

## Constellation of early childhood, Gugu's firmament. A portrait of Augusta Rasponi del Sale (Ravenna 1864-1942), author of picture book

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### Abstract

Augusta Rasponi del Sale (1864 – 1942) aka Gugù wrote and illustrated children's picture books published in England, France, Italy; she dedicated her work to the representation of early childhood. She used to portray herself as a duck, or goose and she devoted her life to neglected children. She looked at childhood from a unique point of view – her work as an author focused on representing all children, also infants of the age of one, two and three months, dedicating realistic portraits and poetic verses to them. What emerges from her work is a modern way to conceive children's books and early childhood life conditions and rights. She created a cultural portrait of childhood of her time – representing not only childhood but also *early* childhood. This article focuses on her work, in order to rediscover the value of a great, forgotten children's literature author still capable to amaze scholars and educators.

Augusta Rasponi del Sale (1864 – 1942), detta Gugù, ha scritto e illustrato libri per bambini pubblicati in Inghilterra, Francia, Italia. Ha dedicato la sua vita allo studio e alla rappresentazione della prima infanzia, disegnando se stessa nei libri in forma di oca. La sua è una prospettiva unica, di un'autrice che ha rappresentato la prima e primissima infanzia, dedicandole una osservazione realistica e minuta. Dal suo lavoro emerge una concezione moderna delle condizioni della prima infanzia, dei libri per bambini e dei loro diritti. Questo articolo si concentra sul suo lavoro di autrice, con l'obiettivo di contribuire alla riscoperta del valore di una grande figura di educatrice e autrice capace di parlare ancora oggi agli studiosi di educazione e agli storici della letteratura.

**Keywords:** history of children's literature, illustration, history of childhood, education, imaginary

**Parole chiave:** storia della letteratura per l'infanzia, illustrazione, educazione, immaginario

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The literary historians, mistaking books for life, construct a fictional picture of childhood, as though one could know what really happened in the nineteenth-century American home by reading Tom Sawyer.

Thus wrote Lloyd DeMause (1983, p. 12), famous psychohistorian. In fact, we must confess that sometimes this happens: studying children literature is a chance to investigate childhood, its world and imagination, to better understand both childhood and the idea or what Ariès called *sentiment* (Ariès, 1960), i.e. the way childhood is conceived and represented in modern era. History of children's literature is a field of investigation, which allows scholars to understand something more about childhood and moreover the whole existential

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dimension of man. Necessarily, to undertake this often perilous journey, many disciplines are requested in order to deal with verbal and visual narratives, such as history of childhood and education, history of art and ideas, children's literature, literary criticism and history of illustration.

Augusta Rasponi del Sale (Ravenna 1864 – 1942) aka Gugù wrote and illustrated children's picture books, calendars, primers, postcards, even a statistical survey on children's health. She wrote poetry and translated from French and English. In her illustrations she used to portray herself as a duck, or goose, in perfect Perraultian tradition. She dedicated her life to the representation of very early childhood. Daughter of the count Lucio Rasponi del Sale, member of the Accademia dei Filopaperi<sup>1</sup>, she looked at childhood from a truly unique point of view – she entirely invested her great wealth in philanthropic activities for orphans, abandoned, poor and neglected children and her work as an author focused on representing all children, also infants of the age of one, two and three months, dedicating adorable portraits and poetic verses to them. What emerges from her work is a modern way to conceive books, life and childhood, and a sharp taste for the nonsense and the beauty as aesthetic and educational tools. She created a cultural portrait of childhood that is still modern today, inaugurating a narrative and figurative tradition with a two-fold vocation – representing not only childhood but also *early* childhood.

