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### A Classic Work of Italian Literature: Italo Calvino's Trilogy for Young Readers

*Pregledni rad / review paper*  
*Primljeno / received 15. 9. 2012.*

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*During his career as a writer, Calvino achieved a special bond with the children's universe. He was one of the greatest Italian storytellers for adults who also explored the area of children's literature and young adult literature and did so with sublime results. In particular, his literary approach is especially inspiring when addressing young adults. The main characters of his Our Ancestors trilogy embody some important qualities of the new contemporary man. The protagonists of The Cloven Viscount, The Baron in the Trees and The Nonexistent Knight all live, each in his own way, 'upside down', because they break the rules of logic. Their 'adulthood' is characterized by the actual dimensions of unrest, 'incompleteness', indefiniteness, doubt, confusion, and uncertainty about the future, that is, by feelings that deeply define the archetypal elements of youth. Furthermore, their behaviour emphasizes the role of wandering which is considered a viaticum given as a means to access a different quality of life, which is certainly strange, unusual, and extraordinary, but also, precisely because of this extraordinariness, all the more authentic and rewarding. Finally, the search for humanity, differently incarnated by the three respective characters, represents the highest literary and educational values of Calvino's narratives.*

**Keywords:** *Calvino, children's literature and young adult literature classics, fantastic, imagination, human nature, self-identity.*

Italo Calvino is one of the greatest Italian writers of the twentieth century, a sharp-witted and well-educated intellectual in Italian contemporary literature, the only writer to have produced undisputed classics of our time and of modernity, a writer whose works are normally read and studied in literature classes in primary

and secondary school. His neat and concrete style, his prodigious and highly imaginative skills and his undisputed talent in being able to observe existential experience gave rise to narrative plots of high literary value, characterized by lightness, precision, sharp irony and a peculiar melancholic disenchantment with respect to society. This pessimistic dimension, underlined by his deep historical understanding of reality, gradually intensified during his forty-year career as a storyteller and essayist, but never produced in him an attitude of disengagement or renunciation when confronted with the human being's existential responsibilities.

We owe to Calvino not only the precious collection, transcription and philological editing of the *Italian Folktales (Fiabe Italiane, 1956)*, but also, most importantly, a profound educational sensitivity and many literary ideals which pervade his books for teens, all characterized by a superior style. He wrote illuminating stories about the importance of the search for self-identity, in which he tried to give an answer to the big question "who am I?" and investigated matters such as cultural habits, stereotypes and prejudices, the quality of the human being and some educational themes such as being and appearing, equity and iniquity, ethics and immorality.

For the purposes of this paper, it is useful to outline a few noteworthy phases in Calvino's life, because his personal experience influenced significantly his career as a writer and his interests with respect to young readers. Italo Calvino was born on 15 October 1923 in Santiago de Las Vegas in Cuba, where his father was at the head of an experimental agricultural station. At the age of 2, he moved to Italy, settling in Sanremo where he spent his childhood with his parents (his father was a famous agronomist, his mother a botanist and university professor). His parents passed on to Italo their love of science, their interest in plants, animals and nature in general, and chose not to give him any religious education. Calvino had a brother, a playmate, who continued his family's tradition in the field of the exact sciences, while Calvino enrolled in the Agriculture Faculty to study in a field not belonging to the mentioned exact sciences. When he was a child, Calvino was not a keen reader, although he was a fan of *Corrierino dei Piccoli* (a weekly magazine for children that regularly published comic strips, 1908-1995) and *Pinocchio*, and primarily of some great classics by Stevenson, Kipling, Nievo and above all Conrad. He played an active role during World War II because he entered the Resistance movement against Mussolini's dictatorship in Italy and after the Liberation he became a member of the Italian Communist Party, although he soon distanced himself from it. His degree thesis, after he had abandoned the study of agriculture, focused on the writers mentioned above. In 1947, he graduated in the arts in just two years and began to have regular contacts with Natalia Ginzburg and Cesare

Pavese, two writers who had committed themselves to reorganizing the publishing house Einaudi, the prestigious publisher which had a great influence on Calvino's education. In the same year, at the age of 24, he published his first novel titled *The Path of the Nest of Spiders* (*Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*).

