

Writing to free childhood. The contribution of Leila Berg

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Abstract

This essay is part of a research work aiming to rediscover and enhance the contribution of Leila Berg, English author and editor who died at the age of 94 in 2012: a fully-fledged player in the profound transformation of children's literature in Europe during the Sixties and Seventies, she was renowned for her works on the close ties between pedagogical thought and writing, taking part in the debate on the limits of traditional education and literary choices. The innovative depth of Leila Berg's most famous literary project, the *Nippers* series for early readers, which began in 1967, may be fully understood from the essays the writer dedicated to the problems of education and language learning: in these, children's literature, with its reworked topics and stylistic choices, is given a central role for the empowerment of working class children, often deprived of motivating reading experiences both in the family and school contexts.

Il saggio si iscrive in un lavoro di ricerca che intende riscoprire e valorizzare il contributo di Leila Berg, scrittrice ed editor anglosassone scomparsa a 94 anni nel 2012: pienamente inserita nel contesto di profonda trasformazione della letteratura per l'infanzia in Europa negli anni Sessanta e Settanta, il suo impegno si caratterizza per la stretta relazione tra riflessione pedagogica e scrittura, adesione al dibattito sui limiti dell'educazione tradizionale e scelte letterarie. La portata innovativa del progetto editoriale più noto di Leila Berg, la serie dei *Nippers* per primi lettori, avviato nel 1967, può essere pienamente compresa attraverso i saggi che la scrittrice dedica ai problemi dell'educazione e dell'apprendimento linguistico: in essi è assegnato alla letteratura per l'infanzia, ripensata nei temi e nelle scelte stilistiche, un ruolo centrale per l'empowerment dei bambini della working class, spesso privati di esperienze di lettura motivanti sia nel contesto familiare che in quello scolastico.

Keywords: children's literature, Leila Berg, libertarian pedagogy, social realism, learning to read

Parole chiave: letteratura per l'infanzia, Leila Berg, pedagogia libertaria, realismo sociale, educazione alla lettura

Introduction

Five years after the death of one of the most authoritative and enthusiastic voices of the second *golden age* of British children's literature (Townsend, 1965, p. 151; Hunt, 2001, p. 157), the literary and cultural profile of Leila Berg deserves being rediscovered for the complexity and topicality of its contribution, connoted by a very close relationship between pedagogical commitment and narrative invention. Her innovative approach to writing and educating to read cannot be separated from her fierce defence of the rights of the child and the fundamental principles of libertarian education: in her long career as editor and author, she showed a constant attention for unconventional childhood, rarely narrated or imagined in traditional canonical literature, and the significant thematic and stylistic opening in her books, based on a gratifying relationship between reading and child, offering an alternative to impositional school practices.

In the Sixties and Seventies, at a time when a new way of tackling the problems of education, interpreting school and family institutions and setting the political and social role of pedagogy was emerging

(Cambi, 1995; Codello, 2005; Bernhard, 2006), children's literature began to face some social issues for the first time, linked to the environment, diversity, pacifism, the search for identity (Boero & De Luca, 1995/2007; Denti, 2013; Sola & Vassalli, 2014): it lay at the centre of a "revolution" in literary and iconic communication promoted by writers, artists, editors, illustrators, with new emphasis on the right of children to enjoy quality books respecting their intelligence and personality. Creativity, exploration, innovation, critical thought: these are the keywords of complex texts aiming to establish dialogue with the reader, overturning the formalisms, stereotypes and rhetoric of much literature of the past.

In this direction, Leila Berg's books and editorial projects represent the attempt to focus attention on literature with renewed language, able to enhance the needs and interests of non-standardised childhoods, with a variety of social, cultural and ethnic belongings, able to represent a precious tool for empowering working class readers.

Above all where children have not had the opportunity to enjoy an effective narrative relationship and develop the consequent emotional and cognitive skills (Dallari, 2013), according to Berg, the books available in schools must fill this gap, guaranteeing young readers experiences for the recognition, acceptance and confirmation of their own identity. To foster the meeting between life and reading, we must therefore rethink the purposes of children's literature, radically transforming educational practices and the role of the teacher (Berg, 1977).

Innovation and social realism

Born as Leila Goller in 1917 into a Jewish family in Salford, Greater Manchester, Leila Berg offered a vivid and poetic picture of her own childhood in an original autobiography, *Flickerbook* (1997), an impressive story composed of a series of short photographs which, one after the other, are able to give the illusion of a moving picture, recreating all the dynamism and disorientation involved in the complex process of growing up. The author writes in a subjective voice that relives the age she narrates, reconstructing the painful relationship of non-communication with her mother and father and her early intolerance for the authoritarian nature of school. The modesty of her family scenario is a sharp contrast with her enthusiasm for books, the cinema, the theatre, the cultural life of Manchester in the Twenties and Thirties, her passion for writing and education: in the works of Susan Isaacs and the innovative methods of early childhood care at the Malting House School in Cambridge, at the age of seventeen Leila found confirmation of her progressist ideas. Her growing interest for alternatives to traditional education led her to abandon teacher training college in 1937, just before being expelled, preferring political activism in the Youth Front against War and Fascism and later the Young Communist League, involved in the Spanish Civil War.