This article is divided into two parts: the first, entitled *Gugù's wings*, deals with the author's vision of childhood, symbolically represented with the iconographic attribute of wings in her self-portrait as a duck. The second one, entitled *Thousand of children in mind* (Modoni Georgiou, 1986), focuses on her books, especially *Mother Duck's Children*, firstly published in London in 1900 and reprinted in Italy in 2007. She portrayed and narrated babies and toddlers, and what “effectively happens” (deMause, 1983) to very young children of all social classes in last-19<sup>th</sup>-century Ravenna's society – wet nurses, swaddling bands, braces and other torments, and also thoughts about her poetic view, compared to other authors from the same Italian area of Romagna.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gugù's books were published by important French and English children's publishing companies as Hachette and Heinemann. She was aware of the cultural value of the discourse of childhood (Satta, 2012). This is the reason why in her works we find declarations of poetics concerning her way of looking at childhood, but also alarmed, well-argued criticism of the way in which childhood was cared for, or neglected, at her time.

The illustrative language is that of an artist: synthetic, rapid, impatient, flexible and seeking to create and multiply beauty. The chosen form is often that of the picture book. This feature ascribes her to the world of European children's illustrators which, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, offered a new viewpoint in print, able to restore step by step the idea of a childhood with an increasingly complete and rotund body, made of several dimensions, a space of rights which has a painful history dotted with continuous infringements, where the possibility of being different from adult expectations and conventions, the possibility to be subjects, to be respected, to be oneself, progressively – but not without difficulty – takes hold. Childhood also has a cultural body, an invisible and interior world, which is the flowing magma of the collective imagination, the fairy-tale mirror of possible destinies, present in classic children's stories and representations (Bernardi, 2016; Beseghi & Grilli, 2011). Gugù's children are emblematic metaphors of an age in which literature looked at a childhood that was slowly conquering a new face and a new voice. These were the years of the first illustrated children's magazines (Pallottino, 2008), when the Anglo-Saxon graphic sensitivity referring to Liberty began to develop, not without some Beardsley-style anxieties rooted in the Victorian dawn that discovered and invented children in books and books for children (Meyer, 1983).

At that time, literature, iconography, childcare, the philosophy of education looked towards a childhood that was all but rosy (Rasponi, 1904) but which however began to demand its own voice, a limited yet irreducible space, a small space of one's own.

Childhood still needs interpreters, and above all careful observers and interlocutors. Today, international publishers represents early childhood in the changing and complex landscape of human developmental forms and ages – a mostly figurative literature, made accessible to the age it is representative of, that also tells the ineffable and ambiguous children’s poetic cipher, still an enigma for artists and thinkers, a poetic and contemporary discourse of the enigma of the visible and the invisible, the childhood and the human soul, the pictures and the big picture.

### Gugù’s wings

In the opening of *La mia statistica. Piccolo studio sull’allevamento dei bambini con 62 illustrazioni* (My statistic. Little study about the upbringing of children with 62 illustrations; 1914), the statistic study devoted to the conditions of babies in her society, drawn and published by Augusta Rasponi del Sale, we find the author’s alter-ego drawn as the duck Gugù, portrayed with her wings spread, beak open, the squiggle of her signature visible on the feathers worn as a necklace (fig. 1).



Figure 1 – Frontespizio *La mia statistica*

On the front cover the title is framed by a garland of babies in swaddling bands linked together in nursery deco style (Pallottino, 2008), drawn in the gracious style of an illustrator with a quick, happy line – some small, enchanting cherub-like, others crying and contrite, in a rhythmic and rhetorical alternation which brings a smile to the reader. The winged disguise as a duck, at times in an eloquent pose, more often with the quality of a discreet and silent presence, is both a homage to French fairy-tale traditions (i.e. Mother Goose) and a totemic reminder of pre-verbal innocence, an archetypal allusion to wildness and a visual pun that plays with candour and irony. Thus Gugù herself wrote: “I wish I had huge wings to protect and defend all children from every possible disgrace” (fig. 2).

