
Spain – India – Russia

Centres, Borderlands, and Peripheries of Civilisations

Anniversary Book
Dedicated to Professor Jan Kieniewicz
on His 80th Birthday

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Et in Arcadia Ferdinand: The Mythical Victory of an Extraordinary Bull

Once upon a time in Poland
there was a little boy who adored reading *The Story of Ferdinand*
– the tale of a bull who “liked to sit just quietly
and smell the flowers,”
instead of fighting in the arena.
As the years went by
the boy grew and grew until he became a renowned Professor of History.

You would think that the Professors of History stop reading stories for children. In fact (and this is their big secret) many of them still find these stories appealing and even more important than they had seemed in their childhood, as if their knowledge of History added an unexpected, deep and mature dimension to the tales for young readers. However, most of the Professors of History feel too embarrassed to admit this aloud.

But not Professor Jan Kieniewicz.

The Myth Is Born

“Who has never come across Munro Leaf’s pacifist bull Ferdinand?” This rhetorical question is posed by Bettina Hürlimann in her 1959 seminal study *Europäische Kinderbücher in drei Jahrhunderten*.¹ In 1986 “The Washington Post” granted their precious space to the American specialist in children’s picturebooks, Michael Patrick Hearn, who celebrated Ferdinand’s 50th birthday with a paper on the genesis of the story. But that is not the end. That book, written by Munro Leaf – a graduate in English literature from Harvard University, and illustrated by the New York artist Robert Lawson – remains a pivotal part of global culture. In 2017, Bruce Handy (the author of *Wild Things: The Joy of Reading Children’s Literature as an Adult*, 2017) published an article in “The New Yorker” linked to the promotion of the 3D computer-animated film *Ferdinand* – the successor of the Academy Award Winning Disney short of 1938. In that article, Handy seals the common opinion on Leaf and Lawson’s book as “the greatest juvenile classic since *Winnie the Pooh*.”² The work is proclaimed a classic also by contemporary scholars of children’s literature, to quote only the judgement, from 2018, of Anne Ketola and Roberto Martínez Mateo in *Translating Picturebooks: Revoicing the Verbal, the Visual, and the Aural for a Child Audience*.³ In the context of this study, it might be observed that the number of translations offers another proof of the book’s high status. *The Story of Ferdinand* can be read in more than 60 languages,

¹ B. Hürlimann, *Europäische Kinderbücher in drei Jahrhunderten*, Zürich 1959 (quotation after the English edition: *Three Centuries of Children’s Books in Europe*, B. W. Alderson, transl., Cleveland – New York 1968, p. 180). In my chapter, I use the reprint of *The Story of Ferdinand* published by the Puffin Books in 1977. My text results from the project *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, supported by the ERC Consolidator Grant (2016-2021, no. 681202) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme. I wish to thank Anna and Jerzy Axer for the most inspirational exchange of thoughts on our favourite bull.

² B. Handy, *How “The Story of Ferdinand” Became Fodder for the Culture Wars of Its Era*, “The New Yorker,” December 15, 2017 (accessed online), quoted by Handy after “Life” magazine. The reception of Leaf and Lawson’s book and the authors’ biographies have been recently studied by Sharon McQueen in her dissertation *The Story of “The Story of Ferdinand”: The Creation of a Cultural Icon*, Ann Arbor, MI 2013 (in preparation for print, as we can read on McQueen’s personal website: <http://www.sharonmcqueen.com/about.html>, accessed April 30, 2018).

³ Part 4.1. *The Story of Ferdinand: Comparing the Spanish and Finnish Versions*, in: *Translating Picturebooks: Revoicing the Verbal, the Visual, and the Aural for a Child Audience*, R. Oittinen, A. Ketola, M. Garavini, eds., New York 2018, p. 110.

including the beautiful Polish version (1939) by the poet Irena Tuwim, composed almost immediately after the publication of the original, and the Latin version, *Ferdinandus Taurus*, by Elizabeth Hadas of 2000, with the *linguarum regina* being considered the crowning of the work's success.⁴

But this is not a simple story of a children's book about a bull who prefers smelling the flowers to fighting, in circulation since its publication 80 years ago. Adolf Hitler called it "degenerate democratic propaganda" and ordered it burned. And so it happened.⁵ But not long thereafter, the Allies, having captured Berlin, had 30,000 copies printed and distributed among German children. It was one of the favourite books of Thomas Mann, Mahatma Gandhi, and H. G. Wells. It was also the only then contemporary American book permitted by Stalin to be read in Communist Poland, while it was excluded from circulation in Spain all the way until 1962. Only then did its first Spanish translation appear, and even so in New York, not in the literary country of Ferdinand.⁶

