

Fairy tales, children's books and schools in Sweden and Italy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historical comparisons and pedagogical remarks

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Abstract

This paper examines some historical parallels in the field of children's literature and education between Sweden and Italy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sweden and Italy are at the opposite ends of Europe, but they exhibited some interesting similarities in children's book and pedagogy during those decades. Suffice it to say that two of the most important European education experts of the time – the Swede Ellen Key and the Italian Maria Montessori – were in relationship, appreciated each other's work and exchanged ideas and remarks on educational and social issues. Parallels cannot obscure the large differences between the two nations, but there were also convergences that must be examined: researches on folktales, mass education and education of the élite were important issues in both countries. Moreover the convergences will intensify further in the coming decades, because Sweden and Italy belong to the same European context.

Questo articolo esamina alcuni parallelismi storici tra Svezia e Italia nel campo della letteratura per bambini e dell'educazione tra la fine del diciannovesimo e l'inizio del ventesimo secolo. Svezia e Italia sono agli opposti confini dell'Europa, ma, in quei decenni, mostrarono alcune interessanti similarità nell'ambito dei libri per bambini e della pedagogia. Basti dire che due delle più importanti studiose europee di temi educativi di quell'epoca – la svedese Ellen Key e l'italiana Maria Montessori – erano in contatto, apprezzavano l'una il lavoro dell'altra e si scambiavano idee e osservazioni sui temi educativi e sociali. I parallelismi non possono nascondere le grandi differenze tra le due nazioni, ma ci furono anche convergenze che devono essere esaminate: gli studi sulle fiabe, l'educazione di massa e l'educazione delle élite furono importanti tematiche in entrambi i Paesi. Del resto le convergenze si intensificheranno ulteriormente nei decenni a venire, in quanto Svezia e Italia appartengono allo stesso contesto europeo.

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Parole chiave: Ellen Key, letteratura per l'infanzia, storia dell'educazione, Svezia, Italia

Introduction

The article is a contribution to international research on educational and social issues by the Ellen Key International Research Network (EKIR) belonging to the Ellen Key Institute of Ödeshög – Sweden¹. The network consists of a selected team of scholars from many European universities. The EKIR's main purpose is to study the pedagogical and reformist projects born in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its research starts from the proposals of the Swedish intellectual Ellen Key (1849-1926) and the analysis of other theoretical and practical concepts developed in educational, artistic and philosophical systems. The work of the EKIR does not only pertain to historical analysis, it also aims to outline a new vision for educational and social development in the present and future European Union. This paper examines some historical parallels in the field of education between Sweden and Italy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, before beginning the analysis, it is necessary briefly to introduce the figure of Ellen Key, who is still often ignored by many scholars outside Scandinavia.

Ellen Key (Ambjörnsson, 2012) is an extraordinary example of intellectual woman in an era of great change. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the whole of Europe was experiencing a hectic period of technological and social transformation: feminism, scientific discoveries, the mobilization of workers, education of childhood, and the relationship between the individual and religion had become matters of fierce philosophical and political conflict. Ellen Key was intensely interested in these debates, and she contributed to them with numerous books. She travelled extensively in Europe and corresponded with numerous and prestigious intellectuals of the time. Indeed, we have documentation on relationships between Ellen Key and the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke², the philosopher Martin Buber, the French dramatist Romain Roland, the educator Maria Montessori, the Italian writers Sibilla Aleramo and Ada Negri, and many other European intellectuals. Women's dignity, their right to happiness in love, the independence of consciousness from religious dogma, and the importance of childhood for human civilization: these were some of the main ideas developed by

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the Swedish writer. They cast their light upon the present time and are therefore inspirations for the future.

Sweden and Italy are at opposite ends of Europe, but between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they exhibited some interesting similarities in education, children's literature, and certain cultural aspects. Suffice it to say that two of the most important European education experts – the Swede Ellen Key and the Italian Maria Montessori (1870-1952) – lived in those decades, appreciated each other's work, and exchanged ideas and remarks on educational and social issues. Even if briefly, analysis of these similarities may help shed light on some aspects of the common European identity.