She graduated in journalism a few years later from King's College in London, getting her first job with the *Daily Worker*. Her interest in children's literature began to thrive after she became the mother of two children, at the end of the Second World War. Having made her début as an author with the then-revolutionary *Little Pete Stories*, in 1952, she became children's books editor at Methuen from 1958 to 1960, and then editor of Salamander Books at Nelson, in 1965 (Stones, 2012).

Berg's commitment as an author and editor lies within one of the most radical moments of transformation of British children's literature, marked in the Sixties and Seventies by a strong political, social and pedagogical focus on childhood, stimulating a process that redefined the concept of quality children's books, inciting an interdisciplinary debate which also actively involved the editors: we may think of figures like Kaye Webb (Puffin) Marni Hodgkin (Macmillan), Judy Taylor (The Bodley Head), Aidan Chambers (Topliner), who contributed to making children's publishing a central part of the British cultural industry. (Pearson, 2013, pp. 3-7; Reynolds, 1998, pp. 29-30).

The climate of recovery after the Second World War, and the education reforms (for example, extending compulsory schooling to the age of 16 introduced by the 1944 Education Act), and the gradual increase in public funds for schools and libraries, laid the foundations for the start of a critical review of an independent editorial space for children's literature (Sinfield, 1965, p. 65): however, the greatest boom in the production of children's literature was seen in the Sixties and Seventies, with the diversification and experimentation of unique forms, genres and topics, printing and illustration techniques, all marked by

innovation, the contamination of languages, driven by the increasing popularity of radio and television, and an opening of production to international and particularly American trends (Hunt, 1994, pp. 148-149).

A lucky interconnection between economic and social factors and a new more general cultural attention to childhood produced a unique network of relations between publishers, educators, academics and librarians, stimulating a constructive osmosis between the different roles: writers such as Geoffrey Trease and Jill Paton Walsh played an active part in the critical redefinition of children's literature; journalists such as John Townsend from the Guardian reviewed and selected books, committed to a rich production of literature for children and adolescents; librarians such as Sheila Ray and Elaine Moss were active and influential scholars; some publishers themselves became authors, such as Philippa Pearce and Berg herself, while new writers came increasingly from the world of education and teaching (Pearson, 2013, p. 15).

The lively critical debate on children's literature and its educational role then reflected new economic, educational and cultural investments in an age marked by its own peculiarities and specific needs, the recipient of literature deserving pondered and "tailored" choices: contributions were offered in this direction by the gradual horizontal and democratic transformation of the family institution, the evolution in historiographical and anthropological studies on childhood, the works by Donald Winnicott and John Bowlby on children's psychological development, Dr. Spock's revolutionary essay, subverting the imperative of discipline and routine in childcare and introducing new principles of symmetry in the educational relationship.

In the Sixties, the romantic construction, later the focus of criticism by Jacqueline Rose (1992), of the imaginative child who is a "repository of hope", after a period of war, still profoundly linked to the influence of Paul Hazard (his *Les Livres, Les Enfants e les hommes* was translated in England in 1944) and the celebration of the imagination as a powerful and distinctive feature of the "Republic of Childhood", constantly threatened by the intrusion of adult rationality, is accompanied by an increasingly insistent appeal of realism: attention focuses on the socialising aspects of literature, and the corresponding shift towards more openly ideological and didactic books aiming to challenge or alter the status quo and open up to the social demands linked to immigration (accelerated by the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act) and the needs of the working class. Books such as *The Machine Gunners* (1975) by Robert Westall, *Thunder and Lightnings* (1976) by Jan Mark, or *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* by Gene Kemp (1977) interpret a new social realism, underlining the cultural, political and racial divide of a country like England in their characterisation, settings and language.

The presumed contrast, noted as a constant factor of critical debate in the Sixties and Seventies by John Rowe Townsend (1990, p. 63), between "book people", scholars and authors stating the importance of literary and aesthetic quality of children's books, and "child people", interpreters and writers focusing on the educational, social and ideological aspects of the stories and the response of the child reader, is more apparent than substantial, as clarified by Peter Hollindale (1988, p. 5), as the two demands are often both present and dialectically taut in literary production over time.