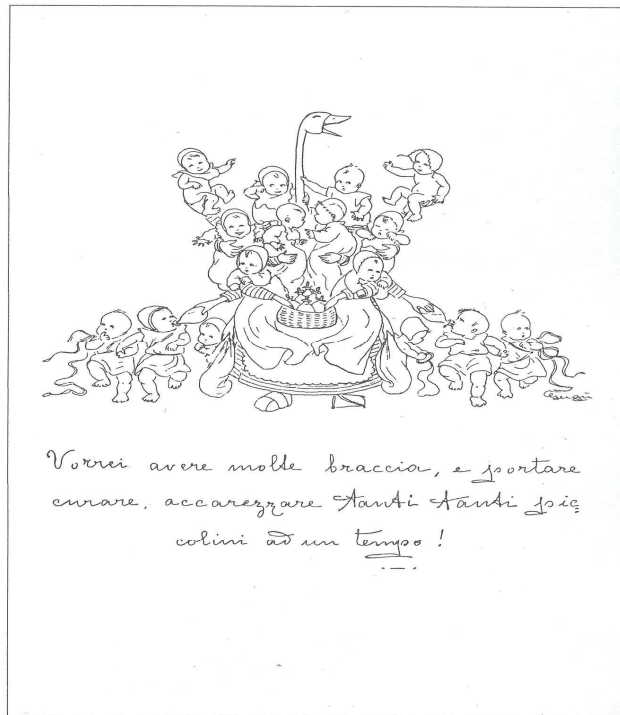


Figure 2 – *La mia statistica*

The wings of Gugù the duck are a visible sign of that “existential lightness”, the lyrical dimension able to tone down even drama with irony, so well described by Calvino (1993) and which Augusta Rasponi del Sale was certainly equipped of.

Unpredictable and sharp, an only child, Augusta-Gugù had a very particular and multi-functional personality, a strong sense of humour and tenderness, generosity and curiosity towards others, an inclination for paradox, dreams, study, drawing, poetry and a passion for all languages. The few biographical works about her always have for some reason the characteristic of sounding affective, fragmented, partial, as if time had not really been able to truly understand this irregular personality, who is now praised, but at her time marginalised, then rewarded with Fascist emphasis, then portrayed with cruel provincialism with the physiognomy of a fairy, or indeed a witch, a little crazy. Then she died in a state of poverty and abandonment in her elegant and claustrophobic Ravenna. Yet reading her works we meet a light and indeed neotenic – with juvenile characteristics in adult life (Montagu, 1992; Terrusi, 2012) – Gugù, marked by a very special relationship with childhood, incompleteness and lightness.

Gugù was never perfectly integrated nor understood by the society of her time, as happened to many artists and intellectuals throughout history. Gugù is – with an expression dear to Antonio Faeti – constitutionally *outmoded* and, perhaps thanks to this, still modern today. She had neither husband nor children but, as she stated, “thousands of children in mind”. Light, *puella aeterna*, eternal maiden, able somehow to be an *angelos*, i.e. etymologically a messenger, among unspeaking beings, in-fans, and subsequent forms of the same species,

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imperfect, she is shaman and ambivalent like Mary Poppins (Grilli, 2002), the bringer of that form of poetical and nonsensical wisdom we find in some founding English children's literature, such as in the forms of nursery rhymes. Only apparently naïve as a "duck", she was indeed capable to look very closely and precisely to the light and the very small world, "whether children, insects or fairies" (Grilli, 2012), or only an infinite number of infants, apparently all the same and yet different and wonderful like flowers, or pebbles, or leaves, natural elements that Gugù also loved to portray in her constant exercises of botanical and scientific illustrations. The graphic diction with which Gugù's story of childhood takes shape seems to play with the multiplying effect produced by the monstrous similarity of all new-born babes and thus with the relationship linking all natural forms to others, with the metamorphosis and continuity that unites all living forms. This can be considered a similar and substantially contemporary sensitivity to that of the works of English scientist Charles Darwin, expressed in particular in *The Evolution of the Species*, a work we can imagine she was familiar with, and which contributed to build her vision of the world.

