

## Educational models and domestic life in two animals novels of the end of the XIX century

**Lorenzo Cantatore**

Università degli Studi Roma Tre

### Abstract

Against the backdrop of different and partly unconventional existential horizons, the writing of Ida Baccini and Contessa Lara is built around educational models that share the same principles and proposals, and that especially find in the animal world and in its relationship with mankind some useful, helpful and effective pretexts for inspiring uplifting stories for children belonging to the Italian middle-class.

However it should be noted that both novels *Una famiglia di topi* and *Una famiglia di gatti* insist on a negative and dangerous image of the outside world, as opposed to the *hortus conclusus* of the domestic microcosm, or the family nest where every room, every object and every action has a safe and reassuring place in the rhythm of a daily life full of material and moral welfare, inspired by the values of Providence and of the upper-class etiquette.

**Key words:** Children's literature, Ida Baccini, Contessa Lara, education in XIX century, educational models

---

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the bit monotonous landscape (but with peaks of genius, first and foremost, of course, *Le avventure di un burattino* (*The Adventures of a puppet*) by Collodi, but also *Cuore* (*Heart*) by Edmondo De Amicis) of the Italian literature for young people is enriched by two novels featuring similarities and differences, starting from their titles: *Una famiglia di topi* (*A family of mice*) and *Una famiglia di gatti* (*A family of cats*). Both written by women, but with very different personalities: Countess Lara (pseudonym of Eva Cattermole Mancini, 1849-1896), beautiful, fashionable, with a Boldini-flavoured *nom de plume* and a clearly *maudit* life (she will be killed by her lover in the centre of the Byzantine Rome<sup>1</sup>); Ida Baccini (1850-1911), all home and work, few significant bends to rules, but basically sober, closed and satisfied with her Florentine origins, prudent and faithful to a tireless literary craftsmanship (Baccini, 2004; Cambi, 2003; Cini, 2014). However both our authors went through a tough experience for those times, because of which people talk about them: they both were pioneered divorced.

Against the backdrop of so different and partly unconventional existential horizons, the writing of these two women is built around educational models that share the same principles and proposals, and that especially find in the animal world and in its relationship with mankind some useful, helpful and effective pretexts for inspiring uplifting stories for children belonging to the Italian middle-class. Baccini is a veteran of animals tales (her first and very lucky book was entitled *Le memorie di un pulcino* (*Memories of a chick*)), Countess Lara will come even to create talking anthropomorphic toys (*Il romanzo della bambola* - *The doll novel*). No wonder that, even in this case, the bourgeois pedagogical project includes, in its library for younger readers, narrations that “place side by side the family life and the external life with disconcerting ease”, because “behind every text [...] you can see the need to tame the rebellious child within the borders of

a lifestyle legitimized by socialization processes fully managed by the ruling classes” (Calabrese, 2011, pp. 22, 30).

The two novels here examined (in some way educational novels) start by opposite actions. *A family of mice* is the story of an inclusion, of the adoption by the aristocratic Sernici family of a pair of Indians mice (Ragù and Caciotta) already abused by a cruel street artist<sup>2</sup>; *A family of cats* tells the story of Pallina, a small kitten first marginalized and then moved away from their owners house, the Beltramis, because, jealous of a pair of canaries that took her away the affection of little Matilda, had ate them in a gulp. So while Ragù and Caciotta raise their family within the walls of a cosy and rich townhouse, where they establish a fair relationship with the children Rita and Nello, Pallina is expelled from a sumptuous house and from the city to be confined in the countryside where she pays, one by one, all the consequences of her jealousy and of her moral weight.