Although Leaf denied any kind of intentional political background for his and Lawson's work, Ketola and Martínez Mateo may be right in their opinion that the choice of Spain for the setting of the book was "not by chance."⁷ *The Story of Ferdinand* was completed in October 1935.⁸ The situation on the Iberian Peninsula had already been tense – after the king's flight in 1931 and the leftist attempt at revolution in 1934. With the *pronunciamento* of July 17, 1936 the Civil War broke out (in fact, the barely visible date on the bullfighting poster read by Ferdinand's peers seems to indicate exactly this month). Handy recalls the memories of Leaf's wife Margaret that the publisher (Viking Press) "had wanted to hold [the book] back until 'the world settles down,'" however, Leaf and Lawson "insisted on going ahead, which the publisher did."⁹ The pacifistic *Story of Ferdinand* was published in 1936,

⁴ See W. Stroh, *From Aesop to Asterix Latinus: A Survey of Latin Books for Children*, in: *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, K. Marciniak, ed., Leiden – Boston 2016, pp. 29-34.

⁵ J. Todres, S. Higinbotham, *Identity Rights and Family Rights*, in: *Human Rights in Children's Literature: Imagination and the Narrative of Law*, J. Todres, S. Higinbotham, eds., Oxford 2016, p. 95.

⁶ *Ibidem*. See also A. Ketola, R. Martínez Mateo, *The Story of Ferdinand: Comparing*, op. cit., p. 110.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ See S. Wolf, K. Coats, P. A. Enciso, Ch. Jenkins, *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, New York 2010, p. 390.

⁹ B. Handy, *How "The Story of Ferdinand"*, op. cit.

with the today-poignant date of September 11th. The Francoist censorship banned it. And not without reason.

Ketola and Martínez Mateo, in their analysis of the differences between the original and the Spanish translation of 1962, notice that *The Story of Ferdinand* offers many an ethical lesson to readers, and on such topics as animal rights, violence, individual rights, respect for difference. Above all, “it is a story of a peaceful individual who is confronted with difficult situations that challenge his way of life. (...) The function of the original story in its source was to educate its readers about reacting to violence and confrontation.”¹⁰ And this process of education is not limited to a juvenile audience, as it also includes adult readers who are said to buy three out of four copies of the book for themselves.¹¹ Jonathan Todres and Sarah Higinbotham in their study on *Identity Rights and Family Rights* declare *The Story of Ferdinand* a tool teaching how “not conform to the mainstream or further the national agenda.” Her conclusion is clear: “Generalissimo Franco and Adolf Hitler apparently took issue with the lesson.”¹²

However, how come a story embedded in Spain, about a bull fight that is cancelled in the end, written and illustrated by Americans, made such an international impact and – via numerous translations, theatre adaptations, movies, and songs – started functioning as a cultural myth? For the term “myth” should be used here, with its whole rich inventory. Indeed, the lesson that the two dictators rejected to their doom turned out to be timeless and universal.

The Bull with a Thousand Faces

The origins of Ferdinand did not bode well. Sales were moderate and the publishers had little faith the situation would change, as they concentrated their efforts on promoting another title of 1936 – *Giant Otto* by William

¹⁰ A. Ketola, R. Martínez Mateo, *The Story of Ferdinand: Comparing*, op. cit., pp. 111, 118. See also J. Balantic, L. S. Libresco, J. C. Kipling, *Every Book Is a Social Studies Book: How to Meet Standards with Picture Books, K-6*, Santa Barbara, CA 2011, p. 101: “The book raises the issue of how one individual can take a stand for what he or she believes in, perhaps changing the hearts and minds of others.”

¹¹ B. Handy, *How “The Story of Ferdinand”*, op. cit.

¹² J. Todres, S. Higinbotham, *Identity Rights and Family Rights*, op. cit., p. 96.

Pène du Bois. The rumour goes that the president of Viking Press stated: “*Ferdinand* is a nice little book (...), but *Giant Otto* will live forever.”¹³ Just the opposite happened. Suddenly *The Story of Ferdinand* caught a wave and in almost no time achieved a prominent place in the pantheon of world literature. By the way, Leaf is said to have chosen a bull as the protagonist to distinguish his book, as it was published during the peak season for dogs (*Giant Otto*) and rabbits (Beatrix Potter’s cycle).