Gugù's wings thus become a metaphor of her airborne explorations of a special constellation, that specific sphere of early childhood.

Educator, observer, scholar, narrator, artist and defender of the rights of children, above all of very young children, who were otherwise mostly ignored, in her *picture book* (she herself used the English term in Rasponi, 2007) Gugù was one of the first documented illustrators to draw many new-born babies, beings considered constitutively temporary in times and societies with very high mortality rates, who have no voice and change too fast to be exactly observed and portrayed; silent infants, represented rarely by figures in books, where they are, when they are, associated traditionally with light, winged, flying, aquatic, suspended beings, halfway between man and animal, between here and elsewhere.

Gugù's wings recall a specific characteristic of great children's authors: they are that irreducible place of childhood and lightness that poke out of the pocket like the ear of a teddy bear, the string of a spinning top or a fishing line. They are the visible signs of the infantile and persistent otherness of certain souls, that most mysterious *acorn* (Hillman, 2009) that each of us carries inside right from early childhood, a kind of dictionary of the *anima mundi*, that make different languages understandable to literary children – i.e. in *Mary Poppins* the twins still speak the language of the *stornello* bird – and thus to artists.

Gugù's wings are also perfectly modern: they allude to that unbearable lightness which psychoanalysis, art and literature associate to the demands of childhood, the discovery (or creation) of which is closely linked to the study of the dream, the unconscious and creativity between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are the lightness of *Peter Pan* (first published in 1906) and the dreaming flight of *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905), they are the joyful laughter of Pascoli's Fanciullino (1902), who we see (only if we raise our heads up to the sky) as he runs to look out from the suspended balcony of the soul remembered during a party (Pascoli, 1992). They are the wings that do not warm Arthur Rimbaud's orphans in the poignant "nest without feathers" where "children, huddled like pretty birds rocked by the branches, sleep their sweet sleep full of white dreams!" (Rimbaud, 2004). Wings that embrace thousands of children, orphans and waifs, never asking anything in return, not even the seal of maternity. They are wings that recall the mythical messengers of antiquity, the enchanted wings of those who know how to look beyond.

Yet Gugù portrays herself as an earthbound domestic duck, sometimes dressed with accessories suited to the occasion and to the fashion of her time. Hers are wings that can but do not fly. Hers is indeed a domesticated wildness, a sweet and earthly wisdom which is never haughty but rather, more than anything else, surreal and transversal – an unorthodox educator yet with a solid background, not only in health and hygiene practices but also knowledgeable of child psychology, certainly a fervent precursor of the modern importance of silent observation in education (Maida, Molteni & Nuzzo, 2009).

In Barrie's *Peter Pan* we read: "The reason why birds fly and we can't is simply that they have perfect faith, for to have faith is to have wings" (1902, pag. 32). Thus we can state that winged Gugù nourishes undying faith and loving curiosity to childhood. Her perspective, *neotenic* and *green*, is common to great writers of children's classics defined by Alison Lurie as "boys and girls forever" (2004) and still able to amaze us. Where examined closely, Gugù's children narrate pages that are still bright and winged on the elusive secret of childhood.

### Thousands of children in mind

Gugù drew a surprising number of infants and nursing babies. We may say that her poetic and scientific intent was to affirm, narrate and defend the rights of small children, starting from understanding and responding to their primary needs with care, and by granting them imaginary citizenship in the pages. Their physical, psychological needs, their need for affection, play and relationships are narrated and portrayed as the inevitable features of a childhood with rights and acceptable quality life.

With the appropriate space, we could deepen the study about the literary work of Gugù, relating it to the history and sentiment of childhood in order to place her illustrated "children in history" (Becchi, 2010). Here we would remark on the delay Italians had in removing infants' swaddling clothes (the English and the Germans freed them much earlier than we did, and Rousseau stigmatised the practice in *Emile*); the history of objects such as the little bottle, as Gugù called it (preferred to the separation from the mother) or the precise, critical description of practices such as wet nursing; we would find, in Romagna and Ravenna in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the recommendation for maternal nursing, which had already taken hold in France in previous decades.