However it should be noted that both novels insist on a negative and dangerous image of the outside world, as opposed to the *hortus conclusus* of the domestic microcosm, or the family nest where every room, every object and every action has a safe and reassuring place in the rhythm of a daily life full of material and moral welfare, inspired by the values of Providence and of the upper-class etiquette (Boero, 2002). Even these two literary sources reinforce the historical perspective according to which the house, “undisputed domain of private life, since the nineteenth century becomes both the foundation of the family and the cornerstone of social order. [...] An obvious element of stability” (Covato, 2007, p. 25). On the contrary, leaving the house to go around the world (the expulsion in the world) for Pallina is a punishment as well as the curiosity for the world proven by Moschino, the most lively of Ragù and Caciotta’s sons, is punished with a series of terrifying visions beginning with that of a stray cat that eats a mouse during a night shower. In this sense, the educational perspective of the two authors seem to agree around the importance, even symbolic, attributed to the home, to the daily routine, to the preservation of a regular life and environment that considers as harmful (and for this reason penalizing), any abrupt turnaround: “The worst step is that of the door” (Countess Lara, 1930, p. 109)<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, in the scenes structure and in the dialogues construction, our authors show their deep knowledge of the pedagogical mission they want to play for their young readers and for their families. Now their own voices, those of the characters they have created, are perfectly in line with an educational project that combines the typical values of the Catholic tradition (guilt, sin, punishment, redemption, forgiveness) with those of the post-unification bourgeois morality (work, dignity, honesty, loyalty, decency domestic, social justice) that grows stronger thanks to the spread of this type of literature.

In Countess Lara’s work, as noted by Pino Boero, we find the interpretation of the “topinità” as an “effort to adapt to the behaviour of people with common values and choices” (Boero, 2002, p. 19). Since, if it is true that every mouse represents a character, it goes without saying that for each of them a similar fate clipped on analogue human types is going to take place, as explained by the lively Moschino: “Dodò will become a librarian; I’ll make my best; Lilia will be assigned with an husband to continue the breed; I don’t know what will happen to Nini, so irritable; and you, make the bed at least, skiver!” (Countess Lara, 1930, p. 66). From this point of view the writer treats the mice like children: their characters have to be formed, despite keeping their original nature. At the end of this tale there is a story of mutual education among children and mice, in the shadow of authoritative and fair parents such as the Sernicis, who seem infallible and, even when making a mistake, they recover by drawing positive lessons from the worst catastrophes. It is no coincidence that the Countess Lara puts at the centre of the story the financial meltdown of Count Sernici, i.e. the danger of losing the economic strength that frames the whole story and that was providential for the poor mice. The recovery, when the house comes to shine from well-being and serenity, is made possible thanks to the count’s ability but also to conjugal and family love. Here the children and the mice play a key role, they become the symbol of unity, of the affections strength, of the importance of solidarity in misfortune, of trust in honesty and in the householder’s professional skills: “Nor even the mice were forgotten by the landlord, although the banker had his minutes counted. Those little animals [...] he loved them [...] they had participated with him and with his family to the house affairs” (Countess Lara, 1930, p. 216).

Instead, the story of the cat Pallina is a story of conflict, of the basic inability for the animal to adapt to the human emotional habits. For this reason Matilde’s betrayal was condemned by maternal pedagogy:

“How much jealousy should have accumulated, day by day, minute by minute, in that poor loving heart that you, cruel girl, tortured with shocking thoughtlessness” (Baccini, 1894, p. 37). But there is neither teaching nor reproach which is valid, also the attempts of reconciliation between the cat and the girl are vain, the effort to forgive one another shipwrecks in an underlying pessimism, so that Baccini intervenes by directly addressing to her young readers:

Pardon, ladies, is a holy thing: and the more it costs, the greater is the violence that we had to do to ourselves to give it, the more it is meritorious in the sight of God. But forgiving does not mean forgetting; because, unfortunately, forgetting does not belong to us. We can, we must, exercise our will on worse feelings, on our nature, and address them, as much as possible, to a high and generous aim. In one word, we can command the heart, but we cannot suffocate memory<sup>4</sup> (Baccini, 1894, p. 40).

In the end the decision to be taken is one, very painful: “Pallina must leave this home” (Baccini, 1894, p. 42). From this drastic choice, that pushes the animal world away from the human one and condemns the first to return to a total nature that, under bucolic appearances, exposes the protagonist to new proofs to atone for the sins committed in the city, the story focuses on the troubled love stories of the cat Pallina.