What is certain is that the publication of explicitly ideological texts like *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 by Betty Friedan, the resonance of the civil rights movement in America, the documents on new educational policy such as the 1967 Plowden Report on "Children and Their Primary Schools", the debate, fuelled by the increase in public funding, between experts and teachers on the need for a more demographically articulated childhood, all helped to focus the debate on the possible deconstruction of the ideologies that were implicit in children's literature. Left-wing author and poet Bob Dixon denounced the racist, sexist and classist dimension of the canon of children's literature, criticising even the classics such as *Little Women* (1977); Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig applied a feminist approach to girl's adventure stories, in their study *You're a brick, Angela!* (1976), while in 1971 the US critic Lois Kalb Bouchard launched a strong attack on Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* for its racist contents.

The Children's Rights Workshop, founded in 1973 by Rosemary Stones and Andrew Mann, published a series of essays offering guidelines on questions such as racism and sexism in children's literature, seeking to identify stereotypes and prejudices not only in the plot or the characters but also in linguistic terms. In this direction, in 1975 came the Other Award for writers and illustrators committed to make a broader and more accurate representation of the human experience accessible to children.

Leila Berg began to write for children in the early Fifties, for the Oxford University Press. The BBC involved the author in the production of the famous radio programme for children *Listen with Mother*, for which she developed a large amount of material, including some stories dedicated to the everyday adventures of a 4-year old boy named Pete. When the first story was broadcast, the programme received many furious letters, accusing it of being a threat to society and corrupting children, and using a public service to boot. The sins of the young hero were substantially that of running instead of walking, going downstairs backwards, talking and asking questions to busy adults. Pete's adventures take place outside the domestic context: always accompanied by his shadow he explores his environment without fear, wins over adults with his frankness, is not afraid of interacting with them and is able to transform them, often unawares, into play mates. The BBC decided not to continue with the stories. The *Little Pete Stories* book, finely illustrated by Peggy Fortnum, was later published with in 1952 by Methuen, becoming a great success and with many reprints.

From the letters received, it clearly emerges that the disturbing element lies precisely in the realism of Pete's characterisation, indeed one parent writes: "Above all the trouble with it is that every child will know Peter as a real boy. It wouldn't matter if he was a gnome!" (Berg, 1977, p. 83). The anti-authoritarian dimension of the Pete stories, the independence of the lead character evidently represented a – more or less aware – threat to adults due to the aggressive and less socialised side of childhood, beyond a relationship of control (Tucker, 1981/1996, p. 61).

Building on this experience, the production with Macmillan, from 1967, of the Nippers series for primary school, followed by the Little Nippers for younger readers in 1972, was Leila Berg's response to a new, widespread need for realism but above all to a liberating and emancipating function acknowledged to children's literature: in clear contrast to the Ladybird books launched in 1965, a series of 36 books for early readers telling the stories of white Peter and Jane and their bourgeois family, the Nippers aimed to tell the story of working class childhood, with a strong but not necessarily respectable sense of family, a sense of humour, an eye for real situations and colloquial language.

Berg's programme, sent to Macmillan and the writers she hoped to involve in the chain, was eloquent:

The majority of children who now read, cannot read about themselves. For with very few exceptions, the children who exist in books are middle-class children. This situation is beginning to change, and a very few books are written about working-class streets; of these very few, some are patronising and 'slumming', others can only be read by children with educated backgrounds. [...] We must write about our children in primary readers as they really are. How many writers can do this? And can do it with accuracy, strength, grace, rhythm - in fact, in good writing? And have, furthermore, an affectionate and respectful understanding of the small child - the *essential* child, not merely the child favoured by circumstances? (Berg, 1977, pp. 83-4)

The author's intention is that every child in the country, whatever their background, rural, the city or the suburbs, and whatever the culture of their family, can find a story they can recognise, which talks of their family relations, their neighbourhood, their language, that they can read again and again, offering self-confidence as a reader. And even if they are only a "taste" of many different situations, every story must reflect the tone and rhythm of local language, with the occasional use of specific local words and a reference to the economic situation and emotional attitudes of the area. She therefore involved authors including the political playwright Trevor Griffiths (*Tip's Lot*), winner of the Guardian Fiction prize JL Carr (*Red Windbeater*), London's first coloured headmaster, Beryl Gilroy (*Rice and Peas*) and, thanks to the involvement of John La Rose's Caribbean New Beacon Bookshop, several West Indians writers with their own emotional attitudes and experiences flowing into their sentences, as well as West Indian characters.