Fairy tales as keys to children's imagery

The writer and thinker Ellen Key said in her book *Barnets århundrade* [*The Century of the Child*] (Key, 1900/1921, pp. 167-168, auth. trans) that we must foster the imagination of children by reading fairy tales to them. She also claimed that educators should not offer books designed for children: for the Swedish thinker all children are able to recognize the books appropriate for them without the mediation of adults. Therefore, the author of *The Century of the Child* thought that fairy tales offered early access to the world of imagination and creativity. Maria Montessori, on the other hand, viewed escapes into fantasy with suspicion: in her opinion, a child who fantasises is ill at ease with his or her environment: when children plunge into imagination, they want to escape from difficult or boring circumstances (Montessori, 1957, pp. 209-217). However, Maria Montessori's theories allowed the reading of fairy tales provided that the children were at least seven years of age. In fact, in the opinion of the Italian thinker, young children cannot distinguish reality from fantasy, and hence may fall prey to groundless fears (Tucker, 1996, pp. 73-74, auth. trans).

In general terms, the art of writing fairy tales is an important topic not only in education, but also in anthropology and in literary criticism: consider the studies of Propp, a Soviet folklorist, on Russian fairy tales. His analysis revealed (Propp, 1928) a narrative structure which can be extended to numerous literary genres. The consequences of Propp's discoveries relate – not intentionally – to what Ellen Key wrote in 1900: the Swedish thinker believed, in fact, that every young reader can move from fairy tales to great literature (Key, 1900/1921, p.168, auth. trans) as if it were a natural process. In many ways, these insights also indirectly pertain to the heritage of certain children's writers: Gianni Rodari (1920-1980) was one of the most important Italian children's authors and one of the first scholars to un-

derstand the creative possibilities of Propp's discoveries. In his book *La Grammatica della Fantasia. Introduzione all'arte di inventare storie* [*The Grammar of Fantasy. Introduction to the art of inventing stories*], published in 1973, Rodari suggested turning the narrative elements identified by Propp (e.g. the fight against the antagonist) into cards. Children could be inspired by these cards to invent new stories. This was the first step towards a literary education.

Moreover, there is also a cultural proximity between childhood and fairy tales: children and fairy tales were long considered to be 'more humble' than adulthood and courtly literature. Childhood and fairy tales were therefore united by the same 'status' of inferiority: a status that children and folktales often still suffer. However, as the Italian scholar Milena Bernardi points out, over the centuries authors and gatherers of fairy tales have always requested a kind of 'passport' to childhood so that they can enter the world of folk tales (Bernardi, 2005, pp. 35-50). Moreover, when Basile, Perrault, the Grimm brothers and others dealt with fairy tales, they paid attention to children and the conditions of childhood. This attention was not always free from moralistic or satirical intent, but it was important in order to promote greater interest in childhood and children's imagery.

The legacy of fairy tales

In this regard, it is now appropriate to outline the history of the publication of fairy tales, because the connection between childhood and fairy tales will become clearer. Because we are concerned with the similarities between Sweden and Italy in children's literature, this historical reconstruction will especially regard the situation of the two countries.

From the seventeenth century onwards in Europe, several writers and scholars devoted important books to fairy tales: one of the first writers to be interested in them was the Italian Giambattista Basile (1575-1632) who collected numerous Neapolitan folk tales at the beginning of the seventeenth century. His book was titled *Lo cunto de li cunti ovvero lo trattenimento de' piccerilli* [*The Tale of the Tales or rather Children's Entertainment*], and it was written in Neapolitan dialect. This book was published posthumously (1634-1636) and only in 1925 was it translated into Italian by the philosopher Benedetto Croce. Even the title suggests a close link between the fairy tales collected in the book and childhood: the stories collected by Basile mainly involved children, who were both the subjects and characters of fantastical plots. In fact, Basile collected fairy tales in which childhood was very present, although it was a miserable childhood which was often ridiculed. The children of these folk tales were orphans, poor and often hungry, forced to live and work in humiliating places (latrines, filthy alleys, unhealthy slums). The childhood de-

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scribed by Basile was the representation of the social conditions of the poor classes in southern Italy during the Baroque period. The fairy tales of the Neapolitan writer have happy endings, but they use childhood metaphorically to depict the conditions of the poor to the upper classes, using the literary devices of the fantastic, grotesque and comic. In Baroque Italy, children and fairy tales were representations of humility and poverty; but Basile had no interest in social protest: his stories reflected a strong tradition of popular fairy tales in Naples, and they were intended to be pure entertainment for gentlemen of the court (Bernardi, 2005, p. 41). To be noted is that, in the narrative frame of Basile's book, fairy tales were recounted by old crippled women: these narrators had been summoned to keep company with a Moorish princess who was expecting a baby. The hags were malformed, and they came from the most miserable class, but they knew amazing stories. Basile resorted to old and poor women in order to show that his fairy tales were born from stories and events of the Neapolitan people.