The theme of love between animals is common to both works and gives rise to a series of functional thoughts about education in the perspective of social equality. Countess Lara makes Lilia, one of the daughters of Ragù and Caciotta, fall in love with a coarse grey mouse living in a cellar, Rosicalegno. Also Baccini makes Pallina fall in love with a vulgar cat of the countryside, Nerone. Let's read the descriptions of these two males: Nerone is “a young cat” and we are touched by “his severe habits, his pride nature, his composed behaviour [...]. Big, tall, very black, with a pair of yellow eyes full of light and mystery [...] sweet and combative nature at the same time”. However Pallina despairs because she is so attracted by the “peasant scent emanating from Nerone's body”, “flirtatious and mischievous, she puts in place all her means of seduction for charming to her chariot that strong and proud animal” but, as refined and educated city kittenish, she can only wonder: “He was good, he was strong, he was brave! But why are courage, strength and goodness allied to roughness, and - alas - neglect? Nerone had shaggy, hard hair, disgusting breath, uneducated speech! Poor Nerone!” (Baccini, 1894, pp. 52, 66, 58, 72). Even Rosicalegno, “the poor [...] was a common mouse; but beautiful, big, with elegant shape, light grey mantle like the skin of a chinchilla, white stomach and arms like an ermine. His bright and black eyes had an intelligent and gentle expression, which appealed sympathy at first sight” but this did not preserve him by a heavy social inferiority complex, “because my race is despised, because I am ugly, because I am poor, because I had no education, nor schooling, me! - In saying these words, his eyes were brimming with big tears; and he looked at Lilia like a poor chimney looks at the daughter of a king” (Countess Lara, 1930, pp. 194, 198). The appearance of these animals that call into question an already well delineated social balance, made of good manners, lounges, lustier and fragrant hair, determines a series of reflections about the values that arbitrate the relationship between individuals, both animals and human. It opens the great scenery of the encounter with the other than himself, by intriguing and frightening at the same time. For this important passage about education and social life, Countess Lara calls into action the wisest of her mice, Dodo, who lives among the books, well-educated, philosopher mouse who, talking about the love of his sister for Rosicalegno, declared:

There are no inferior breeds, because before God, who created us all, nobody is inferior nor superior. Our actions raise or lower us. [...] I know our family; and I can assure that, instead of being beaten and mistreated because you are not Indian like us, if you show to be smooth and graceful, you will get care and caresses<sup>5</sup> (Countess Lara, 1930, pp. 195, 199).

The novel ends with the description of the wedding between Rosicalegno and Lilia, and the author gives to this inter-class event a strategic position in the story, as if it were the final step of an education journey that targets the enhancement of good character and good deeds, the respect for the community rules and institutions (the wedding, the family home). The happy ending of this story makes it a hotbed of “healthy optimism marked by the nest *topos*- a pattern with a strong autobiographical value, reflecting the always

evident desire of Evelina to reach a new family stability, desire that seems in contrast with her public attitudes, at the limit of the scandal, but not less sincere because of this” (Calabrese & Fioroni, 2011, p. 100). This life project condemns the apparent virtues of the people, the formalities in inter-relationships, the attention paid to having rather than to being, an error in which instead Baccini’s protagonist falls. Pallina is fortunate to have a boyfriend like Nerone, whose value she is aware, but she is conquered by the flattery of Nanni, a sly cat who moved from the city to the country for the summer “the most elegant, the most seductive, the most beautiful white kitten that the fantasy of a romantic pussy could ever dream”. In this way the advice of the “evil spirit” says:

You are mistress to prefer a dark and slavish life to an happy one, blessed, full of sweetness! You are mistress of being a fool, in one word!” and it is used by the Florentine writer to declare her rules of life, that fully coincide with Countess Lara’s thought: “A serious kitten, a judicious kitten would have certainly thought that the heart aristocracy, that is goodness, is much higher than that of the birth and of the brain: she would have thought that some farmers are worth more than many lords and that a honest, loyal and courageous cat such as Nerone can run ring around many lazy and coward city cats. But [...] I have not described Pallina as a model of virtue! And, obviously, she could not think in this way<sup>6</sup> (Baccini, 1894, pp. 69, 75-76, 68).