Moreover, the specialists in visual literature observe that *The Story of Ferdinand* is a truly exceptional book also in the graphical aspect. For Lawson as the illustrator made use, in this one short work, of all possible variety of shots.¹⁴ As if this work, one of the first picturebooks, contained the seed for the whole future genre. However, even if the illustrations are crucial, as we shall see, to understand the narrative about Ferdinand, the reason the book became a worldwide phenomenon is usually linked to the message of non-conformism it conveys. Hearn stresses Leaf’s original approach: “Every child knows what it is like to be forced to do something that he or she just does not want to do. Another writer would have clumsily transformed timid Ferdinand into a hero of the bullring. But Leaf knew that true courage is being true to one’s self, no matter what anyone else might say.”¹⁵

While Lawson is thoroughly modern, even cinematographic-like in his pictures, Leaf operates at the intersection of very traditional narrative schemes and a highly atypical content. The embedding in tradition takes place from the very beginning of the story that, as Ketola and Martínez Mateo observe, “starts with the traditional tale formula coined by Vladimir Propp.”¹⁶ This short book (ca. 700 words) also evokes the concept of tragedy, by means of a sudden change of fate (here, the placement of the protagonist in the bullring) that, however, as Todres and Higinbotham notice, makes no impression on Ferdinand: “In classical tragedy, the narrative’s turning point or reversal of circumstances typically sparks self-discovery

¹³ B. Handy, *How “The Story of Ferdinand”*, op. cit.

¹⁴ B. Bader, *American Picturebooks from Noah’s Ark to the Beast Within*, New York 1976, pp. 145-146; P. Nodelman, *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children’s Picture Books*, Athens, GA 1989, p. 183.

¹⁵ M. P. Hearn, *Ferdinand the Bull’s 50th Anniversary*, “The Washington Post,” November 9, 1986 (accessed online).

¹⁶ A. Ketola, R. Martínez Mateo, *The Story of Ferdinand: Comparing*, op. cit., p. 113.

of the hero: Oedipus realizes that he murdered his father and married his mother, and Othello gives way to jealousy and distrust of his wife. 'But not Ferdinand' " who remains "his own bull."¹⁷ Conrad Hyers, in *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World*, even makes a connection with the most famous elaboration of the narrative framework in global culture – *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell. Of course, Leaf could not know it while writing *The Story of Ferdinand* (Campbell's study was published in 1949), but that is not the point. Leaf, well versed in literature owing to his studies at Harvard and already with some experience in writing by the time he was working at Ferdinand, indeed uses the "patterns of heroic tale." Even more – he uses them to overturn the model via one modification: he makes Ferdinand refuse the call. In consequence, the heroic virtues are "completely reversed. Proponents of the *monomyth* of the hero might attempt to classify Ferdinand as a variant of the universal type. But Ferdinand is clearly no hero. He is the antithesis of the hero," Hyers concludes.¹⁸

This unheroic hero type is developed by the illustrations. Bette Goldstone, in her study *The Paradox of Space in Postmodern Picturebooks*, notices the calm and unchanging character of the space in Leaf and Lawson's book: "Even in the building, even with the taunts of the Banderilleros, the Picadores, and the Matador, Ferdinand feels safe,"¹⁹ and this – according to Perry Nodelman (one of the pioneers in research into picturebooks) – creates "a viewpoint of detached irony."²⁰

This touch of irony is surely attractive for adult readers, however, I wish to focus on a different aspect. From all these observations the crucial question that arises for understanding the book is: Why indeed does Ferdinand feel safe – in the middle of the bullring, taunted by the Banderilleros, the Picadores, and the Matador? Such psychic comfort is truly incomprehensible,

¹⁷ J. Todres, S. Higinbotham, *Identity Rights and Family Rights*, op. cit., p. 96.

¹⁸ C. Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World*, New Brunswick – London 1996, p. 199.

¹⁹ B. Goldstone, *The Paradox of Space in Postmodern Picturebooks*, in: *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody, and Self-Referentiality*, L. R. Sipe, S. Pantaleo, eds., New York – London 2008, p. 125.

²⁰ P. Nodelman, *Words about Pictures*, op. cit., p. 231. See also K. Coats, *Gender in Picturebooks*, in: *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*, B. Kümmerling-Meibauer, ed., New York – London 2017, p. 125.

all the more so that the illustrations – as I will try to demonstrate – may also be deciphered with a negative key. As by no means stable and calm, but pre-announcing death and tragedy.