However, it is symptomatic that Basile's book was rediscovered at the beginning of the twentieth century, because at that time in Italy there was intense interest in mythological and fantasy literature for children (Grandi, 2011). There was a need to find 'good books' for young readers, and many writers and publishers were rediscovering the heritage of Italian fairy tales, myths and legends. However, Basile's fairy tales entered textbooks and books for children only some decades later, because, in the 1920s and 1930s, publishers preferred to offer young readers adaptations of tales by other authors (e.g. Homer, Virgil, Boccaccio, Sacchetti, Gozzi), probably because Croce (the editor of Basile's book) was unpopular with fascism, and perhaps because the tales of the baroque writer were considered material for scholars. Basile's rediscovery came about in a historical phase – the very long transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century and the consolidation of fascism – in which Italian culture and politics showed a certain interest in childhood (this was an interest with controversial aspects, but this topic will be discussed later). After Basile it was not until the eighteenth century that another important writer of fairy tales lived and worked in Italy. This was the Venetian Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806), who wrote some of the most famous Italian fairy tales for the theatre (Beniscelli, 1986). *Turandot*, *L'amore di tre melarance* [*The Love of the Three Oranges*], *Il re cervo* [*The King Stag*], and many other stories are his most important literary contributions: the tales of the Venetian writer were successfully represented on the stage, and these fairy comedies were often also appreciated by foreign writers, such as Goethe and Schiller. Gozzi's stories were inspired partly by popular tradition, and partly by the then widespread fascination with chinoiserie. Nevertheless, Gozzi wrote such moving stories that they inspired other artists: for instance, Puccini (1858-1924), just before his death, set *Turandot* to music, turning the fairy tale into an opera.

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And what happened in Sweden in the eighteenth century? The Scandinavian country had numerous story-tellers, called *sagoberättaren* in common parlance: they perpetuated a long narrative tradition of the Swedish people (Palme Sanavio & Sanavio, 2005, p. 5); a tradition born in the mists of time. During the long northern winters and family celebrations, the *sagoberättaren* would hearten their listeners with fairy tales and legends of the Swedish tradition. The most important of these *sagoberättaren* was born in the eighteenth century: indeed, in many ways, the year 1778 can be called the *annus mirabilis* of Swedish folk tales, for born in that year was Michael Jonasson Wallander (p.6), the ‘master’ of Swedish fairy tales. In the middle of the next century, Wallander composed forty-four fairy tales which scholars regard as masterpieces. He was a humble man who told tales in exchange for a handful of tobacco, but his efforts to preserve traditional fairy tales helped to inspire several academic studies on Scandinavian folk tales in nineteenth-century Sweden. Hence it is clear that, until the end of the eighteenth century, fairy tales were regarded as a minor literary genre. Indeed, fairy tales were confined to oral storytelling. Or when stories about fairies were recounted in books and plays, the narratives took the form of entertaining escape to a wonderful and disengaged world of fantasy. Examples of the former case are the old and deformed women-narrators depicted by Basile or, also, the *sagoberättaren* that for centuries told stories during the long Swedish winters. Examples of the latter case are the comedies of Carlo Gozzi.

In the nineteenth century, however, the cultural ‘status’ of fairy tales radically changed: the romantic ideology that initially appeared in Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries attributed great importance to people’s tales, because the genuine identity of nations was in those stories (De Paz, 1984, p. 44). Consequently, fairy tales were not only entertainment for the lower classes or an escape in wonder for the upper classes; these fanciful stories became the keys to open doors locked for centuries and gain access to ancestral truths.

The German brothers Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859) Grimm altered the approach to fairy tales hitherto dominant. The two brothers, who were philologists, were animated by a spirit of nationalism (typical of that era and which spread to several European countries, such as Hungary, Italy, Finland and Sweden). For this reason, they wanted to rediscover the literature of Germanic antiquity and everything that had existed prior to written literature: that is, oral tales, proverbs, and thus also fairy tales (Calvino, 1970, p. XV).