So that she surrenders to the idea of a marriage that would have led her back to city and wealthy life. The wedding with Nanni is celebrated in secret, and when Nerone discovers the misdeed, a pandemonium happens. The physical violence of the countryside cat rails against the moral violence of the two traitors. The positive result of this catastrophe (leading Nerone to flight, Nanni to death, Pallina to blindness and to the loss of her beautiful appearance) comes after three months, when Pallina gives birth to three kittens.

These latter are responsible for the second part of Baccini’s novel, where the author gives full voice to her didactic-pedagogical vocation. One of the three kittens has the good fortune to be adopted by the grandson of Queen Victoria, during his holiday in Fiesole. This is an opportunity to open a long parenthesis on the difficult life experiences of famous past and the present queens, and to remind young female readers (whose attention is repeatedly invoked by Baccini, always very careful to stress the genre of her ideal reader) to moderate the ambition and to avoid dreaming improbable destinies of princesses, because it is “[...] the little bourgeois woman who awaits the return of her husband busy with business or in public companies is happier, calmer! [...] The best crown on female hair is a crown of flowers: the others are too heavy [...]!” (Baccini, 1894, p. 119). A clear invitation to maintain social order in accordance with their origins, conditions and environment, not to be disillusioned by fanciful and misleading readings, to choose life patterns within our socio-cultural context, where we grew up.

Even more interesting is the fate of Fiocco di Neve, the kitten donated to the teacher of Fiesole, she studies and she sends a long letter to her mother Pallina, where she tells what she does, she sees and she hears, providing a valuable chronicle of school life in the Tuscan countryside in the late nineteenth century. The document is functional to stress the value of education and of the respect due to school as institution, represented here by the young teacher which paints a pathetic portrait, deeply consistent with the clichés of the teacher character given by much literature of those years and entered in the collective imagination (Raichich, 2005; Ascenzi, 2012; Cantatore, 2012):

My dear mum [...] You will not marvel too much that I have learned to read, write and do arithmetic, when you know that I was given to Miss Annetta Carpi, the town teacher that you maybe know know by reputation. The sight of so many students excited my pride, spurred my will so much that, as you can see, I am now able to properly write everything I think and I feel. I'm not an extraordinary talent, but I can assure you that many of my fellow students write and compose worse, oh much worse than me! Miss Annetta is a good girl, poorly dressed, but very clean. I've heard that she left her father and mother in Florence not to be maintained by them, and came here to teach. She loves children very much, but they do not repay her well: they are turbulent, restless and inattentive during the lessons. The poor schoolteacher! When no one can see her, she cries like a cut grapevine, and she kisses the portrait of an old woman that she keeps in the desk drawer. It must be the portrait of her mother!<sup>7</sup> (Baccini, 1894, p. 122)

The sensitivity of Ida Baccini to the school world (also emerging by her autobiography Baccini, 2004, and well reconstructed in the studies carried out on this subject by Ascenzi, 2012) and, in particular, the difficult life of many poor families that come to light when children start going to school, emerges from a subsequent passage of Fiocco di Neve's letter-diary. Here the novel clearly shows to be a *tranche de vie*, a documentary, a window on social life through the astonished and pitiful gaze of the schooled kitten who, with her fur, heats the knees of Gino, the poorest boy of the class:

February 1<sup>st</sup>. Today a very nice gentleman came to school, he had a blond beard around his chin and gold glasses on his nose. The young teacher made him the reverence and called him 'Mr. Inspector'. He seems to be an important person, in charge of seeing how things go in the school, if children are taking advantage of the lessons, if the teacher is happy, if you miss anything, etc. It must be a very good man, since he immediately noticed the poor trembling Gino in his discoloured ticking jacket. He took him on his knees and made him a thousand questions: if he ate the soup every day, if he was cold at night, if he coughed, if he was hungry and if he was happy. The child's responses saddened that good man very much, because I noticed some tears behind his lenses [...] – Can't we do anything for this creature? - Asked him to the teacher. And, shaking her head, she softly said some words that I could not hear, but which, judging by her expression, should have been very sad. - But why do his parents send him to school if he is so ill? - Asked the Inspector. - Because they are better at school than at home, - said Miss Annetta. - Is it true, Gino, that you are happy to come to school? - She added, turning to the child. - Yes madam. - And what do you find pleasant at school? - Asked Mr. Inspector. - At school it is hot, there are my schoolmates who love me [...] and besides [...] - and he hesitated. - And then, darling? - There's the lady who kisses me and always calls me 'my son.' - Miss Annetta blushed as if she had done something wrong. - Don't your mum kiss you? - We are seven and we would need something else! In the morning we all leave to earn money. Mum and dad, together with my three brothers go to work: my sisters go to the tailor, Mrs. Agata, to learn to sew. - And you are learning to read, write and count, aren't you? - Yes, sir. - Tell me, dear: would you like to come to Florence with me? I would put you in a nice big house where there are good nuns who care for sick children. They put them in a warm bed, they give them very sweet medicines, toys, and when they are good they send them back to their families. Tell me, would you like to come there? - Gino looked immediately at Miss Annetta who was keeping her head down; he tightened my tail with his trembling little hands and he firmly said: - Thank you, I would not come there, unless [...] - Unless? - I could take with me my people, the teacher and my schoolmates. - You would be too many - said smiling Mr. Inspector - but we'll talk again about this. Meanwhile, I'll ask Miss Annetta to buy you a nice flannel suit that will keep you warm as a brace<sup>8</sup> (Baccini, 1894, pp. 125-127).

Surely this predisposition to social denunciation (the exploitation of child labour, the escape from school, illness and infant mortality, etc.), despite being nuanced by a tearful patina far from ideological and political perspectives, is one of the distinctive features of Ida Baccini's literary experience who, loyal to her nature of literary-educator, points out with a special note that “this dialogue is a faithful copy of the truth” (Baccini, 1894, p. 127). A cultural attitude that, in this case, draws its strength from the fantastic component of animals' humanization. Fiocco di Neve in fact learns the language of men to explain to her cat-mother and to the readers the deplorable living conditions of a child who is the symbol of a significant part of the Italian people. Here the distance between Baccini and Countess Lara is more evident. The latter, by developing a more compact and consistent literary work under the formal and stylistic point of view, never betrays the idea of the novel as fiction (in her case full of interesting surreal traits that put it ahead of the contemporary literary production of the late nineteenth century), embodied in the final scene, the costume party of children for the wedding of Lilia and Rosicalegno, completed with a rat miniature banquet. The final inclusion of domestic mice is resolved in the dimension of a fantastic elsewhere, in the detached world of party and game, while the initial exclusion in Baccini is resolved by in the aware re-inclusion of the animal to be educated (Fiocco di Neve) in the real world of man, the classroom, the real trench where, day by day, the human champions fight to defend their place in the world. Pallina, the sinner cat, conscious of her mistakes, can only withdraw from the world and from human society, through the cloister door of San Lorenzo in Florence, where “all unemployed or master less cats live” (Baccini, 1894, p. 131). Another institution that, unlike the school, isolates and excludes (punishes!) the deviant who has proven to be refractory to good rules of civil coexistence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the recently published letters between Countess Lara and her lover-murderer, Giuseppe Pierantoni (Venzo, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Countess Lara will entrust to the character of the mouse a critical step of *The doll novel* (1896), when the fall into disgrace of the doll Giulia with the mistress Marietta will be permanently marked by the gruesome aggression of a rodent. Here the mouse has nothing meek, he seems indeed the ally of the worst side of man (the inconstancy and the greed of goods that devour the common sense, the sobriety, the ability to appreciate the fortunes that life gives us), he becomes almost a symbol of death and of the end of the harmonious relationship between the man and his goods. Material goods, of course, but which, nevertheless, have a soul too. Impoverished, marginalized and locked into a closet of the home, theatre of forgotten objects and overwhelmed by the upper-class consumeristic luxury, the doll Giulia is terrified by the gnawing of her own body by a mouse, who seems to continue the cruel action perpetrated by Marietta against her ex-beloved doll: "In its fast runs, the rat got often close to her, then he began to gnaw one of her shoes, one of her beautiful bronzed leather shoes, maybe because he liked their smell. After the first few bites, he broke off a piece of thin leather sole; and for a while, until he had finished, Giulia no longer felt any shocks. Ah, she wished her fright were over! Not at all! The animal, after having made a hole in her shoe, attacked the silk sock, all torn by his long and pointy teeth. Then the unhappy doll felt the martyrdom of having her poor little foot devoured, without being able to withdraw it, indeed, having to keep it inert, like something dead. [...] The sawdust flowed from the hole in the thin skin of her pink little foot, an horrendous wound, and among the gasps of the mouse while gnawing it, part of her little leg was getting empty; it then remained there with its loose, sagging, skin when the animal was well gorging and preferred to change his food" (Countess Lara, 2011, pp. 32-33). About the luckiness of the mouse-character in children's literature, see Alatri & Cantatore (2006).