Indeed, the initially safe space changes in the moment when Ferdinand grows up. At the age of two, he is a mature bull fully ready to fight, which means to die. This is metaphorically expressed by the figure of a prominent vulture sitting on his growth chart. The metaphor is continued on the next page. We see a poster recruiting the fighting bulls. Ferdinand's peers from his neighbourhood (some of them with visible wounds after their training bouts) read the announcement and their biggest wish is to be chosen for the bullring. The Matador on the poster performs the *coup de grâce* to a bull pierced with pikes. From the roof of a nearby household two vultures dominate the space.

The teacher's guides through Leaf and Lawson's story usually explain the presence of these predatory birds with a comic or satiric touch, but there is nothing funny in this scene.²¹ The famous shots from Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), only one year older than Ferdinand, may be recalled here for the perception of the vultures in children's culture of those times. The birds assist the Queen when she gives the Princess the deadly apple. Moreover, eager for blood, they follow the Queen – and as soon as they know she will lose the battle against the dwarfs, they hover, waiting for her death.

Lawson hid even more vultures in the story. After the Bumble Bee episode, Ferdinand is taken to Madrid in a cart – as a convict to the site of his execution, which indeed is what is supposed to happen. The cart passes by a signpost with the name of the city. A vulture sits on it. On the day of the fight, there are flags waving and the crowds gloat, and again, two vultures rule over the space, perched upon the roof of a tenement in Madrid. The culmination of the danger is of course the *corrida*. This term never is used in the book. As we already know, the bulls (but not Ferdinand, of course) seem to be eager to participate in the fights. However, their consequence is death, which is foretold enigmatically by the act that the Matador is to perform. We could see it earlier on the poster in Ferdinand's village. Now we are presented with the word

²¹ *A Curriculum for English: Grade 1, Units 1-12*, Nebraska Curriculum Development Center, 1966, p. 46.

definition – the Matador will “stick the bull last of all.” The number of vultures is doubled there: four gloomy birds chair the event, seated on the highest of the bullring’s rows. And yet Ferdinand avoids this fate. He sits in the middle of the arena, he sees the flowers, and he smells them. Any attempt by the *Banderilleros* and the *Picadores* to enrage him fails. Nothing works. The Matador cries and gives up. “So they had to take Ferdinand home.” On the journey back he is accompanied not by the vultures, but by a whole flock of amicable birds, maybe jays, like the one sitting on the broken (that is: unfit for killing) pike of a *Picador* from one of the preceding illustrations.

The most surprising aspect of this story is the logic of the phrase: “So they had to take Ferdinand home.” The essence of the peaceful bull’s enigma consists precisely in the fact that they did not have to take him home. Among various reactions following the publication of the book, Handy reports one negative opinion by an anonymous diplomat from Geneva who wrote to Leaf that “the real fate of any little bull who would not fight was a tragic trip to the butcher shop.”²² As Handy remarks, Ernest Hemingway also entered into polemics with Leaf and he deemed it appropriate to show how a bull should behave and what the real source of its satisfaction and admiration should be. The story *The Faithful Bull* (1951) starts in the following way: “One time there was a bull whose name was not Ferdinand and he cared nothing for flowers. He loved to fight and he fought with all the other bulls of his age, or any age, and he was a champion. (...) He was always ready to fight (...)” and it ends: “He fought wonderfully and everyone admired him and the man who killed him admired him the most.” Handy links Leaf’s unusual creation of the bull protagonist with the implication of dismissing “the challenges facing professional peacemakers.”²³ So be it, but this does not clarify the essence of the problem which is within the scope of our enquiry: Ferdinand’s apparent passiveness does not exclude the activity of the *corrida* participants. But it was precisely them who stopped their actions at the crucial stage of the show. They could have killed Ferdinand (or have had him killed by the butcher), but they did not do that. What is more, they sent him home. This decision and this action resulted from both an imperative they had felt (“So they had to (...)”) and the seemingly natural consequence of the chain of events (“So they had to (...)”)

²² B. Handy, *How “The Story of Ferdinand”*, op.cit.

²³ *Ibidem*.

which was at the same time thoroughly against the “natural” order of the *corrida*. Thus, that is the question: What is the source of Ferdinand’s secret that let him survive and live on for the next generations of children?