The new conditions of childhood, and the small conquests, while slow in taking hold, in terms of greater health and hygiene, were contemporary to the progressive creation of products for children in the publishing field, above all during that great cultural season what blossomed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in book printing.

Gugù's book of rhymes *Mother Duck's Children* was published in England in 1900, a book which she herself defined with the term *picture book*, habitually in use today (Terrusi, 2012) to define that new form of children's books made of pictures and short texts.

Gugù already looked at children's daily life and childcare as complex and dynamic dimensions including not only the physical care for children but also the close attention to the cultural and pedagogical aspects of childhood; attention and curiosity that light up in her before the tiniest of new-born infants with the greatest seriousness, right from the very first moments of life, marking and noting the developments of the first two years of life, defined in a famous incipit, in the very same years, as "the beginning of the end" (Barrie, 2004).

Gugù dedicates highly detailed descriptions to this liminal time. In her book of rhymes, infants are described in their doing nothing at one month, nothing at two, and something at three (fig. 3)





Figure 3 – “Baby’s progress”; *Mother Duck’s Children*

Each month has a portrait, up to one year, and tells the progress made by these tiny infants.

“Baby just arrived to-day/must have come a long, long way:/he’s so tired he only lies/shutting tight his tiny eyes” (Rasponi, 1900, p. 5). In this illustration the infant even has that typical brownish colour of the first few hours after birth. Then he becomes paler, his cheeks turn pink, and the drawing better defines the face, before undefined – a conquest of survival for the infant, and of vision for the observer. The child’s progress: from grasping an object, to bringing a toy to his mouth, to biting a hard object to taking his socks off, crawling and then standing, this is all described and narrated in the lines of her rhymes, demonstrating that Gugù is an extraordinary, and modern, children’s nurse as well as an author.

Her books are at every level modern picture books, their function is to mediate the relationship between adult and child, and protect the rights and dignity of the latter. She uses the grammar of picture books: synthesis, musicality, variety, rhythm of sound and composition; happy figures with that dynamism typical of the infantile energy of the great English illustrators (above all referring to the atmospheres of Arts and Craft, Art Nouveau and Liberty) that Gugù knew well – Randolph Caldecott, Kate Greenaway, Walter Crane, Aubrey Beardsley, whose most elegant Italian populariser was Francesco Nonni (Imolesi & Pozzi, 2015) – and whose picture books, when this book was published in 1900, were certainly on the same shelf in the English bookshops.

And what fun is to be had in Gugù’s pages, overrunning into paradox, in the decades in which *Alice in Wonderland* was becoming more and more popular among readers, for example in the tables of the infant cyclists (fig. 04) – hilarious oxymoron, certainly not in equilibrium, indeed fabulously, all but one.



Figure 4 – “The bicycling babies”; *Mother Duck's Children*

These are cyclists portrayed just before crossing the two-year finishing line, in a part of the journey where few have considered them interesting subjects to narrate. And present as ever, tiny on a corner, there she is, on her bicycle, the narrator, the Duck, the reporter of the possible and impossible of childhood.

Generally literature does not abound with infants and nursing babies: looking to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one delightful and founding example can be found in Victor Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs* (1869), when an infant girl is described as found and fed with a makeshift bottle.

In the same years (in 1863 the stories, first published in episodes in a magazine, were collected in a single volume) Reverend Charles Kingsley had written the story of the *Water-Babies*, who became famous and were reinterpreted in many different versions, including the charming short film in the Silly Symphony Disney series of 1935.