However, the works I would like to focus on belong to the heraldic trilogy *Our Ancestors* (*I nostri antenati*). They are young adult fantasy novels which were published during the 1950s: *The Cloven Viscount* (*Il visconte dimezzato*) in 1952, *The Baron in the Trees* (*Il barone rampante*) in 1957, and *The Nonexistent Knight* (*Il cavaliere inesistente*) in 1959.<sup>1</sup> During this period, Calvino devoted himself passionately and with great philological commitment to the careful selection and translation from various dialects into Italian of 200 fairy tales belonging to the Italian tradition. This transcription work left indelible marks on his literary production. The 'inconsistencies' of Italian social and political life led him to strengthen his relationships with some colleagues beyond the Alps and overseas. These peculiar relationships contributed significantly to his later production. In 1964 Calvino married and the following year he moved to Paris. During his long stay there, he published some of his most celebrated literary works, such as *Cosmicomics* (*Le cosmicomiche*, 1965), *Time and the Hunter* (*Ti con zero*, 1967), *Invisible Cities* (*Le città invisibili*, 1972) and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979). His activity as essayist and editorialist was also rich and fruitful thanks to important collaboration with numerous Italian and foreign periodicals and by giving lectures throughout Europe. In 1980 he came back to Italy and settled in Rome where, after becoming a consultant for the publishing house Einaudi, he worked hard to prepare his new novel, *Mr. Palomar* (*Palomar*), published in 1983, and devoted himself to the meticulous review of manuscripts. Calvino, one of the greatest contemporary Italian thinkers, died in 1985 at the age of 62.

### The heraldic trilogy *Our Ancestors*

These few notes on Calvino's life may help us understand the themes of Calvino's poetic prose considered in this paper: first of all, the individual's ineluctable responsibility when facing the difficulties of life and the impossibility to fully understand reality; secondly, the awareness of the need for human action

<sup>1</sup> *The Cloven Viscount* appeared in English translation in 1962, *The Baron in the Trees* in 1959, and *The Nonexistent Knight* in 1962. The Croatian translations of the trilogy, titled *Naši preci* appeared in one volume in 1965. The novels were translated by Mladen Machiedo and Karmen Milačić as *Nepostojeći vitez* (*Il cavaliere inesistente*), *Raspolovljeni viskont* (*Il visconte dimezzato*) and *Barun Penjač* (*Il barone rampante*).

characterized by an ethical, consistent and concrete attitude, which can become an authentic driver of change in one's own nature; and, finally, the unavoidable, cathartic and liberating role of logical-fantastic narration. This last theme offers the reader the possibility to look at reality in a different way, thanks to the visionary and allegorical interpretation of an author who, as Ghidetti puts it, despite the pessimism of intelligence, claims to glimpse in the optimism of will the possibility to grasp and give sense to the senselessness of daily life, that is, to transform the disorder of life into the order of literature (1988: 180).

The heraldic trilogy *Our Ancestors* consists of three 'long novels' that the Ligurian writer specifically created for the audience of the young in 1960.