Each book in the series sought that special alchemy offered by Berg in her early works, such as *A Box for Benny* from 1958: the neighbourhood is that of Salford, her childhood, some linguistic terms are specifically Hebrew as are some of the shops, references to food or the customs of the Sabbath, yet nothing of the Jewish culture is stated explicitly or explained; the story simply tells of a child looking for a box to play with, with the children next door, without any excessive emphasis on the ethnic or cultural background. Differences are instead represented as a normal and positive aspect of British multicultural life, blending the

specific character of the Jewish identity of the lead character with the universality of the childhood condition (Travis, 2013, p. 77)

The *Nippers* stories, sometimes in verse or poetic prose, are entertaining, playful, light, illustrated humoristically with a choice of bright colours, they do not intend to piously denounce the living conditions of the less fortunate, but rather represent a complex reality in which relationships can survive even in the most disastrous of homes, the dignity of work is underlined even when exploitation is round the corner, and the "brilliance" of childhood can shine even when playing in a rubbish dump. Before starting work on the drafts of *Nippers*, Berg spent much time in Brixton market, she visited many schools in London's East End, finding inspiration in the experience and the stories of the children and families she met.

The author thus began to compose a set of stories based on the imaginary Carter family (the mother is a part-time office cleaner, the father a boiler-man at the hospital, working shifts both day and night, who is portrayed sitting most of the time) reconstructing the tiny flat, the neighbourhood, the shops, the primary school, and the children's games and adventures. The first stories, read by Berg to children in schools in the East End, aroused powerful reactions of hilarity and entertainment, almost pointing at the authentic physical and psychological liberation of the young readers:

Above all, of course, the fact that the child readers *recognise* the characters [...] and laugh, is very frightening to some adults. Laughter, and art, can be deeply threatening to many teachers, who feel very precarious even among pomposity. That a new and more fulfilling safety lay in joining in the laughter was beyond their life training. For training and schooling aim at preserving the status quo, whereas *Nippers*, springing on the contrary from creativity, rocked it (Berg, 1977, p. 101)

In 1967 Macmillan decided to send some copies of *Nippers* to 20 schools around the country to test above all the reaction of teachers and headmasters, and two stories in particular caused scandal and worry, *Fish and Chips for Supper* and *Going to Bed*, labelled with disdain in some comments as "silly", "ridiculous" and "slum situations": the first tells of a father who has trouble getting out of bed and going to work, despite his son's demands, the bills to pay, the leaky roof, the laundry waiting to be hung out along to the stairs. The story ends with the furious mother who forces him out of bed, the solution which finally leads to the repairs, the bills paid and a plate of fish and chips for supper. A story in verse, with folkloristic tones, playing on repetition and the rhythmic accumulation of words, accompanied by Richard Rose's humoristic illustrations. Paradoxically, despite its declared lightness, it attracted captious debate on the presumed immorality of fish and chip shops, those perilous emblems of the laziness of irresponsible parents denounced by puritan teachers and hard workers. The second, very simple, story tells of a three-year old child who gets filthy playing in a rubbish dump, has a wash in a tin bath in front of the fire and, "clean as a daisy", joins his sister in the only bed available. Critics hounded the roughness of the expression "filthy dirty" used to describe the child, or the realism of the tin bath, berating the writer for her excessive indulgence in the depressing and unusual environmental aspects, even for working class children, but never explicitly refer to the truly disturbing element of the story, that of the two children sharing a bed. Others stigmatised the use of expletives and colloquial expressions like "Shut up", simply not accepting the sight of an authentic conversation between children reproduced in print (Berg, 1977, pp. 89-92)

In the same years, however, the results of some surveys such as the 1965 Milner-Holland report were published on the living conditions and lives of many working class families in the suburbs, which closely mirrored the settings and situations described in the *Nippers*; in particular, the Plowden Report of 1967 not only set out to establish education in harmony with the nature of the child, but also cited education experts who denounced the dangerous emergency and degradation of some neighbourhoods and the priority for a different and fairer distribution of educational resources (Lawsom & Silver, 1973): "Experts revealed that the dump round the corner did exist. We wondered if, amazingly, we would become respectable" (Berg, 1977, p. 93).

The document, inspired by Piaget's theory of cognitive development, also supported the abolition of corporal punishment - unsuccessfully - and emphasises the value of tailored teaching curricula, insisting on experiential learning, the involvement of the families, universal preschool education, and the organisation of opportunities for the less privileged. On the trail of this new and widespread pedagogical sensitivity, in

January 1969 14 new Nippers stories were published. The fact that the stories highlighted a profound gap between reality and “what teachers were required to teach” produced a sense of threat and danger which, however, was mitigated as time passed due to their exceptional commercial success. By now it would have been easy to be ironical over the letters of indignation, if it were not for the fact that every letter represented a delegitimisation of the identity of hundreds of “prisoner” children and their families by headmasters and teachers who compared blindness to morality and virtue, who thought that children should be served only propaganda and exhortation (thus according to an authoritarian logic, anything mentioned in a book would become an exhortation, whether moral or immoral), which invalidated the experience of the pupils, leading them to despise their parents, their homes and themselves: headmasters and teachers who were incapable of establishing authentic relations, insecure in a highly vacillating social hierarchy who for this reason remained attached to formalisms, unable to understand the unity and profound sense of a story and completely lacking in a sense of humour (Berg, 1977, pp. 101-102).