Ferdinand’s Secret

As already observed, *The Story of Ferdinand* follows the narrative scheme of a fairy tale, immediately broken by Leaf, just like Carlo Collodi does in his *Adventures of Pinocchio*. The Italian author begins his story, seemingly responding to the expectations of the readers who anticipate a king, but he disrupts the convention immediately: “C’era una volta... Un re! – diranno subito i miei piccoli lettori. No, ragazzi, avete sbagliato. C’era una volta un pezzo di legno” – “Once upon a time there was... A king! – my little readers will immediately say. No, children, you are mistaken. Once upon a time there was a piece of wood,” we are told.²⁴ With Leaf operating in a similar way, Lawson adjusts his illustrations to the unusual *modus*. We see a castle on a rock on the first page and we read the famous words that have always introduced us into the fairy-tale world (here linked with a real, yet in a certain sense fabulous country): “Once upon a time in Spain (...).” However, already on the second page we discover that the protagonist of the story is... a bull. An animal rather unusual as the main character of fairy tales. But we should note that this bull has a regal name – Ferdinand. And later he will also be given a *cognomen* as befits a real king: Ferdinand the Fierce. In his article for “The Washington Post” Hearn reports the belief that the only Spanish names known to Leaf would have been Ferdinand and Isabella,²⁵ but that can hardly be true in the case of an American, and all the more so one educated at Harvard in literature. The choice of the name of the most famous emperor of the Kingdom of Aragon for the taurine protagonist is significant. It is Ferdinand the Fierce (even if the bull refutes this *cognomen*) that in the end turns out to be the king of his fate and the ruler of the narrative and visual space of the story. But the game with conventions takes place also at other levels.

²⁴ See V. Bonanni, *Pinocchio, eroe di legno. Modelli mitologici, fiabeschi, realistici*, “Cahiers d’études italiennes” vol. 15, 2012, p. 230.

²⁵ M. P. Hearn, *Ferdinand the Bull’s 50th Anniversary*, op. cit.

First of all, though it is not widely known, Leaf prepared the text – and Lawson illustrated it – for a collection of Aesop’s *Fables*. Their collaboration within this task took place in 1941, only five years after the publication of *The Story of Ferdinand*. In 1979, when the publishing house Easton Press wanted to re-release the *Aesopica* for youth, the editors were faced with the dilemma, which previous base to choose? They decided for Leaf’s version, reporting the following argument: “And so, when it became imperative for us to issue our own edition of Aesop, we decided that the ideal version for today might be written by Munro Leaf, who in 1936 had created that popular modern fable, *The Story of Ferdinand*. The best Aesopian-style fable ever written, it is the story of a bull who would rather smell the flowers than fight in the bull-ring.”²⁶ The editors correctly spotted the component of the ancient heritage in *The Story of Ferdinand*. And precisely this heritage, elaborated not only in the context of the animal fable that offers a precious lesson of life, is the key to understanding the secret of Ferdinand’s victory.

As we remember, some scholars pointed to the scheme of the ancient tragedy that Leaf was supposed to have broken. But that did not explain Ferdinand’s salvation. So we have to search further. The extraordinary bull also implements other ancient *topoi*. For example, his refusal to accept the call makes him an anti-Achilles. Ferdinand chooses a long and quiet life over quick death and fame – as if he had drawn the conclusion from the lesson given by the ghost of the greatest Homeric hero in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. Achilles says the following: “Nay, seek not to speak soothingly to me of death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hiring of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.”²⁷ Ferdinand’s refusal also challenges the thesis on his passivity, in line with which Hyers even compares him to Adam, whom he perceives as a submissive creature tempted by Eve.²⁸

²⁶ *Publisher’s Preface*, in: *Aesop’s Fables*, a new version written by Munro Leaf, illustrations by Robert Lawson, Norwalk, CT 1979, p. ii (the first edition of the *Fables* was published in New York in 1941).

²⁷ Hom., *Od.* 11.487-491, A. T. Murray, transl. (via Perseus Project). Let us observe that also Achilles refused his first call, however, on his mother’s request (the Skyros episode).

²⁸ C. Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, op. cit., p. 199: “If anything, Ferdinand is more like the lackluster Adam and Eve of Genesis, who organised no grand rebellion against the gods and made no defiant assault on the heavens or clever steal [*sic!*] from divine altars, but who quite unheroically got talked into eating forbidden fruit by a garden snake in a conspiracy of circumstances.