### ***The Cloven Viscount***

The novel *The Cloven Viscount* narrates Viscount Medardo of Terralba's vicissitudes. He was split in two by a cannonball hitting him in the chest during the war between Austria and Turkey at the end of the seventeenth century and, once recovered from the terrible injuries, he returned home cloven. This splitting-in-half experience marks the beginning of a series of very cruel and indescribable actions (splitting of flowers, plants, animals, fires, tortures, unfair capital punishment, etc.). During the development of the plot, the reader discovers that not only the bad part of the Viscount has survived, but also the good one, and this good half tries without success to contain the wickedness of the bad part. I say without success because in the end the actions of the good part turn out to be ineffective, and even annoying. Given that the two halves of the Viscount are riven, there is a complete lack of balance and harmony between them (**Fig. 1**). Only their accidental and positive final conjunction allows the Viscount to achieve a peaceful acceptance of himself. The cloven Viscount's adventures are not aimed at highlighting a questionable and rather superficial opposition between good and evil and the affected and imaginary triumph of the first over the second, but at trying to offer a reading-key to interpret contemporary man's existential conditions. In the introductory note of the trilogy, the same Calvino wrote that modern man is characterized by the dimension of splitting-in-half, mutilation, incompleteness and enmity towards himself (1960: 354). According to Calvino, modern man's great evil is not the presumed ontological dichotomy between good and evil, but, as Bonura highlights "his incapacity to reconcile the beast and the angel that are inside the 'whole man'" (1972: 68). Even if recalling some of the main allegorical works of Italian literary tradition by Boccaccio, Ariosto, Basile, Collodi and Nievo (De Carlo 1977: 71), when Calvino wrote *The Cloven Viscount* he was seduced by some of the greatest authors of Anglo-American literature, particularly relevant also for children's and

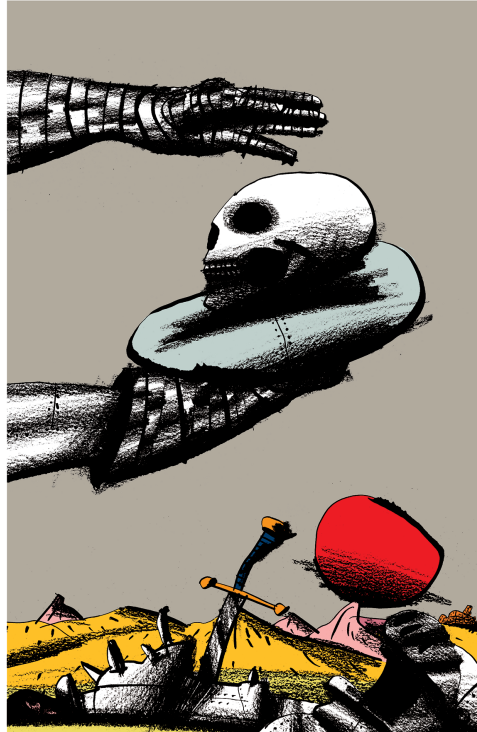


Illustration © Federico Maggioni

- Fig. 1** *Illustration by Federico Maggioni from the 2006 Mondadori edition of Il visconte dimezzato (The Cloven Viscont).*\*
- Sl. 1.** *Ilustracija Federica Maggionia u Mondadorijevome izdanju romana Il visconte dimezzato (Raspolovljeni viskont) iz 2006.*\*

young adult literature. With a clear style, a fast-paced rhythm and using few means, in the ten chapters of this fantasy novel he was able to condense, as De Carlo states, the dark symbolism of Melville's *Moby Dick*, adventurous spirit, dramatic realism, Conrad's pessimistic vision, the ineluctable duality of human nature in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Kipling's vigorous realism and even Defoe's richness of imagination (1977: 73).

The use of symbolic language and the contextual ironical tone widen the polysemic reading possibilities of the text. The novel contains a metaphor that helps us better understand the concept of Calvino's humanism: inverting the well-established rules of logical and scientific thinking, the splitting-in-half dimension represents a valuable resource "to achieve a deeper and true knowledge of our identity" (Barenghi 2009: 21). In portraying contemporary man through the

\* The images can be seen in colour in the electronic version of this issue. To view all the images in full resolution please visit <[www.librietliberi.org](http://www.librietliberi.org)>.

protagonist, Calvino highlights how important it is for a person to be able to dominate opposing impulses: such impulses need to be governed, otherwise they lead to great pain, because they tear the individual's own human nature. Therefore, the maturation of the ego is the result of the ability not to stifle such aggressive tendencies, but to direct them positively towards a more balanced development of one's own personality (Spinazzola 1988: 101).