For this reason, Jacob and Wilhelm travelled through Germany gathering traditional tales by word of mouth from narrators who were often farmers – in the case of Katherine Viehmann – or belonged to the lower middle class – in the case of Dortchen Wild, daughter of a pharmacist and then wife of Jacob (p. XIV). Through careful analysis of the narrative materials collected, the intention of the

Grimm brothers was, on the one hand, to revitalize the ancient Germanic traditions, and on the other, to strengthen the dominant bourgeois ideology. In fact, they subjected the fairy tales that they collected to thorough revision in order to eliminate elements that might undermine the bourgeois mentality; for example, they mitigated sexual references in the folk tales and instead emphasised metaphors of industriousness and prudence (Zipes, 2006, pp. 96-128, auth. trans). The narrative materials collected were repeatedly revised by the two brothers so that the stories would be more in keeping with their cultural project: between the first edition of 1812 and the last of 1857, the fairy tales were republished seven times, being constantly expanded and revised by Jacob and Wilhelm (p. 100). The journey of the Grimm brothers through Germany to collect stories and fairy tales became an example of research that many other scholars of legends and traditional stories successfully emulated. This also applies to Swedish-Finnish Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884), the 'Father of Finland' in a cultural sense (Sivieri, 1964, pp. 472-476). Lönnrot was a doctor interested in ancient Finnic sagas and who travelled – from 1828 until 1849 – the length and breadth of Finland's various regions to collect from elderly storytellers the epic songs of the ancestral traditions of peoples inhabiting the area between the Baltic Sea, Karelia and the Kola Peninsula. Lönnrot's intense effort resulted in a long and fascinating poem consisting of twenty-two thousand eight hundred verses in the definitive edition of 1849. *Kalevala* (this is the title of the Finnish poem collected by Lönnrot) is one of the most beautiful ancestral sagas. It blends magic, emotions and adventures into stories that are both fairy tales and myths. *Kalevala* helped to establish the cultural identity of the Finnish people by bringing out the ancient narrative tradition of Karelia and other boreal lands. It should be borne in mind that traditional Finnish tales long exercised a particular fascination on Italian culture: in 1799, the Italian traveller and explorer Giuseppe Acerbi (1773-1846) – on his return from a journey to Finland – described and drew a *runnoia*, which is a traditional Finnic narrator. Acerbi also collected songs and poems that he had heard in those distant boreal lands (Agrati & Magini, 1988, pp.8-9). Moreover, *Kalevala* was translated into Italian by various scholars: partial translations of the poem were produced in the second half of the nineteenth century (Antonio, 1872; Targioni Tozzetti, 1881), but the first comprehensive study on the saga dates to 1891 (Comparetti, 1891), while two different Italian translations of the Finnish poem appeared in 1909 (Cocchi, 1909; Pavolini, 1909), and in 1912 (Di Silvestri-Falconieri, 1912) a third translation was published. Finally, in 1941 (Primicerio, 1941), an adaptation for children, still available in book shops, was produced.

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In search of folk traditions

The interest in oral narrative tradition was also central to the research of many Swedish scholars who wanted to collect, preserve and analyse the vast heritage of fairy tales handed down over the centuries in the countryside and forests; a heritage maintained by the *sagoberättaren* but which historical and economic changes in the nineteenth century threatened to erase. Although there were some oral storytellers – for example Wallander – who had compiled collections of fairy tales, this heritage would probably have disappeared without the efforts of dedicated scholars, most notably Gunnar Olof Hyltén-Cavallius (1818-1889), Nils Gabriel Djurklou (1829-1904) (Jacobsen, 2001) and the Swedish-Finnish Vilhelm Eliel Viktor Wessman (1879-1958) (Palme Sanavio & Sanavio, 2005, pp. 6-7). Hyltén-Cavallius is often considered the ‘father’ of Swedish ethnology because his study entitled *Wärend och wårdarne ett försök i svensk etnologi* [*Wärend and its Inhabitants: an Attempt in Swedish Ethnology* – 1863-1868] was the first investigation into the origins and customs of the inhabitants of Sweden’s Småland district. Hyltén-Cavallius edited a collection of Swedish fairy tales entitled *Svenska folksagor och äfventyr* [*Swedish Folk Tales and Adventures*], in collaboration with the English philologist George Stephen (1813-1895), which was published between 1844 and 1849. In many ways, this was the first anthology of Swedish fairy tales compiled using scientific methods, both philological and ethnographic. Moreover, the scientific value of Hyltén-Cavallius’s research is recognized by the entire community of scholars: for instance, the American Stith Thompson (1885-1976) – one of the leading experts on traditional fairy tales and stories – did not fail to cite the research of the Swedish scholar in his seminal book *The Folktale* (Thompson, 1994, p.549, auth. trans). Thompson³ also recalled that the material collected by the Swedish researcher was voluminous, and that some of his most interesting writings had long remained unpublished. Hyltén-Cavallius’s studies soon had resonance in Italy: suffice it to mention that the important Italian historian and expert on mythology, Arturo Graf (1848-1913), cited the Swedish scholar in regard to some fairy-tale themes in his book on mediæval legends published in two volumes between 1892 and 1893 (Graf, 2002, p. 35). This is significant evidence that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the Italian academic world was interested in ethnological research in Sweden.