However, to refute, you have to be active somehow, which is metaphorically reflected in the images from Ferdinand's journey to and from Madrid. Carried to death, he looks backwards, after his Paradise Lost (to continue Hyers' parallel). It seems he has no power over his fate, but already the course of his sight foretells the future. Indeed, he comes back soon, and this time he sits next to the coachman and faces forward, in the journey's direction. Of course, there is no point in juxtaposing Ferdinand and Adam – while the first Man accepts, Ferdinand declines, and there is no sin on his conscience (maybe except for having sat on the Bumble Bee). However, Hyers justly individuates the Edenic-like space of Ferdinand's story – "a pastoral simplicity,"²⁹ as he writes, and it is precisely this thread, though not in Biblical, but in Greek and Roman interpretation, I consider the key to unravelling Ferdinand's secret. The bull passes the time "in the pasture under a cork tree," sitting "in the shade all day." This is a typical motif in ancient bucolic stylistics, and Ferdinand executes this motif in several ways.

First, the bull, being as such an animal akin to the bucolic genre (*βουκόλος* in Greek – a cowherd), enters also the role of the Gentle Beast. One of the characteristic traits of the ancient pastoral poetry consists in placing the monsters in Arcadian space. The Cyclops is the most famous example of this practice – he changes from the cruel and barbarian monster in Homer's *Odyssey* into a passionate lover in Theocritus' *Idyll* 11 and in the bucolic *ekphrasis* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. (Madly in love with Galatea, the Cyclops does not handle the situation very aptly – he combs his beard with a rake and he brings death to Galatea's beloved Acis. Nevertheless, he is capable of love.³⁰) In particular, Ferdinand evokes associations with the fierce Minotaur, killed by Theseus, or the Cretan Bull, captured and brought to the continent by Hercules within one of his labours for Eurystheus. Also the motif of bull-fighting is mythical, embedded in the Minoan civilisation and preserved in a number of artefacts from this period. Judging after Ferdinand's peers, we can see what dangerous creatures bulls are. Ferdinand has lethal potential, too, in fact, he is possibly the deadliest of all of them. This becomes clear

We are in the world of pastoral simplicity." On Ferdinand's passivity, see also J. Todres, S. Higinbotham, *Identity Rights and Family Rights*, op. cit., p. 95 (their remark that Ferdinand faces the reader in only 6 from 16 illustrations).

²⁹ C. Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, op. cit., p. 199.

³⁰ Ov., *Met.* 13.738-788.

when he is stung by the Bumble Bee. This episode is the only moment, when – as Goldstone remarks, analysing the illustrations – the calm space and time are “disrupted”.³¹

Second, it is none other than the Bumble Bee episode that introduces another important bucolic motif. The bee was considered a sacred animal in Antiquity.³² The respect for this genre of insects has remained until our times and has found a cute validation in the polite appellative in the Polish translation of *The Story of Ferdinand* by Irena Tuwim: “Pan Trzmiel,” that is “Mr. Bumble Bee.” What Ferdinand experiences is the so-called Sacred Bite, described already in Archaic Greek literature and then developed as a literary motif in Hellenistic idylls and Anacreontics. Its victim was usually the god of love, Eros. This rather unpleasant experience performed an essential function – it made Eros understand the immensity of his power. Aphrodite, comforting her son in pain, recommends him at the same time to imagine what huge suffering he causes with his arrows. For Ferdinand, who is closely linked to his mother as well, the bite is the test of his supremacy. It permits him (though *nolens volens*) to show to all that he is not a weakling refusing to fight because afraid of a failure. On the contrary, he is the king of the bulls, or anyway he could be if only he wanted. His choice is the result of his autonomous decision, supported by his caring mother. He renounces aggression to embrace love.

Third, Ferdinand’s choice to live an Arcadian life grants him immunity. He himself becomes a sacred creature. No one is able to hurt him, nor even gather the courage to attack him. That is why the Matador can only cry in the end and the organisers of the *corrida* have to take him home, in respect for his decision. For Ferdinand is not passive at all, though his activity is of a very special, barely noticeable type. With his choice, he shapes the space around him and he creates a new order of things, quietly, without violence, in the aesthetic pleasure of Epicurean stamp. He is the *artifex* of his own world and this world responds to him, ensuring him inviolability. Just as the Roman poet Horace was immune when he not only miraculously avoided death under a fallen tree (*Odes* II 13, II 17 and see III 4), but also survived the

³¹ B. Goldstone, *The Paradox of Space*, op. cit., p. 125.