Calvino bestowed on us a precious allegorical legacy: by contemplating Viscount Medardo's adventures and reflecting on the metaphorical value of the split human being, the young reader feels 'totally' welcomed, and in Calvino's pages finds even the full legitimacy of negative impulses. This is a sublime model of acceptance of the otherness belonging to a person, a high form of human reassurance, particularly beneficial during adolescence, when the young person, overcome by strong opposing impulses, feels his or her soul is torn. Calvino's literary characters comfort and support us: we should all bear in mind that human beings consist both of good and evil. Joining these two dimensions is a difficult, sometimes even unattainable, task, but everyone is affected by the impulse to make an attempt. It is from here that the young person can start on a new road.

### ***The Baron in the Trees***

*The Baron in the Trees* tells the adventures of twelve-year-old Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò. In a rebellious fit after refusing to eat a dinner of snails on 15 June 1767, Cosimo leaves through the window, climbs a tree and decides never to come down again. The decision, at first due to futile obstinacy, turns into an authentic exercise of freedom, a life choice, consistently followed until the end of his days. Similarly to Voltaire's *Candide*, this novel narrates the young Baron of Ombrosa's whole existence in thirty fast-paced and happy-ending chapters: although isolated from other human beings, Cosimo leads a very intense and exciting life, full of meetings and personal, social and political relationships.

His prodigious experience takes shape moving from branch to branch, from garden to garden and from wood to wood. Although immersed in nature, this original way of life does not prevent him from cultivating his passion for reading, hunting, from contributing to the collective good, from finding love or from living and participating enthusiastically in the main events in the eighteenth-century world (**Fig. 2**). Critics have unanimously assessed *The Baron in the Trees* the most successful work of the trilogy. *Bildungsroman* (formation novel), geometric fairy tale, historical pastiche, philosophical fiction: none of these seems to be totally appropriate to describe this work depicting the adventurous life in a fantastic

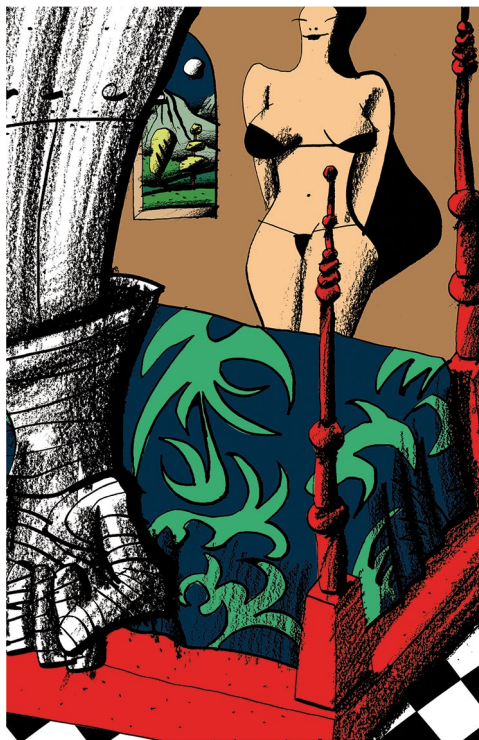


Illustration © Federico Maggioni

- Fig. 2** *Illustration by Federico Maggioni from the 2006 Mondadori edition of Il barone rampante (The Baron in the Trees).*
- Sl. 2.** *Ilustracija Federica Maggionia u Mondadorijevome izdanju romana Il barone rampante (Barun penjač) iz 2006.*

eighteenth-century atmosphere of this positive, rebellious, lonely, impulsive, forward-looking hero, with autobiographical features and therefore particularly well-loved by Calvino. In this hero's adventures, it is not difficult to discover familiar echoes of a book Calvino was keen on during his youth, namely Daniel Defoe's *Robison Crusoe*. In short, *The Baron in the Trees* is neither a philosophical nor a historical novel. How, then, should we approach the book? The same Calvino provides us with an answer through the words of the self-styled pedagogist, Tonio Cavilla, *alias* Italo Calvino (1965: 5-6):

the right way to develop an interest in this book is therefore to consider it a sort of *Alice in Wonderland* or *Peter Pan* or *Baron Münchhausen*, that is, to recognize the relationship with the classical works of poetic and fantastic humour, with the books traditionally put on the shelf to be read by young people. On the same traditional shelf, you can find adaptations of classics like *Don Quixote* and *Gulliver*.