Reading and literature as a tool for empowerment

Leila Berg’s specific position, in a context of lively debate on the quality standards and educational function of children’s literature, stands out for its solid foundation in the libertarian pedagogical theories of the Seventies, and her publications and theoretical thought underline her direct involvement in the debate on the limits of the traditional education system. Issues already denounced some decades earlier in Europe by the promoters of anti-authoritarian education and which re-emerged with force during the explosion of protests in the Sixties, moving from the confined oases of specialist studies to the vast spheres of public opinion.

When Berg began to plan what was perhaps the most significant of her works as a children’s author and publisher, the Nippers series, her interest in education had already been expressed angrily and courageously in the pages of *Risinghill: Death of a Comprehensive School*, written in 1965 but released by Penguin in 1968. It is the story of the birth, in 1960, of the Risinghill comprehensive school in the deprived London suburb of Islington, at the will of London County Council, and its closure, only five years later, after some inspections of the LCC officials, by the will of the Labour government’s Secretary of State, Anthony Crosland. Of the report written by Berg, who visited the place a few months after the closure of the school, after the event had been widely reported in the national press, scholar David Limond (2002), in one of the very few scientific contributions dedicated to an educational experience which deserves a more accurate historiographical study, complains of the stereotypes found in the description of the living conditions of the working class and the hagiographic rhetoric of the portrait of the headmaster, Mike Duane: what however emerges from Berg’s report is the sincere bitterness over a solution interpreted as political and not educational, a deliberate act of censure towards the progressist methods and personalism of the headmaster, rather than a choice of opportunities linked to the actual needs of the pupils and their families. A challenge that was perhaps already compromised by the organisational conditions of Risinghill: a huge school, created from the merger of 4 other secondary schools, architecturally dysfunctional and dispersive, with an insufficient number of teachers unprepared to manage a student population composed of 19 nationalities, unable to overcome the cultural gap with the families and see the students as complex human beings (Berg, 1968, pp. 44-60).

Michael Duane methods fuelled the debate on two awkward issues: corporal punishment and multiculturalism. The headmaster eliminated the first, which was still extremely common in English schools (still in 1965, London County Council issued new teachers with a confidential booklet on the different methods of corporal punishment according to the students’ “crimes”), and undertook to enhance ethnic differences as a resource for all pupils, initiating forms of cultural mediation for the benefit of the whole school community: inspired by Dewey, Duane’s project was to organise and inclusive school, with rules developed with all the school stakeholders, including the parents, which did

not exclude anyone (even expulsion, in compulsory schooling, was illegal, according to the head), which could become a point of reference for the life and activities of the neighbourhood, which used sex education as a fundamental tool for preventing violence and hardship.

The Newsom Report, drafted by John Newsom who had taken part in Duane's work, was published in 1963: the document on education for 13 to 16 year olds with average or below-average skills, underlines what the experience of Risinghill denounced, i.e. that above all in industrial and peripheral areas it was necessary to ensure *gifted teachers*, highly motivated experts, rather than the continuous turn-over due to the desire to work in richer and more attractive areas. Teachers dangerously saw themselves at most as "missionaries", their objective being to refute the child's culture, perceptive and linguistic methods and replace them with their own (Berg, 1968, pp. 144-147)

The dedication at the start of Berg's book on Risinghill rings emblematic: the book is in fact consecrated to the memory of Susan Isaacs, Anton Makarenko, Homer Lane, Alex Bloom and "to all those adults – parents, teachers and others – who respect and delight in the growing child". Duane's experience was again reported by Berg in *Children's rights*, published in 1972, in which six education experts, including the famous Alexander Sutherland Neill – whose work at Summerhill had already been celebrated by the author in a photographic book (Walmsley, 1969) – examined the position of children in modern society and explored the experiences and possibilities for their lasting liberation from authoritarian, repressive education.

In her essay *Moving Towards Self-Government*, Berg explained her idea of education by offering an overview of the early pioneering and community experiences which laid the foundations for pedagogical thought which, by the Seventies was ripe: the overview runs from the Gorki colony of Makarenko, who "always saw the individual child in front of him, and spoke directly to him, not to an abstraction", and the Homer Lane's Little Commonwealth, another co-educational experience, in which "each sex developed a concern for and an understanding of, the other, just as they learned to understand themselves. And in both, the 'citizens' did the work their own community needed and paid for [...] So their self-government and their education was always rooted in real life" (Berg, 1972b, p. 15).