³² See, for example, H. M. Ransome, *The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore*, New York 1937.

meeting with a dreadful wolf that did not attack, but indeed fled from the unarmed poet (*fugit inermem*). And why? Horace's answer is simple: "Integer vitae scelerisque purus (...)" – "He who is upright in life and pure of sin (...)" does not need any kind of weapon (*Ode* I 22). Ferdinand's case is all the more poignant as he is not unarmed, yet the source of his power is in his tenderness.

Last but not least, the special character of Ferdinand's space should be mentioned – his Arcadia. Its two principal elements are a tree and flowers. Both are representative for the classical eclogues. Ferdinand rests in the shade under a cork tree which Hyers associates with the Biblical Tree of Knowledge.³³ A more direct link leads us however to Theocritus' *Idyll* 12, where an oak tree (the cork tree belongs to the same genus of *Quercus*) provides shelter for the poem's protagonist. It is the very same work which Virgil is in a dialogue with in his well-known *Eclogue* 1 that opens the whole collection of his bucolic poems. The Roman poet changes Theocritus' oak into a beech tree – hence the famous expression *sub tegmine fagi*. Timothy Saunders in *Bucolic Ecology: Virgil's Eclogues and the Environmental Literary Tradition* observes that Virgil performs in this way a wordplay: Latin *fagus* – "beech tree" – sounds like the Greek *φηγός* – a type of "oak".³⁴ Virgil executes this change for a reason. He obtains the shadow from the beech tree, since he gives a more important function to the oak – *quercus* – in his *Eclogue* 1. Tityrus who rests under the beech tree is happy. He can stay in his Arcadia and live quietly, while his friend Meliboeus is forced into exile because of a civil war that had been foretold by the destruction of an oak: "(...) its striking by lightning signals this change from an earlier cultural order. Meliboeus recalls this event in the following terms (1.16-17): *saepe malum hoc nobis, si mens non laeua fuisset, / de caelo tactas memini praedicere quercus*. 'I remember that the oaks struck from the sky often predicted this evil to us, if only I had been in my right mind.'"³⁵

Ferdinand's oak is special, too, and maybe prophetic as well. For sure, it is an atypical, or even – as Hearn calls it – a "whimsical tree,"³⁶ all because

³³ C. Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, op. cit., p. 199.

³⁴ T. Saunders, *Bucolic Ecology: Virgil's Eclogues and the Environmental Literary Tradition*, London – New York 2008, p. 85.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ M. P. Hearn, *Ferdinand the Bull's 50th Anniversary*, op. cit.

of the concept Lawson invented for the illustrations. Indeed, he drew Ferdinand's cork tree (*Quercus suber*) quite literally. Between the oak leaves there are clusters of corks visible – the real corks like the ones used in the bottles of wine or champagne (in reality, they are produced from the bark tissue). A guide for teachers explains this unusual idea with Lawson's willingness to respond to the practice of "natural visualisation" that is supposed to be typical for children and his attempt to give to the images an "amusing touch."³⁷ Moreover, Karen Coats, a researcher of picturebooks, assumes that "Lawson's depiction of the cork tree playfully reminds us of his autonomy from representation."³⁸ That is true, however, there is a lot more in this concept. The corks are a symbol of success – they are shot to celebrate a victory. While emitting a sound similar to gunshots in battle, yet without any sanguinary consequences, they stand for joy and happiness.

In addition, as the corks are generally linked to alcohol, their presence in Lawson's pictures should be considered a message addressed to adult readers above all, even if the visualisation targets children. And indeed, the motif of drinking appears in three places – quite many for such a short book. In Madrid, just before the bullfight, the crowd passes by a winery (the signboard "VINO" on a house's wall). Next, a bottle of alcohol lies in the grass, in the foreground, in front of the procession of the Banderilleros to the bullring (one of them, in fact, points with his index finger in the direction of the bottle). And last, but not least – the coat of arms we see over Ferdinand's head, as he glances timidly at the arena, has an inscription in Latin that reads: "SIC SEMPER PROSIT." A reviewer from the Virginia Beach Public Library interprets this jokingly in the context of the corks: "Thus always – Cheers!,"³⁹ and indeed, it can be an allusion to victory toasts (in fact, Latin is at the origin of the German *Prost!* or *Prosit!*), at the same time in a humorous and a serious manner. For Ferdinand, who at this very moment is exactly under the coat of arms and this inscription, about to enter the bullfight ring, seems to be presented with a call of arms as befits a king. In such case, the call would mean: "May it always profit like this!" – that is: may all potentially cruel events end

³⁷ *A Curriculum for English: Grade 1*, op. cit., p. 46.