Djurklou conducted research identical to that of Hyltén-Cavallius in his work on the oral histories and traditional customs of Swedish populations. One of the most interesting publications by Djurklou was a collection of fairy tales and stories in dialect entitled *Sagor och äfventyr, berättade på svenska landsmål* [*Fairy Tales and Adventures Told in Swedish Dialect*] and published in the 1880s. This anthology of fairy tales was illustrated by Carl Larsson (1853-1919) who is considered one of the principal Swedish painters and illustrators: his graphic works demonstrated a par-

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ticular interest in the world of childhood, and they deeply influenced Italian authors for young readers. As recalled by the Italian writer for children, Bianca Pitzorno, watercolours by Carl Larsson showed the magical atmosphere of northern Europe to the Italian people. Hence Larsson's paintings, books by Astrid Lindgren and Tove Jansson, as well as the films of Ingmar Bergman, were a fundamental part of the Italian imagery of Sweden (Pitzorno, 2007, pp. 36-37)⁴.

The contribution of Wessmann (Palme Sanavio & Sanavio, 2005, pp. 6-7) was significant in imparting the legacy of Swedish folk tales. Wessman was a school teacher who used to visit, during the summer, the Finnish-Swedish region close to the village of Leksvall. In 1909 Wessmann met one of the last oral storytellers in the area: this was Berndt Leonard Strömberg (1822-1910), called the "Blind". Strömberg was the son of peasants and he had been blind from birth (like Homer). His community paid him a allowance; in return, Strömberg recounted dozens of traditional fairy tales. Wessmann was a scholar of folklore materials and knew the work of the Grimm brothers. Consequently, he collected the fairy tales of Strömberg from the voice of the blind narrator in the spirit of the two German philologists. These were fairy tales characterized by ancient and pre-Christian plots and which contained numerous descriptions of customs, crafts, and traditions dating back to remote times. The collection of stories narrated by the blind minstrel of Leksvall is one of the most important testimonies of Sweden's ancestral traditions.

Also for Italy, the nineteenth century was a period of rediscovery of folk traditions, and especially of fairy tales. After national unification in 1861 – when the Subalpine Parliament proclaimed the country's unity in Turin – some Italian scholars of folk traditions started extensive research on uses and customs in the various regions of the Peninsula. The most important of them was the Sicilian scholar Giuseppe Pitré (1841-1916), who for years devoted himself to collecting the traditions and tales of his Mediterranean island (Cocchiara, 1941). The studies undertaken by Pitré were so extensive that they were collected in numerous volumes which still represent a precious stock of knowledge on a legacy of fairy tales and traditions now threatened with extinction. Some the most interesting research by Pitré is collected in *Fiabe, novelle e racconti popolari siciliani* [*Sicilian Fairy Tales, Folk Tales and Short Stories*] published in 1875 and in the successive book *Fiabe e leggende popolari* [*Folk Fairy Tales and Legends*] published in 1888. In 1882 Pitré also founded an important journal entitled *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari* [*Archive for the Study of popular Traditions*] whose contributors were not only scholars but also writers interested in fairy tales: for instance, the author Maria Savi-Lopez (1846-1940), who wrote some articles for Pitré's journal on fairy tales and legends of the Alps. She subsequently reworked these articles into children's books. Savi-Lopez, in her academic articles and children's stories, drew on the theories of the Anglo-