The writer describes the scholastic and extra-scholastic experiments, such as those conducted by Teddy O'Neill in Lancashire and the Peckham Centre in London, focusing on the overall well-being of families as a basis for the respect and harmonious development of the child; the overview also mentions Olive Kendon's Children's Houses in Manchester, communal spaces for adults and children who were happy to work together and establish their rules based on the experience, or a new plan of playgrounds designed for adventure and free exploration by children, sponsored by the National Playing Fields Association and based on a Danish model. Berg's contemporary references include firstly Paul Goodman, who as early as 1956 in *Growing Up Absurd* expressed his radical pedagogic ideas on the pathogenic mechanisms of affluent society and a system immolating the grace of childhood on the altar of efficiency and pointless rigour; according to Berg, John Holt's *How Children Fail* (1964) represented another milestone of libertarian pedagogy, followed by *Instead of Education* in 1976, exalting the rights of children to control and choose their own learning, a principle returned to in the same years in England by Colin Ward, who in some articles in "Anarchy" proposed a review of the Education act and the abolition of selective compulsory schooling.

Following Holt, Berg wrote in *Look at Kids* that "schooling fails 'most children'", and that "I sometimes think we are simply taking a chunk out of their lives" (Berg, 1972, pp. 137-138). Concluding, Berg recalls the experience of the First street school in New York, led by George Dennison, author of *The Lives of Children* (1969), as an emblematic "antidote to the dehumanization" of state school, as it was founded on the "reality of encounter" that children need, the involvement of the community in school activities, abolishing classes, timetables, institutional buildings and bureaucratic organisation, in favour of a school understood as a space of relations and a resource for free learning, at the disposal of all members of the community, whatever their age or cultural background.

An education therefore not conceived by Berg as a bureaucratic curriculum, a missionary fantasy or an authoritarian prison, but rather as a natural, creative and instinctive process of growth, assisted by

adults who believe in it and find joy in covering this role. Berg thus builds on this assumption in *Reading and Loving* (1977): reading and the pleasure of reading are, according to the author, a natural acquisition – not technique or training – which grows from a warm, physical and emotional base, of pleasure shared with another human being. Adults, and first and foremost parents, use words to communicate safety, attention, and recognition of their personality to the children. The acquisition of reading requires three essential ingredients: self-confidence, shared joy, reciprocity of dialogue. Language is acquired initially as a result of the relationship, it enriches the bond with important others in our lives, every act of communication performed by the child is in response to someone or something: this continual exchange convinces him that words are magic, they mean acceptance, pleasure, relationship. Factors like these, the joyful trust in constant growth and the adult's respect for the child's identity, decide whether the child is culturally deprived or not, and this has nothing to do with the notions served by school to its young wards, but has much to do with what society and the education system directly or indirectly do to the adult dealing with the child.

The principle of *self-government* inspiring Berg, borrowed from Wilhelm Reich and Homer Lane in many of Neill's works, refers to an absolutely positive vision of the nature of the individual, considered as a source of strength and energy which, where not hindered by the implicit repressions of social and education systems, always meets its full, total and productive expansion. "The fundamental problem thus becomes that of freeing the original native strength of the personality from the "character armour" which – according to Reich – tortures it; or we need to prevent the armour from being formed and consolidated" (Scurati, 1977, p. 26). In addition to the many ideas anticipating the debate on *emergent literacy* which was to lie at the centre of future national education to reading programmes, in Berg's words we seem to capture the concept of "incidental education", with its intrinsic liberatory nature contrasting direct and formal pedagogy, used by Paul Goodman to comments the Summerhill experience in a precious book edited by Egle Becchi (Goodman, 1975, pp. 135-151)

All education socialises, but incidental education is natural, spontaneous and inevitable, while formal education is scholastic, a deliberate intervention which thus has to be justified. The most extraordinary and complex example of incidental education is when a child learns to speak, a formidable intellectual feat which is done universally. We still do not know how this occurs, but the main conditions determining this learning seems precisely to lie in the sphere of "incidentalness", the meeting between two or more beings who interact through the environment. In this case, and in all other fundamental moments of the cognitive and emotional life of human beings, it is precisely the relationship with others that triggers the meeting between the natural need to learn, the satisfaction of a desire, and an equally spontaneous exchange of knowledge. Children see their own right to have needs, interests and instincts recognised by adults and, through the contractual nature of freedom, Laporta (1975, pp. 15-16) explains, from Neill's viewpoint, they will learn to recognise the "give and take" relationship underlying coexistence: the liberation of childhood needs the presence of the adult, his irreplaceable coexistence, the loving offer of a life environment which satisfies the need for approval and affection which runs through the situations the child experiences, in his continuous attempts and explorations.