<sup>3</sup> The hazards of expulsion from home, from the mother and/or father home, are the key prerequisites in two central works for children of the late Italian nineteenth century production: in *Le memorie di un pulcino* by Ida Baccini (1875) the protagonist's troubles start right from the bad example of a cockerel that leads the chick away from the hen house for a whole night, as well as the *Avventure di un burattino* (1881-83) by Collodi starts when Pinocchio escapes from the house of his "father" Geppetto. On the educational representation of the domestic environment as nest and school of life see Cantatore (2013).

<sup>4</sup> "Il perdono, signorine mie, è cosa santa: e quanto più ci è costato, quanto più grande è stata la violenza che abbiamo dovuto fare a noi stessi per concederlo, tanto più è meritorio agli occhi di Dio. Ma perdonare non vuol dire dimenticare; poiché, pur troppo, il dimenticare non sta in noi. Si può, anzi si deve esercitare la nostra volontà su i sentimenti men buoni, sulla nostra natura e indirizzarli, per quanto è in noi, a un fine alto e generoso. Si può, in una parola, *comandare* al cuore, ma non ci è concesso soffocar la memoria".

<sup>5</sup> "Non esistono razze inferiori, perché davanti a Dio, che ci ha creati tutti, non ci sono, per nascita, né inferiori, né superiori. Sono le nostre azioni quelle che c'innalzano o ci abbassano. [...] Io conosco la nostra famiglia; e ti assicuro che invece d'essere scacciato e maltrattato perché non sei indiano come noi, se ti mostri agevole e grazioso, avrai cure e carezze".

<sup>6</sup> "Una gattina seria, una gattina di giudizio avrebbe pensato certamente che l'aristocrazia del cuore, ossia la bontà, è molto superiore a quella della nascita e dell'ingegno: avrebbe pensato che certi contadini valgono più di molti signori e che un gatto onesto, leale e coraggioso come Nerone può dar dei punti a molti mici di città, oziosi e vigliacchi. Ma [...] io non vi ho presentato la Pallina come un modello di virtù! E, naturalmente, lei queste riflessioni non poteva farle".