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German scholar Max Müller (1823-1900), according to whom legends and fairy tales are reminiscences of ancient myths. Besides giving space to Italian tales and legends, Savi-Lopez did all she could to popularize German and Scandinavian mythologies among young Italian readers: her adaptations of Nordic and Germanic myths are important in this regard, and they are contained in the books *Oberon, piccolo re selvaggio* [*Oberon, the Small Wild King*] (1929), *La leggenda di Gudruna* [*The Legend of Gudruna*] (1933), *Nani e folletti* [*Dwarves and Goblins*] (1900). This last book is replete with references to the fairy tales of northern Europe: in particular, the chapter entitled *Verso il Polo* [*Towards the Pole*] recounts some of the most famous Scandinavian legends. Also the Sicilian writer Luigi Capuana (1839-1915) drew inspiration from Giuseppe Pitré's research for his fairy tales published in the volumes *C'era una volta* [*Once Upon a Time*] (1882) and *Il Raccontafiabe* [*The Storyteller*] (1893). These books are small masterpieces of children's literature in which the traditional themes of fairy tales are mixed with original literary devices: in Capuana's fairy tales there are, as usual, kings and ladies, but these dignitaries often act comically, unexpectedly, and playfully, so that the solemnity of the traditional fairy tale is mixed with popular farce and pantomime. Similarly, the collection of Tuscan stories entitled *I racconti della nonna* [*The Grandmother's Stories*] – written with admirable literary skill by Emma Perodi (1850-1915) – is faithful to the legacy of folkloric narrative studied by Pitré in that it contains stories about saints, skeletons and monsters; but it is equally attentive to the imaginative world of childhood with its happy endings, spells, and punishment of the wicked. Moreover, one of the most important Italian contemporary writers for adults and children, Italo Calvino (1923-1985), recognized the importance of Pitré and other scholars of Italian fairy tales in the nineteenth century when he wrote the introduction to his collection *Fiabe italiane* [*Italian Folktales*] in 1956.

Therefore, on conclusion of this analysis on the fairy tales, it should be noted that in Italy since the nineteenth century, in both academic research and children's books, there has been a strong interest in the fairy tales and epic poems of northern Europe. On the other hand, also in the Scandinavian countries there has been a certain interest in Italian fairy tales: one of the main publishers in Sweden, Bonnier, brought out a Swedish translation of the book by Capuana *C'era una volta* a year after its first Italian edition. Moreover, also Ellen Key recommended reading the Swedish translation of Capuana's fairy tales: in fact, she included it among the books recommended for childhood listed in the Appendix of her essay *The Century of the Child* (Key, 1900, 2/, p. 246).

As in Germany and Sweden, so in Italy fairy tales for children derived from detailed studies undertaken in the nineteenth century on folk narrative traditions.

Children's literature in Sweden and Italy between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: a comparison

Numerous parallels are apparent between Sweden and Italy also in regard to the novels and picture books for children published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These parallels exist although, obviously, the books and authors of the two countries often had distinctive features. To be noted is that Ellen Key listed numerous writers for children in the closing pages of the Swedish edition of *The Century of the Child* (Key, 1900, 2/, pp.173-189, 245-256)⁵. This list provides useful guidance in the field of Swedish children's literature of the late nineteenth century. Among the many names cited by Key, some of them immediately attract the attention: the first is that of Otilia Adelborg (1855-1936) who was an illustrator for children and nourished especial interest in the folk traditions of Sweden (Klein, 2013, pp.126-129). Otilia very efficaciously depicted the children of the Swedish countryside in her illustrations: she placed particular emphasis on the traditional costumes and clothes that she observed during long walks in fields and villages. Otilia drew children who were 'real', because her illustrations were not stereotypes or clichés, but rather affectionate and sincere reproductions of life in the Swedish countryside: the picture book *Barnens Julbok* (Adelborg, 1885) is an example in this regard. It is a book about Christmas in which the main characters are Swedish children depicted in their everyday lives at school, at home, or outdoors. The illustrations are accurate and detailed: all the children are drawn in their realistic clothes and in their natural behaviours. Thus on one page a child, watching the chickens, is wearing patched shorts, whereas, on the following pages, other children yawn at school and have the typical crumpled vests of Swedish peasants. Also in Italy children's literature became interested in the plight of children in the countryside. However, this interest manifested itself not so much through the investigation of folklore; rather, the attention focused on material life, where poverty, hunger and insecurity were the dominant characteristics. The condition of Italian peasant children is the background to the novel *Le Avventure di Pinocchio* [*The Adventures of Pinocchio*] by Carlo Collodi (1826-1890) published in one volume in 1883. The story of Pinocchio absorbs many of the themes of fairy tales; but also pays attention to the reality of Italian peasant life at that time by showing the habits, fears and hopes of the poorer classes of the late nineteenth century (Myers, 2012, p.52). Therefore, in Sweden and Italy at the turn of the two centuries, children's literature recounted the atmosphere of the rural world, albeit in different ways: in Sweden pictures were the main means to represent that reality, while in Italy novels performed the task.