Berg describes work, play, conversations, the emotions children express in relation to their environment in minute detail in *Reading and Loving* (1977), and how "everything has the potential for learning", how education therefore cannot be separated from life: observing the enthusiasm of the first successes with language and the first approach to reading in some children, the author underlined how "none of these children were in a building called School, with an adult called Teacher, and with equipment specially designed as Scholastic. They were in the world, with their own drive to become competent in it, and to welcome whatever they meet" (Berg, 1977, p. 133).

It is moreover affectivity that is the solvent of the educational relationship, and emotions are configured as fertile terrain for the construction of values. The first intervention supporting children's literacy and reading can thus start only by training adults in parenthood and care, so that the acquisition of language and the construction of the motivation to reading are natural conquests in a competent, gratifying affective climate.

Babies learn from birth to talk. They do it of their own accord [...] They learn in the cradle and the pram – first from their own free playful exploration, then from the important people round them, their own important people. And if the child’s “important people” encourage and delight in the child, and if neither they nor society clamps down, then the child not only becomes fluent, but learns the self-organizing power of words [...] the power that enables a child to predict and plan the future (Berg, 1977, p. 35).

When the linguistic experience is based on play and supported by the adult’s time and commitment, not only does the book enter the life of the child but the child enters the book: the quality of picture books or books targeting very young children, according to Berg, lies not so much in simplicity or familiarity, but rather in excitement, in the joy that comes from seeing the emotional and physical pleasures of personal experimentation among the pages of a story being evoked. Quality books for early childhood are those which allow this re-experience, coherent with the child’s social, environmental and cultural hinterland, not to fix it rigidly in his context but rather to broaden and gradually make his linguistic and imaginative heritage more complex, allowing the stories to become a part of his experience. Therefore, Berg wonders, “how can children who are not allowed to build on their own experience, not allowed, so to speak, to remember, ever imagine?” (Berg, 1977, p. 31).

Literature thus contributes to liberating the child, fostering a reflection that enhances and legitimises his present experience, his natural rhythm of development, without proposing any projections forward, forced transformations or pre-constituted models of growth.

When the environment, understood as Dewey meant as a set of conditions promoting or preventing the characteristic activities of a human being, hinders the natural progression of development, literature may compensate, conveying a warm welcome, confirming the child’s identity through an acceptance that may also be critical of the context, contributing, through the mediation of an encouraging, complicit adult, to overcoming a condition of disadvantage and insecurity.

Very often, working class children did not have spaces, calm, respect, care, books and images and music, conversations and reading out loud, which helped other children’s personalities to grow. And also in the books found at school, which are often the only books they handle, they do not find any recognition, any identification, nothing that tells them that they belong to this world; they grow with a feeling of not having the right to exist. Berg adds that it is not possible to resolve this difficulty by offering fantastic stories as the first books. Fantasy is important and enriching, on condition that it is rooted in a firm command of reality, a clear certainty of one’s own identity, and a firm awareness of one’s own value. We must deal with this first of all, otherwise the fantasy which we certainly wish to offer children will be a way of escaping from their own nothingness, rather than a way of empowering their own identity.

Berg’s position was strengthened after the 1967 Plowden Report, which recorded that 29 percent of all homes had less than 5 books, emphasising the importance of the family context in determining the results of education and instruction. If the institutions are not able to guarantee children from disadvantaged social environments the usual supports for “literate children”, in the end the first books they are given can help to fill the gap – they can enhance their personality, nourish it, and build starting from their personality, as happens in the first 5 years of the book child. But school books are still totally inadequate. They are not books which lead to other books, but rather instruments of social control: their purpose is not to initiate children into the pleasure of reading, writing and personal expression, but to train them in conformism, decorum, the status quo.

Teachers, who are obedient defenders of our culture, take reading out of its context, and then look around busily to supply a ‘motivation’ which they have noticed - shaking their heads sadly - is missing; or they will put together in a great artificial project the things the system has just arrogantly and brutally forced apart [...] And only the child who is already secure enough in the basis for reading or writing survives this. (Berg, 1977, p. 49).

The denegation of the present, the immediate in which the child's experience unfolds freely and naturally, is the danger to which traditional pedagogical behaviour is exposed, and school is an expression of this.

The family of books destined for the "orthodox reader" is inauthentic in its perfection yet fully recognizable in its essential exterior features: "the detached house, the clematis round the door, the roses and chrysanthemums, father at leisure with the lawn-mover (or going to the office with the briefcase), the large dog and the aristocratic cat, the tidy organized family consisting only of one father, one mother, one son, one daughter, the polite conversation at the damask-covered breakfast table" (Berg, 1977, p. 49).

