. For this reason, as it will be demonstrated in the following part of the paper, in other segments of text with apposite structural mechanisms one assists at the effect of construction of a new fairy tale, based on the narration of one's own life, and contained within another fairy tale, that is on the contrary already very well known, having a function of frame fairy tale or frame story. From a thematic standpoint, it is this sense of roots to orient and direct the interest of this writer, as she recollects her memories and describes the things as they were in her childhood, already from a perspective of an adult, without forgetting the climate of fairy tale surrounding them.

Among the aspects of this story derived directly from the realm of fairy stories, some already explicated elsewhere in the constellation of essayistic thoughts, there is, for instance, a reference to Fata Nix (the latter being the latin term for snow, that can thus be interpreted as Snow Fairy). It was a pseudonym adopted by a children book's writer named Attilia Montaldo Morando, whose books can be dated to the period *liberty*,

<sup>10</sup> The passage is derived from *In the Middle of Heaven* (*In medio coeli*), in Campo (1987/1999, pp. 19-20).

between the end of nineteenth and the beginning of the 20th century, which were very appreciated by Campo, for their content as well as for their precious illustrations comparable to an object of craftsmanship (Campo, 1998a, p. 187). In the same rang, the mention of the Elf King or fairy tale *Belinda and the Monster* (*Belinda e il Mostro*) appear in Campo's writing (Campo, 1998a, pp. 188-189). The latter fairy tale was connected by the author with the omen of youth story of maternal grandmother that could be grasped and guessed from the yellowed photographs portraying her, together with mythical figures of other female ancestors, as a mode of transmission of genealogical memory, suggesting the idea of tradition preserved by ritual of remembrance.

Rievocation in *The Golden Walnut* also includes excerpts from the fairy tales *The Worn-Out Dancing Shoes* (*Scarpette da ballo*; the allusion is about the episode of careless suspension of moral consciousness, because the accent is placed on the moment of escape, which is not rare to find in fairy stories), *Three Pomegranates* (*Tre melagrane*), as well as a folktale with the sorcerer Latemar as protagonist, from the *Tale of King Laurin* (*Fiaba di Re Laurino*) with his legendary rose garden (Campo, 1998a, pp. 189-191). As for the evocation of the scenes derived from favorite fairy tales, whether popular or artistic, the attention should be drawn as well to the motif of rally of fairies in the middle of the Breton forest of Brocéliande, already thematized essayistically in *Park of the Deer* and *About Fairy Tale*, to which also refers the second epigraph at the opening of this prose text, ascribed to Austrian writer Karl Felix Wolff (or in Italianized version of his name, Carlo Felice Wolff), who collected the legends of South Tyrol and territory of the Dolomites, for instance, in his volume prepared in Italian (*L'anima delle Dolomiti*, whose first edition is from 1967, and successively appearing in 1987).

Favolist source of inspiration in *The Golden Walnut* is also found in narrative plot from *The Thousand and One Nights*, that is to say, in the fragment centred on King Solomon's ring, described as reuniting mysterious and magical force making his reign light and aerial, as Piero Citati writes (Citati, 1989; 1992/1997), as Campo compares it to luminous ring worn on the little finger by her uncle, Vittorio Putti (as if he too reigned over the others, keeping them tied to his spell). Very noted surgeon on the international scale, specialized in orthopaedics, Vittorio Putti exercised his profession at the Rizzoli Orthopaedic Institute in Bologna, while living in a neighbouring house on the hill overlooking the city (together with the family of his sister, writer's mother Emilia Putti; it is exactly there that she gave birth to her daughter who sojourned there in the summer months).

In essayistic part of this text, a question is posed about the traditional mentality that should be preserved, by taking the example of emblematic and propaedeutic role of toys, preparing for the accumulation of experiences in the adulthood, and containing behavioral schemes, as allusive germs.<sup>11</sup> It should be observed that this discovery prepared gradually, in the itinerary traced by memories and favorite fairy tales, is always made with help of literary symbols, bringing author to consciousness about first revelatory signs of her basic inclination toward creative writing and literature. Moreover, at the expressive level, it persists metaphoricity through use of rhetorical figures, presenting itself as poetic truth, as if a succession of metaphors, which give an allegorical meaning to the whole setting, could bring to identifying life with fairy tale. And as if there were no longer difference between metaforizing term (fairy tale) and metaforized term (life), they were made coincide and rendered identical. Or to put it more plastically: One could imagine a stage on which a distinction between scene and backstage was abolished, so that what is invented or allusive could merge itself with reality, and it is,

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<sup>11</sup> The excerpt is from *Park of the Deer* (*Parco dei cervi*), in Campo (1987/1999, pp. 160-161).

so to say, what constitutes the miracle of literature. It would then be like living in the dream of fairy tale or literature: Since the two things are rendered identical to one another, through a mechanism describable as relation of hyponymy, the term "fairy tale" contains the meaning of broader notion of literature. Since first narrative level is constituted of reminiscences of the past, from a grammatical standpoint, prevails the usage of past tenses. Likewise, to be noted frequently are two connected epithets, so-called adjectival diptychs, that can be synonymous or opposite, creating in the latter case an oxymoric effect. Concomitantly, it is to note persistent examples of synesthesia, created by combining tactile, auditory or visual impressions, while in this case, too, the natural space appears humanized, anthropomorphic.

### Conclusion

From a compositional standpoint, reminiscences about personal destinies (her own but also regarding familiar figures and other persons felt close, from her ambience or non) are intertwined with favolist sequences, making perceptible easily commutable with imperceptible, rational with instinctual, concrete with fantastic, habitual with impossible, realistic with surreal, intimate with universal. Analogously, it can be noted that there are similarities when it comes to adopted narrative perspective, however only in general terms, in the case of childhood autobiography, exemplificatively that of modern French author Nathalie Sarraute, who displayed her memories in the book titled *Childhood* (originally, *Enfance*, 1983). In that regard, the preciousness of the occasion represented by *The Golden Walnut* does not depend only on relative rarity of cases in which Campo puts the spotlight on autoreflexive dimension (with the exception of poetry in which such attitude becomes more evident), usually preferring to talk about herself incognito, and for that reason masking her own narrative-essayistic voice behind apparently neutral style which transcends direct inspirational source (although very present in the background of narration). It is also due to the fact that preciousity of this prose text, infused with accentuated aesthetic dimension, depends especially on its formal qualities and inherent cognitive value.

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