The foreign authors with Swedish translations that Ellen Key mentions in her list include James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, Louisa May Alcott and two Ital-

ian authors: Luigi Capuana and Edmondo De Amicis. Carlo Collodi and his *Pinocchio* are not cited. Moreover, the first Swedish translation of the novel about Pinocchio dates back to 1904. Italy is in the reading suggestions made by Ellen Key: in fact, she recommends a book about Garibaldi by the Swedish writer Cecilia Bååth-Holmberg, an author who specialized in biographies and educational topics. Evidently, the adventurous feats of the Italian patriot fascinated the Nordic imagination. Ellen Key also recommends books by her compatriot Selma Lagerlöf, although, of course, the main children's novel by Lagerlöf – *Nils Holgersson underbara resa genom Sverige* [*The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*] – is not mentioned because it was published in 1906-1907. In Italy, the first translations of this novel were published in 1914 and in 1922⁶. A few years previously, in 1919, the writer and illustrator for children Antonio Rubino (1880-1964) published the illustrated book *Viperetta* [*Little Viper*], which recounts the incredible adventures of a petulant little girl – aptly named Viperetta – who travels to the moon, where she meets fickle princes, boring teachers, amazing creatures, and a beautiful city wrapped in a milky light (Negri, 2010). Both the novel by Selma Lagerlöf and the illustrated book by Antonio Rubino resort to a magical adventure to describe the journeys of their naughty children. But whereas Lagerlöf brilliantly tells legends on Sweden, Rubino recounts an adventure *à la* Gulliver with a lightness in Art Nouveau style, because he wants to make his young readers laugh and to satirize his times. However, the books have a feature in common: both the novel by Lagerlöf and the illustrated story by Rubino describe an extraordinary and magical journey, a flight from everyday reality, a desire to see the world from above. It is significant that two of the most important European children's books of the early twentieth century expressed the same desire to rise above the earth, look at the world from another point of view, and reject the dullness of everyday life. It is also significant that these adventures are made by two naughty children – Nils and Viperetta – who are transformed by the journey and become, in their own way, wise. These journeys have an educational value because they educate the protagonists and express a strong desire for freedom and great curiosity (Grilli, 2003, pp. 95-130). Unfortunately, in Italy these yearnings were soon suffocated by fascist totalitarianism, which instead did not strike Sweden. During the fascist regime in Italy, children's literature was deeply influenced by the ideology of the dictatorship. Consequently, apart from some interesting exceptions⁷, the books offered to young readers favoured tales about colonial wars, the superiority of the Italian people, the achievements of the regime, and mythological stories. In Sweden, by contrast, the absence of a dictatorial regime gave writers for children great freedom of expression, as evidenced by the work of Elsa Beskow (1874-1953), whose delicate and refined books about cute elves and tender families are far from any fanatical ideology. Only after the Second World War did writers for children in Italy recover ar-

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tistic independence from the constraints of ideology. In many respects, the Italian books for young readers by Gianni Rodari may be likened to the Swedish novels by Astrid Lindgren, because both writers had a libertarian and gently subversive inspiration which helped to define childhood as an age of freedom and fantasy.

Education in Sweden and Italy: between conservation and innovation

The analysis conducted thus far on fairy tales and children's books has afforded understanding of some important aspects of cultural evolution in Sweden and Italy. However, this pedagogical research cannot be complete without reconstruction, even if only partial, of the history of educational policies in the two countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; a history which exhibits significant differences, but also striking similarities, especially as far as the conflict between mass education and education of the élite is concerned. In this regard, it is necessary to report the opinion of Ellen Key, whose book *The Century of the Child* advocated co-education between males and females and among different social classes, because the encounter among diverse children is morally, physically and culturally beneficial for childhood growth and the betterment of society (Key, 1921, p.174). For her part, Maria Montessori harboured similar hopes. In fact, her Casa dei Bambini [Children's House] nursery school, founded in 1907 in Rome, welcomed children of both sexes from the poor neighborhood of San Lorenzo. But, as noted by Maria Montessori, her school attracted the attention and favour of the rich and the 'crowned heads', who willingly visited her educational institution (Montessori, 1950, pp. 36-40). The Montessori method transcends differences of gender, wealth and even of nationality: in fact, the Swedish Ministry of Education and Science has reported that several schools inspired by the Italian educator's theories were founded in the early decades of the twentieth century in Sweden, where, moreover, some Montessori schools still operate (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1999, pp. 21-22).