Despite the stylistic lightness, Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò's story raises highly topical questions about human experience. Calvino knew he had been influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, but tended to reassess this dimension with gentle irony, criticising some of the main protagonists of the Age of Enlightenment such as Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau. In this way, he seems to metaphorically warn the reader against two dangers in life: on the one hand, the danger of exclusive faith in cognitive reason ("the use of reason" is always and only an instrument, and, anyway, it does not allow one to go beyond the unfathomable limits of the human being), and on the other hand the difficulty of managing certain social relationships properly. The detached smile and irony through which the author tells the Baron's adventures reflect the typical way Calvino looked at the world and lived in it: the "pathos of distance", as defined by Cesare Cases in 1958, is characterized by the search for a constant balance in the relationship between the desire for solitude and the need to establish relationships with other people. The desire to distance ourselves from the world, which is certainly not due to disengagement or isolation, allows us to see what happens around us in a more objective and critical way: actually, too close a contact does not simplify understanding of events, but, quite the opposite, it sometimes deforms them. In some circumstances, this desire to distance ourselves from reality is an existential need. Therefore, the action of climbing trees takes on a variety of symbolic meanings. For a young person attempting to integrate into social life, it firstly represents a beneficial separation from the family environment, from the comforts of an ordinary life, which allows the youngster to become independent, to find his or her place in the world, to identify his or her human vocation, to experience the extraordinary and authentic life of a human being. This distance from the world gives the young person the possibility to have experience: the *quest* begins as the young person leaves the domestic environment to face the world unfolding before them and to look for their future, a fabric consisting of many inextricably woven threads. The *Baron in the Trees* is a metaphor for the multiple choices a young person is confronted with in life and for the value of change during this life: Cosimo, who observes life from above, from his trees, teaches us not to fear anything. The teacher John Keating does the same thing when he invites his students in the intransigent and all-male Welton Academy to climb onto the teacher's desk in Peter Weir's film *Dead Poets Society* (1989). However, Calvino warns us that the life Cosimo chooses is an uphill task, masterfully represented by the action of climbing trees. The choice to settle on the high branches, to spend his life and to stick to this purpose, even at the cost of great sacrifice and suffering, shows his commitment and confirms the right to exercise the principle of self-affirmation over one's life. Barenghi is right





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- Fig. 3** *Illustration by Federico Maggioni from the 2006 Mondadori edition of Il cavaliere inesistente (The Nonexistent Knight).*
- Sl. 3.** *Ilustracija Federica Maggionia u Mondadorijevome izdanju romana Il cavaliere inesistente (Nepostojeći vitez) iz 2006.*

when he emphasizes that the most important thing to take into account is not the content of the decision, but the determination of the protagonist to follow the new behavioural rule, after the act of disobedience: “only by giving up something do you start becoming someone, and only in this way do all your actions gain value within collective life” (2009: 37).

### *The Nonexistent Knight*

The *Nonexistent Knight* is the third and last novel in order of publication within the trilogy. In this “fantastic story”, Calvino leaves behind all realistic implications. In twelve fast-paced chapters characterized by ironic inventive freedom, Calvino interweaves the adventures of Agilulf, a non-existent knight having no body but only existing as an empty white and immaculate suit of armour (**Fig. 3**) provided with a tireless will, with the human vicissitudes of characters, environments and

situations, taken from the tradition of Renaissance chivalric poems, typically written in Ariosto's style (Barenghi 2009: 51). In *The Nonexistent Knight* all the actions of the characters, set in the time of Charlemagne, are almost exclusively focused on the search for one's own humanity. This quest looks like a gradual process of maturation, experienced and shared by the main characters of the novel. In *The Nonexistent Knight*, knowledge of the world emblemizes knowledge of one's own identity, and only by going back to one's roots is it possible to plan one's own future. The main aim of the novel is to explore the question of being and nonbeing, namely the domain of form over substance.