The choral element is central in Gugù's illustrations, which multiplies characters, the tenderness and marvel felt for each one of them, representing many babies together, like the different notes in the same concert. As we know, special attention is paid to early childhood only with the relatively recent birth of childcare and puericulture. Of early childhood, Rousseau summed up that it “is almost all sickness and danger”, that “children raised with too much delicacy die more than others” in the index of *Emile* there are no infants, in the book little is said of nurslings, and the French author even says that “a child becomes more precious as he advances in age. To the value of his person is joined that of the effort he has cost” (Rousseau, 1989).

Returning to children's literature, we find some rare and adorable illustrated infants in the work of Kate Greenaway (Meyer, 1983), delightful and gracious babies who however, immersed in the pastoral idylls and dreamlike atmospheres destined to have such a profound effect on children's drawings in the decades that



followed, and already reproduced on cups, plates, napkins (like Gugù's drawings are today), don't cry nor scream and rarely smile, like ideal and perfect cherubs.

Kate Greenaway, who also shared with Gugù the fact of being considered *strange* or *irregular* and her sensitivity (and also her extraordinary artistic talent, recognised relatively late on, by the great printer and editor Edmund Evans) portrayed an idealised childhood, in which imagination covered dolls and nature with vitality; she herself sewed children's costumes, which she made young models wear so that she could portray them with her unmistakable lines.

Gugù was born eighteen years after Greenaway, in that fairy-tale land of Romagna, and saw the authentic, often snivelling and crying childhood. She went to the orphanages, fought for better health and hygiene for children, and at the same time she drew them, dialoguing on the international shelves with the traits of the golden age of children's illustration.

The referred visual culture is similar, the mark, the grace, the figurative charm and happiness of representation found in Gugù, but the idealisation of childhood is flawed. It disappears discreetly, she does not dip her quill in caricature but wishes to do justice to the reality of childhood, its human imperfection, singing its praises affectionately and with playful attention, with a measured, poetic, lunar and particular sense of humour. We like to link her poetics of childhood to that of other artists from that surreal and "enchanted" (Antoniuzzi, 2011) Romagna which has the special trait of a lyric and existential condition, always halfway between laughing and crying, that humble and yet intelligent way of querying all things human in amazement and affectionate irony.

This is a key characteristic that ideally links, for example, Gugù's infants to Federico Fellini's ability to see the dream, innocence and childhood with their chiaroscuros, which we can read of in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1991 (Angel, Fellini) about a project that was never completed:

I would have liked to make a film about thirty or so children aged two or three years old, in a building in the suburbs. Their telepathic communication, the looks they give each other on the stairs or in the courtyard, the stories of total love or total pain. Describing these beings who are repositories of immense wealth which in time disappears so quickly. It was a film on the porosity of the wall, which in childhood separates us from the unconscious, the irrational, the dream [...] Afterwards, this wall becomes strengthened, it hardens, and nothing more passes through.

What do Gugù's children do? Mother Duck's children grow up, they prepare for a ball, they talk about "Lomaloos", whatever they are ("we never saw the Lomaloos, but, oh, at night we've heard them sing" (Rasponi, 1900, p. 13), bicycle races, a dip in the sea, playing with and without toys.

They are many, very serious, unforeseeable, and at times unstable. They are clumsy puppies always a hair's breadth from tragedy, dealing with tiny private carnivals, potentially lethal accidents that they survive, like magical spirits, by the skin of their teeth. Not without the lightest and light-hearted touch of sadism, but only sometimes, Gugù's representations of children are for the most part fun, paradoxical, surprising if we look closely at them; Gugù's children are always ready to change places or opinions with the duck, call her to order, call on her as a judge or supreme witness, involve her as she is on their level, if not even a little more rooted to the ground; as for her, now she commands, now she drifts away, she hurts herself, bandages her beak and even cries, along with the infants, the ultimate in empathy.

Gugù restores a three-dimensionality to that elusive age of early childhood and also suggests many other dimensions, which are studied from different perspectives, from social to medical, from pedagogical to the

study of the imagination, iconography and literature: every Gugù's infant is a person. Today she would be invited to speak at a conference on "medical humanities", to discuss the quality of life in early childhood.