From a historical point of view, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in both countries the main educational problems were illiteracy and education of the élite. Research has found that, in the 1850s, about 20% of adults in Sweden were illiterate, whereas in Italy the figure was 80% (Cives, 1992, p. 55). These data were severe for Italy, whereas they confirmed a strong focus in Sweden on universal education; a focus probably due to the Lutheran Church, which – unlike the Catholic Church – promoted direct reading of the Bible by believers, with the consequence that the faithful had to be able to read from childhood.

In Sweden, attendance at primary school or *folkskola* [folk school] was made compulsory in 1842 (Stenholm, 1970, p.9). In Italy, compulsory primary school

[*scuola elementare*] was approved in 1848 in the Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia, and it was entrusted to the municipalities, which often lacked resources to support such education adequately (Cives, 1992, p.57-58). The unification of Italy led to the extension of compulsory education throughout the country. But especially in the South, the situation of teachers, schools and pupils was difficult and miserable.

In Sweden, there long existed a sort of double school system: on the one hand, the common primary school – the *folkskola* – on the other, the *realskola*, which allowed access to higher levels of education (Husén, 1964, pp.101-121). To be noted is that the *realskola* was almost exclusively attended by children of the urban upper classes. In Italy, there has always been only one type of primary school for all people, and it is attended by children aged 6 to 10 years. In the past, selection between those who could continue at school and those who had to leave occurred at the end of primary schooling. This selection was made on the basis of the family's financial capacity, so that only children from the upper classes continued to secondary school. On the contrary, many Italian children of the lower classes could not even attend compulsory school because they were forced to work in order to help their families.

In the 1920s, important educational reforms were initiated in both Sweden and Italy, but they were diametrically opposed. Whilst in Sweden the Labour government attempted to remove class differences in schools by promoting a system of passages for students from the *folkskola* to the *realskola* [School Commission appointed in 1918 and Reform of 1927] (Husén, 1964, pp.104-105; Husén & Boalt, 1973, pp.3-4), in 1923 the Italian fascist government launched a reform – called the “Gentile Reform” after the name of the minister, Giovanni Gentile, who invented it – which created a selective education system (Turi, 2006, pp. 323-358) where social classes were implicitly invited to enroll on different educational post-primary pathways (gymnasium and high school for upper and middle classes, vocational school for lower classes). It should be noted that the learning of Latin – in both Sweden and Italy – was the key feature of the upper-class school career, because this ancient language was not taught in educational programmes designed for the lower classes (Ghio, 1964, pp.170-179). In 1950 the Swedish government launched a pilot project for unification of the *folkskola* and the *realskola*. Instituted in 1962 – despite the protests of some teachers and conservatives – was the *grundskola* (basic school), a compulsory school for all children aged 7 to 16 years old (Stenholm, 1970, pp.13-25). In that same year – 1962 – the Italian parliament decided on the creation of a unified, free and compulsory junior high school (*scuola media*) for all children aged 11 to 13 years: this type of school replaced the previous selective system (Ambrosoli, in Cives, 1992, pp.136-140). Also in Italy the reform was opposed by conservative parties (p.138).

The foregoing brief review of the history of schools in Sweden and Italy between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has shown that the problems of education in the two countries were similar, but that the solutions implemented by their governments were different, in the first half of the twentieth century, because there were different political systems. Only in the 1960s did the two countries – despite numerous controversies – reach a similar solution in order to deliver a unified curriculum to schoolchildren. Undoubtedly, this convergence will intensify further in the coming decades, because Sweden and Italy belong to the same European context.

Notes

¹ Ellen Key Institute website: www.eki.nu

² It should be noted that the 1904 edition of the children's book *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* [*Tales of the Good God*], written by Rilke in 1900, was dedicated to Ellen Key.

³ Thompson translated the research of the Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne (1867-1925) on the classification of fairy tales.

⁴ This text is dedicated to Astrid Lindgren on the occasion of the program *The compass marks the north* (2007-2008) carried out in collaboration with Bologna District, University of Bologna and Scandinavian embassies.

⁵ Some of these pages had already been published in A. Sandström's pedagogical journal *Verdandi* in 1884.

⁶ This children's novel was a success in Italy, because it had numerous reprints in 1928, in 1932, to the present day.

⁷ Some editorial series maintained a high degree of autonomy from the instructions of the regime, e.g.: “La biblioteca dei miei ragazzi” [“The Library of my Children”] and “La Scala d'oro” [“The Golden Staircase”].

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