Agilulf represents the one-sized man, the man who is forced to identify himself with his function and who is unable to dominate his own destiny because he owes his existence exclusively to his knighthood. If he loses this title, there is no reason for his existence. But human beings are not one-sized, and for this reason the plot leads Stevenson's theme of the double to extreme consequences. The dialectical confrontation between soul and body, symbolized by the funny counterpoints staged by the various characters who come onto and leave the theatrical stage, is aimed at depicting a rich and multifaceted individual, full of contradictory ferments. Agilulf's strict and geometric perfection is opposed to the muddling situation of slovenliness and senselessness of the emperor and his soldiers who are depicted on the battlefield. Agilulf, the exemplary, severe and manic knight who knows that he is there but does not exist, is the counter of his squire Gurdulù, a repugnant, illogical and superficial being, who is there but does not know he exists; Agilulf's icy perfection is opposed to Rambaldo's restless, harsh and passionate energy; Torrismondo, a gloomy and introverted young hero, is opposed to Rambaldo, a bold and outgoing one. This continuous carousel of dialectical confrontations within the narration emphasizes one of the main themes of Calvino's poetics: there is no identity outside the dimension of the search for identity, and this search can never be considered closed. Another basic element of this search for humanity is that experience can be really formative only if it is closely related to reality: in other words, it can be fruitful only if placed in direct confrontation with the difficulties of everyday life. The metaphor of Agilulf's bright, white and immaculate armour is exemplary: when the non-existent knight dissolves, his armour will be worn by Rambaldo, it will get dirty quickly and will become heavily dented. An individual's existence is marked by imperfections, mistakes and scars, but these "dents" make life an experience worth living. Without necessary and painful contact with the reality of human beings made of flesh and blood and with history characterized by the succession of days, months and years, we are precluded from any authentic human experience.

## The Trilogy and Young Readers

*The Cloven Viscount*, *The Baron in the Trees* and *The Nonexistent Knight* represent a trilogy of experiences regarding the creation and the development of human beings. Calvino's characters do not have the traits and features of the common human being, but are extraordinary figures which intentionally invert clichés. The portraits emerging from the exclusive description of their actions underline their diversity, their otherness, whether suffered (as in Viscount Medardo's and Agilulf the knight's cases) or pursued (as in Cosimo's case). In this way, Calvino focuses his narration on the personal experience and can freely dwell on the characters' ability to interpret the world and actively intervene in reality. In his works, Calvino does not provide answers, and as Del Giudice highlights, he does not solve the fundamental existential questions his characters ask: "Is there a right attitude towards reality? Is there a possible way of being in this world?" (Del Giudice 1988: 383). He simply describes the possible ways through which an existential problem may pervade the life of each person. Focusing on the valuable dialectical contribution existing between rational control and vitalism, reflection and imagination, the Ligurian writer is able to encourage an ethical, active and concrete response.

In short, this is a plan of work by means of which the reader can draw an important lesson of freedom, courage and ethical reflection. The trilogy was written with the purpose of focusing on the singularity of the existential circumstances of the individual who is confronted with the problems of life. In the three novels, the protagonists are three men who are different from the historical point of view, but very similar as far as the anthropological dimension is concerned (Spinazzola 1988: 92). For inscrutable contemporary adolescents, reading Calvino could be an opportunity to feel a bit less misunderstood in such a foolish, tangled and enigmatic world. Calvino offers our young readers the metaphorical possibility to see themselves reflected in whole or in part in his complex, multifaceted and ambiguous fantasy creatures who are authentic models of a deep humanity, and helps them develop and appreciate respect for otherness and the duality of the person.\*

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\* We are grateful to Federico Maggioni for giving Marnie Campagnaro permission to include his illustrations from Calvino's novels in her paper to be published in both printed and electronic versions of this issue of *Libri & Liberi*.