The child traces some of the details of his own life in this wax model, and subconsciously realises that his family corresponds to the "accepted" standard. The literature proposed at school promotes leads to the personality and energies of the child reader to be encircled, confirming that he belongs to an artificial life and behavioural model, which he must adapt to. Only if he keeps the emotional and enriching dimension of reading experimented in early childhood alive, with the help of competent parents, will the middle class child be able to continue to use books and writing as tools for building his own personality, *despite* school.

Berg thus considers two childhoods, two distortions or alienations, two different forms of de-personalisation, the disorganised version of the working class and the organised version of the middle class.

When not dealing with a book child, but indeed a working class child, used to the coldness and poverty of day nurseries, not encouraged outside of school, school does not compensate, it does not repair, it strikes the final and fatal blow because it is the conformist accomplice of the culture which deprived him, manipulated him, delegitimised him for the first 5 years of his life. The expression "culturally deprived" thus refers to a child who has seen his own culture stolen by the school system, which oppresses him as it pretends to educate him, it subjugates him with the abolition of the language he uses to express his emotions, excitement, identity and power.

If you exclude from a child everything that makes reading meaningful - his own speech, his parents' speech, his friends speech, comics, genuine letters, his spontaneous comments on things that have happened, football pools, matches, Gran dying, visits to hospital - all the things he genuinely enjoys and the things he genuinely hates or is frightened of, if you state you are appalled at his colloquialisms, if you call the content of his life 'disgusting rubbish', why should he confide speech to paper, and ever read or write? (Berg, 1977, p. 105)

Thus reading becomes a reflex of school, an incomprehensible prison, an educational exercise unto itself, from which it is possible to easily free oneself once out of school:

Reading has nothing to do with us. It is one of their things. We will learn the trick like we learn all the other tricks; who knows, it might get us somewhere; anyway it will keep us out of trouble for a bit. And when we leave school we can drop it again with the other acrobatics (Berg, 1967).

Conclusions

Leila Berg's many works for children and adults certainly deserve a more exhaustive research and more in-depth examination, using the published and unpublished materials kept at the Leila Berg Collection at Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle.

Although the pedagogical thought underlying Berg' works is correlated to the radical proposals which failed to find a footing in reality, as it is difficult to imagine an route out of a bureaucratic state education system to foster the authentic birth of a pluralist, community school (Codello, 2014; Aglieri, 2013), her anti-authoritarian approach makes her comparable to other authors who, in the same decades in Europe, placed themselves "at the service of childhood", writing to free it from conformisms and stereotypes, guaranteeing all children instruments for critically reading reality and for social participation. For Italy, duly distinguishing types of cultural education and the results of their writings, we may think of the importance given by Gianni Rodari and Mario Lodi to the meaning of the "culture of the child" as a starting point for language learning and for stimulating creativity (Rodari, 1973; Lodi, 1977).

The idea, underlined by Berg in all her works, that to be truly free education must deal exclusively with guaranteeing children every possible opportunity for becoming that which they potentially can or that which they hope to become, according to each specific life project, can still make headway today in the current schizophrenia of hyper-protection and premature adultisation of childhood (Cambi, 1988, pp. 278-282). The much hoped for Copernican revolution of the educational relationship between adult and child not only did not occur but today appears opposed, in family and school contexts which still have an authoritarian structure, through different, more seductive instruments which end up confirming and broadening forms of coercion which are certainly ascribable to the tradition of “poisonous pedagogy” (Filigrasso, 2012). The belief that literature can represent a tool for mutual knowledge among generations, a precious opportunity for reciprocity, through reading aloud and oral storytelling, returns insistently in many of Berg’s publishing works, dedicated to re-writing traditional fairy tales (1966), the legends of the old testament (2006), or experiences of creative writing such as those described in *Backwards and Forwards* (1994): a narrative exchange between children telling of the lives of their own grandparents or elderly people writing the experiences of their own childhood. According to Berg, reading and writing foster a relationship of co-development: the child needs the adult and a relation of dialogue, to help him free every possible specificity, attitude, talent, while the adult, observing childhood and its extraordinary resources, its freedom of play, the uncensored rhythm of expressiveness and logic, may, perhaps utopistically, protect from the pollution of an unhappy and sick adult civilisation:

It is really so much a child needs - the right to have space, and time for exploration, so that each can grow at its own rhythm and become part of society in natural way [...] the right to have happy parents, whom society accepts and values? It is really too much? It is indeed. Ask our society that sets each creative child on the conveyor belt, and deals it as it moves along a hammer-blow here and a twist there, till it becomes the anonymous mass component that the state needs, and see society’s response... see its priorities. Yet each one of us is a member of ‘society’. And only children, and the sheer brilliance of children, can save each one of us from the sickness and the death that we choose to call living (Berg, 1972a, p. 144).

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