<sup>7</sup> "Mia cara mamma [...] Non ti meraviglierei troppo che io abbia imparato a leggere, scrivere e far di conto, quando saprai che fui regalato alla signorina Annetta Carpi, maestra comunale che tu, forse, conosci per fama. La vista di tanti bambini studiosi eccitò il mio amor proprio, spronò la mia volontà, e, come vedi, oggi sono in grado di scrivere correttamente tutto quanto penso e sento. Non sono un ingegno straordinario, ma ti posso assicurare che molti miei condiscipoli scrivono e compongono peggio, oh assai peggio di me! La signorina Annetta è una brava ragazzina, vestita poveramente, ma con molta pulizia. Ho sentito dire che per non esser loro a carico, ha lasciato a Firenze il babbo e la mamma, ed è venuta qui a far scuola. Vuol molto bene ai bambini, ma essi la contraccambiano assai male: sono turbolenti, irrequieti e stanno poco attenti alle lezioni. Povera maestra! Quando nessuno la vede piange come una vite tagliata, e bacia un ritratto di vecchina che tiene riposto nella cassetta del banco. Dev'essere il ritratto della sua mamma!".

<sup>8</sup> "1° febbraio. Oggi è venuto in iscuola un signore molto simpatico, con una barbetta bionda intorno al mento e gli occhiali d'oro sul naso. La maestra gli ha fatto la riverenza e lo ha chiamato 'Signor Ispettore'. Pare che sia un personaggio importante, incaricato di veder come vanno le cose nella scuola, se i bambini approfittano delle lezioni, se la maestra è contenta, se le manca nulla, ecc. Dev'essere un signore molto buono, perché gli ha dato subito nell'occhio il povero Gino tutto tremante nella sua giacchetta di bordato scolorito. Se l'è preso sulle ginocchia e gli ha fatto mille domande: se mangiava la minestra tutti i giorni, se aveva freddo la notte, se tossiva, se aveva appetito e se era allegro. Le risposte del bambino rattristarono molto quel brav'uomo perché io gli vidi luccicare le lacrime dentro le lenti... – Non si può far nulla per questa creatura? – domandò alla maestra. E questa, crollando il capo, pronunziò pianamente alcune parole che non potei afferrare, ma che, a giudicare dall'espressione con cui vennero dette, dovevano esser tristi assai. – Ma perché, se è tanto malato, i suoi genitori lo mandano a scuola? – tornò a domandare l'Ispettore. – Perché a scuola ci sta meglio che in casa, – rispose la

signora Annetta. – Non è vero, Gino, che a scuola ci vieni volentieri? – aggiunse rivolgendosi al bambino. – Sì, signora. – E che cosa ci trovi di bello nella scuola? – gli chiese il signor Ispettore. – In iscuola c'è caldo, ci sono i miei compagni che mi vogliono bene... eppoi... – e esitò. – Eppoi, tesoro? – C'è la signora che mi bacia e mi chiama sempre 'figliuolo suo.' – La signora Annetta arrossì come se avesse fatto qualche cosa di male. – O la mamma non ti bacia? – Siamo in sette e ci vorrebbe altro! La mattina si va tutti fuori di casa per guadagnare. Il babbo e la mamma insieme con i miei tre fratelli vanno a opra: le mie sorelle vanno dalla sor'Agata sarta a imparare a cucire. – E tu impari a leggere, a scrivere e a fare i conti, non è vero? – Sì, signore. – Dimmi, caro: ti piacerebbe di venire a Firenze con me? Ti metterei in una bella casa grande dove ci sono delle buone monache che hanno cura dei bambini malati. Li mettono in un lettino caldo, danno loro delle medicine dolci dolci, de' balocchi e quando li vedono guariti, li rimandano alle loro famiglie. Di', ci verresti? – Gino guardò subito la signora Annetta che teneva il capo basso; mi strinse la coda con le manine tremanti e rispose risoluto: – Grazie, non ci verrei, a meno che – A meno che? – Non potessi portar con me la *mi gente*, la signora maestra e i miei compagni. – Sareste in troppi – rispose sorridendo il signor Ispettore – ma di questa cosa ne riparleremo un'altra volta. Intanto ho incaricato la signora Annetta di comprarti un bel vestito di flanella che ti terrà caldo come una brace”.