In Gugù's pictures there is always a child who trips, one who spies through a crack, one who cries or can't reach the table. In these figures we recognise the poetic of *all but one*; and that one, the clumsy child of the famous fairy tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, rewritten by the Brothers Grimm and then set to verse by Robert Browning and illustrated by Greenaway (1888); the special child who, not following the masses, today we might call *disabled*, remains as a privileged testimonial in his imperfection, like Peter Pan, becoming an emblem of human imperfection; that idea that without clumsy beings, non-integrated adults, without shamans, dyslexic dancers there would be no story, no world, and there would be no childhood, which is invisible to most, like the essential, as is known to the most classic of little princes of literature.

At first glance the reader knows that we are looking at authentic children, tripping and spinning, with an impatience that becomes a playful rhythm, not with rules or boring stories of children who are too good to be real; authentic children, as we know, have never loved too good children in literature; they prefer the black dictions of incorrect behaviour, who give proof of their sense of inadequacy or the fatigue of having to start over again, which childhood forces us to face every time.

Gugù is the talented creator of a compact poetic universe made of many shades; hers is also a social childhood. To trace the tools for interpreting and giving justice to the complex wealth of her infantile world, we may look to a repertory of studies on childhood that seek to read the conditions, dignity, needs, history, looking to literary representations as a privileged prism, irradiating uncensoring, non-cramping, non-adultcentric possibilities. Is Gugù – the figurine drawer, the writer of few rhymes, translator, above all philanthropist and enlightened children's nurse – thus a novelist of childhood? The same Gugù who from Ravenna (how cramped Ravenna must have been in those days, how poor the conditions of its children) dialogues culturally with France and England, fitting in between the voices and the pens to draw a portrait of childhood seen with new attention.

If "childhood is precisely a set of attributes and projections of the guardian's gaze, the pure object of studies and obstacles in view of the adult age", and if "we must not start from the child, from that empty place he occupies, but from the constellated plot which that place immobilises" (Shérer & Hocquenghem, 1979, p. 42), then in the novel of childhood that Gugù creates with her work as a narrator and drawer we would like to underline and summarise some motifs of her poetic originality, as these describe a constellated plot that, with its unending brightness, offers us an idea of modern, evolving childhood. As we have said, this is a choral, multiple representations of children organised in ideal (and at times literary) garlands. The motifs emerging from these portraits *in vivo*, seen today, relate to recent conquests in the study of childhood – the peer culture (Corsaro, 2003), the dynamism of children, the closeness to the issues of death, emotional wealth, the relationship with the environment, affectivity, physical needs, personality and individual character, the importance of the context, love and atmosphere in education, that which adults can learn from children (Gopnik, 2010).

Looking closely at the representations by Gugù, we therefore find ourselves looking at different "photographs", always characterised by the ability to render the typical dynamism of childhood, the *beat*, as Sendak said (1988, p. 3), which we find in the great figure drawers who were her contemporaries, first and foremost the famous Randolph Caldecott. These children move about, often in playful conflict, they are children portrayed in groups, not isolated by juxtaposed even in the composition of impossible garlands. As if the juxtaposition of several infantile figures joined in a spontaneous group was already a poetic declaration of dignity and recognition of a universe consistent with its own dynamics, cultures and internal rules. Childhood is a secret world apart, Gugù seems to say, to cite another founding study on the representation of childhood in

literature, the incipit of which states that “the representations of children could constitute an excellent control of the system of values and inspirations of a society” (Chombart de Lauwe, 1974, p. 7).