Zahvaljujemo Federicu Maggioniju na ustupanju prava Marnie Campagnaro za objavljivanje njegovih ilustracija Calvinovih romana u tiskanoj i u elektroničkoj inačici ovoga broja časopisa *Libri & Liberi*.

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## Klasično djelo talijanske književnosti: trilogija Itala Calvina za mlade čitatelje

*Tijekom svoje spisateljske karijere Calvino je uspostavio posebnu vezu s dječjim svijetom. Bio je jedan od najvećih talijanskih pripovjedača za odrasle čitatelje koji je također istraživao područje dječje književnosti i književnosti za mladež, i to s izvanrednim rezultatima. Njegov je književni izričaj naročito inspirativan kad ga upućuje mladim čitateljima. Glavni likovi njegove trilogije Naši preci uključuju važne značajke novoga suvremenoga čovjeka. Protagonisti romana Raspolovljeni viskont, Barun penjač i Nepostojeći vitez žive, svaki na svoj način, 'naopako' jer krše logičke zakone. Njihova je 'odraslost' obilježena danas aktualnim obilježjima nemira, 'necjelovitosti', neodređenosti, dvojbe, zbunjenosti i nesigurnosti o budućnosti, tj. osjećajima koji dubinski određuju arhetipske sastavnice mladosti. Nadalje, njihovo ponašanje ističe važnost lutanja koje se smatra pomašću danom kako bi se dostigla drukčija kakvoća života, a koja je svakako čudna, neobična i iznimna. Međutim, upravo zbog te iznimnosti, još je u većoj mjeri*

vjerodostojna i zadovoljavajuća. Konačno, potraga za humanošću, na različite načine utjelovljena u trima spomenutim likovima, predstavlja najviše književne i odgojne vrijednosti Calvinovih pripovijedi.

**Ključne riječi:** *Calvino, klasična djela dječje književnosti i književnosti za mladež, fantastika, mašta, ljudska narav, samoistovjetnost*

## **Ein italienischer Literaturklassiker: Italo Calvino's Trilogie für junge Leser**

*In seiner schriftstellerischen Laufbahn baute Italo Calvino eine besondere Beziehung zur Welt der Kinder und Jugendlichen auf. Er war nicht nur einer der erfolgreichsten italienischen Erzähler für Erwachsene, sondern bereicherte ebenso den Bereich der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur. Insbesondere erscheint seine literarische Ausdrucksweise für junge Leser außerordentlich inspirierend. Die Hauptgestalten seiner Trilogie Unsere Vorfahren verkörpern Wesenszüge des zeitgenössischen Menschen. Die Protagonisten aus seinen Romanen Der geteilte Visconte, Der Baron auf den Bäumen und Der Ritter, den es nicht gab leben – jeder auf seine Weise – ‚verkehrt‘, weil sie gegen logische Gesetze verstoßen. Ihr ‚Erwachsensein‘ ist von den modernen Gefühlen der Unruhe, der ‚Unganzheitlichkeit‘, der Unbestimmtheit, des Zweifels, der Verwirrung und der Zukunftsunsicherheit geprägt, d.h. von Gefühlen, welche archetypisch für die Jugend stehen. In den Verhaltensweisen der Protagonisten spielt ferner das Wandern als eine Art von Salbung eine wichtige Rolle, durch die eine andere Qualität des Lebens erzielbar ist. Mag dieses Qualität auch fremd, ungewöhnlich und außerordentlich erscheinen, so ist sie jedoch gerade dank ihrer Außergewöhnlichkeit noch authentischer und lohnender. Nicht zuletzt stellt die anhand der drei erwähnten Gestalten auf unterschiedliche Weise verkörperte Suche nach Humanität die höchsten literarischen und erzieherischen Werte in Calvino's Erzählgut dar.*

**Schlüsselwörter:** *Calvino, klassische kinder- und jugendliterarische Werke, Fantastik, Phantasie, Menschennatur, Selbstbestimmung*