## References

- Alatri, G. & Cantatore, L. (Eds.). (2011). *Aiuto, c'è un topo nella mia biblioteca: Fantasia e realtà nei libri per ragazzi*. Roma: Palombi.
- Ascenzi, A. (2012). *Drammi privati e pubbliche virtù: La maestra italiana dell'Ottocento tra narrazione letteraria e cronaca giornalistica*. Macerata: EUM.
- Baccini, I. (1894). *Una famiglia di gatti*. Torino: Paravia.
- Baccini, I. (2004). *La mia vita. Ricordi autobiografici* (1904), Cantatore L. (Vol. Ed.), Milano: Unicopli.
- Boero, P. (2002). Come una prefazione: Bambole e topi: Contessa Lara scrittrice per l'infanzia. In Boero, P., Cutrona, F., Salvati C.I., & Tavoni, M.G., *Storie di donne*, Boero, P. (Vol. Ed.), (pp. 5-33). Genova: Brigati.
- Calabrese, S. (Ed.). (2011). *Letteratura per l'infanzia: Dall'Unità d'Italia all'epoca fascista*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Calabrese, S. & Fioroni, F. (2011). La narrazione come gioco. In Contessa Lara. *Il romanzo della bambola*. Calabrese S. & Fioroni F. (Vol. Eds), (pp. 95-108). Cuneo: Nerosubianco.
- Cambi, F. (Ed.). (2003). *Ida Baccini: Cento anni dopo*. Roma: Anicia.
- Cambi, F. & Ulivieri, S. (1988). *Storia dell'infanzia nell'Italia liberale*. Firenze: La nuova Italia.
- Cantatore, L. (2012). La “poesia della scuola”: Miseria e nobiltà di maestre e maestri nella letteratura italiana fra Otto e Novecento. In Marrone, G. (Ed.), *Maestre e maestri d'Italia in 150 anni di storia della scuola* (pp. 45-90), Roma: Edizioni Conoscenza.
- Cantatore, L. (Ed.). (2013). *Ottocento fra casa e scuola. Luoghi, oggetti, scene della letteratura per l'infanzia*. Milano: Unicopli.
- Cini, T. (2014). *Ida Baccini: Lettere (1874-1908): Bibliografia (1896-2013)*. Pontedera (FI): Bibliografia e informazione.
- Contessa Lara. (1930). *Una famiglia di topi: Romanzo*. Illustrazioni di Mazzanti, E., Firenze: Bemporad.
- Contessa Lara (2011). *Il romanzo della bambola*. Calabrese S. & Fioroni F. (Vol. Eds), Cuneo: Nerosubianco.
- Covato, C. (2007). *Memorie discordanti: Identità e differenze nella storia dell'educazione*. Milano: Unicopli.
- Raicich, M. (2005). La maestra di campagna. In Raicich, M., *Storie di scuola da un'Italia lontana* (pp. 29-79), Soldani, S. (Ed.). Roma: Archivio Guido Izzi.
- Venzo, M.I. (Ed.). (2011). *L'ultima estate di Contessa Lara. Lettere dalla Riviera (1896)*. Roma: Viella.

**Lorenzo Cantatore** teaches Children's literature and History of the school and educational institutions in the University of Roma Tre. He has worked on reception of the literary tradition in the Italian school of the late XIX century, the history of the school architecture, the representation of domestic spaces in children's literature between XIX and XX century. Among his publications include: *Scelta ordinata e annotata: l'antologia scolastica nel secondo Ottocento e il laboratorio Carducci-Brilli* (Modena, 1999); *Architetture per l'infanzia in Roma Capitale: i nuovi edifici del Comune 1878-1912* (Roma, 2001); *Le identità violate di tre collegiali. Appunti su Mirbeau, Musil, De Libero* (Milano, 2006); *Frammenti di discorsi amorosi. Il primo amore in alcuni romanzi giovanili dell'Ottocento* (Milano, 2012); *Ottocento fra casa e scuola. Luoghi, oggetti, scene della letteratura per l'infanzia* (Milano, 2013). Contact: [lorenzo.cantatore@uniroma3.it](mailto:lorenzo.cantatore@uniroma3.it)