³⁸ K. Coats, *Gender in Picturebooks*, op. cit., p. 78.

³⁹ Carolyn, *The Story of Ferdinand by Munro Leaf*, November 16, 2011, at Virginia Beach Public Library Staff Pics, <http://vbplrecommends.blogspot.com/2011/11/story-of-ferdinand-by-munro-leaf.html> (accessed February 25, 2018).

with a triumph without bloodshed. To be able to experience this kind of joy has been a solemn dream of many generations of people all over the world. Finally, we should notice also that the oak is traditionally a regal tree, which strengthens the whole image of Ferdinand as a very particular king.

In the oak's shadow, we see also the flowers – the second crucial element for the creation of Ferdinand's space. They are the source of his delight, but simultaneously they represent the dark side of Arcadia, as on the last page of the book there is a solitary flower with falling petals. This is a clear metaphor of passing-away that does not spare even this idyllic place. The flowers are also thrown by the public at Ferdinand and the participants in the *corrida*, and they are embroidered on the clothes of the Matador who is supposed to bring death to the bull. However, Ferdinand takes control over the flowers in the arena, for even if they may symbolize a triumph marked by passing-away, they are from "his" Arcadia. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the flowers and the oak tree implies the two aspects of the world – the ephemeral and eternal elements that accompany us in our lives (Irena Tuwim's Polish translation stresses the oak's longevity: "W ciche wieczory letnie chadzał pod drzewo stuletnie" – "In quiet Summer evenings, he'd walk to the hundred-year-old tree"). Between the tree and the flowers, Ferdinand achieves the Horatian *aurea mediocritas*.

As a final point, one more element should be brought – literally – to light. When Ferdinand is in his childhood, he sits under the cork tree and smells the flowers, and the sky is bright in the background. As soon as he matures and enters the age suitable to be brought to the bullfight ring, a cloud appears on the horizon. And it does not disappear, not even when Ferdinand comes back from Madrid in his quiet triumph. A shadow falls also over Arcadia in Virgil's *Eclogue* 1 as the night comes, and this symbolizes the dark times that are coming nearby: "maioresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae" – "and longer shadows fall from the mountain-heights."⁴⁰ The friends notice the change, but nevertheless (or because of that) they continue their rest – Tityrus, because he can, now and ever after, like Ferdinand, and Meliboeus, because he wishes to use the moment that is given to him only this last time, his *carpe diem* (and *noctem*).

⁴⁰ Transl. from J. Tylus, *Tasso's Trees: Epic and Local Culture*, in: *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, M. Beissinger, J. Tylus, S. Wofford, eds., Berkeley, CA 1999, p. 125.

At the end of *The Story of Ferdinand* we return to the pattern of a fairy tale. We should observe, however, that also in this respect Leaf breaks the convention. This is simply “THE END,” not a happy end, as the readers expect after such a development of the events. But Leaf strives for more. It is Ferdinand who is happy, indeed “very happy.”

What are the conclusions of all this? It is the support from our near and dear that is crucial. In Ferdinand’s case it is his mother, who permits her son to follow his dream, even though she is afraid that he will be lonely. But he is not lonely, or at least he is, though not for too long. Ferdinand could find a common language neither with his fighting bull peers nor the Matador, but he won the hearts of whole generations of readers the world over. As Handy writes in “The New Yorker,” we are on Team Ferdinand.

In Antiquity, in the times of civil wars in Rome, Tityrus offered a shelter to Meliboeus when the clouds came. In the New World, in times of tensions, when it was much easier to be violent, Ferdinand decided to pursue his peaceful route through History and he became a leader, an uncrowned once-and-future king for children and adults who wish to join his Team as soon as they discover his story.

Many bulls would laugh at the idea of a Team. Each of them would like to fight, dominate, and just wipe everybody else out.

But not Ferdinand.

Under his cork tree, he will certainly offer some space to a wobo and to other mythical beasts, and to a group of people, maybe as well. To create such sacred spaces, the asyla of Arcadian stamp, by means of gentleness, community spirit, and respect for other identities – this is a beautiful mission. For generations Ferdinand has been our dear teacher in how to handle it. Many would feel embarrassed to acknowledge the tutorship of this mythical animal guide.

But not Professor Jan Kieniewicz.

And for all I know

you may sit down just quietly nearby

and ask him

to share the Story. Or the History.