Gugù's children are children tackling cultural routines and the dynamics of socialisation – conflict and friendship, independence and appeals for control, they are the bearers of a peer culture expressed for example in the material evidence of the toys and games that Gugù represents, thus also offering a precious documentary photograph of children's lives at the start of the last century. Gugù gives visibility to the invisible, centrality to the marginal, a voice to childhood in the pages. As historian Navoni writes in the preface of *Mother Duck's Children's* Italian reprint: “Enchanting details abound: collars and aprons, ribbons and cloaks, bonnets and bottles, dolls and marionettes, swords and muskets, primers and soap bubbles populate the pages of this book, offering a view of joyful domestic intimacy, a glimmer of life investigated with careful and affectionate participation”.

Gugù portrays herself as an adorable, discreet, willing, reliable and authoritative duck, more similar to a director or a guardian angel than a totemic animal. It reminds of the function of animals in certain stories, in which they “show, explain or perform the function of mediator between nature and the child” (Chombart de Lauwe, 1974, p. 336).

We are tempted to link Gugù's self-portrait of a duck to another rather modern intuition, where read in a psychoanalytical key: the need to maintain profound links with our own wildness (Pinkola Estés, 1992), as a key to accessing and asserting our own femininity. Some read Gugù's obsession with childhood as a compensation for her own lack of motherhood; yet if we reason in the opposite direction, we could in fact think that it was precisely her contact with the *anima mundi* (Hillman, 2014) that wild soul that gave Augusta Rasponi del Sale special access to the world of children, an enlightened and enlightening view of someone who never took herself seriously but was able to work not only with a marginal and oppressed category but also, in the cultural field, could express herself thanks to her symbolic and interior completeness, built through her smiling feathered sisterhood disguised as Mother Duck.

A beautiful image lies in a game of mutuality, with a nursery rhyme, in which two small girls wash two dolls, holding them by their feet, before the omnipresent yet discreet duck. The girls talk to their Dirty Dollies, as they have certainly heard adults do to children: complaining of their dirtiness, untidiness, negligence, teaching a lesson of meteoric and unquestionable hygiene. That is what children do, as we know, when playing mother – they propose again the pedagogical model they have received. Gugù must have observed and listened to girls, studied their role playing and then written and drawn their stories, placing them in the centre stage of an everyday scene without sweetening the pill, without rounding off any sharp edges – childhood is worthy, acceptable and wonderful as it is, the Duck seems to say with its affectionate, silent presence.

There is also room for negative, hazy and ambivalent sentiments in Gugù's picture books, shown on the faces and in the movements of her children. Her view of childhood is neither ideal nor simplified, despite the texts and figures, which show a very modern lightness and brevity.

Children's hunting, still in *Mother Duck's Children*, is illustrated as carnival-like: “mice and rats are chased with cats, as adults would (not) do”, the text says. Again toys are represented, here horses' heads with broom handles to ride on, in this strange open-air hillside landscape with a church, pines and cypress trees, typical of Italian landscapes, where children with a tuba and red tailcoats hold straining kittens on a leash, in the construction of images in which the lesson of nonsense, paradox and the absurd of Victorian children's literature is very clear.

There are little mysteries in Gugù's figures. Above or below a title of a chapter we find sometimes surprising little scenes, with children represented in almost incomprehensible attire – one almost naked, but wrapped in a kind of fur scarf, twirling behind a Mother Duck, and behind him yet another Mother Duck who seems to be scolding. It could almost be a dream, or rather a nightmare!

Negative sentiments and death, as we said, like in the chapter “Our Pets” which opens portraying two chubby children scared of a white kitten with a pink bow round its neck, apparently, despite their reaction, far from threatening. The text states that the children are silly, and an unknown narrating voice says that at that age, around two years old, was not so fearful. And then the invitation to Mother Duck to come and see the beloved pet they had kept in a cage (Rasponi, 2007, p. 25): an adorable canary, which alas is lying feet up (fig. 5): “He cannot hop; he cannot sing!/He simply cannot do anything!/His little limbs are stiff as lead,/our darling bird is dead!/Oh Mother, get my stick and hat,/I’ll go and beat that pussy-cat!”.

Today, 117 years after the publication of this book, we know that not many picture books showed such evident scenes of death, while pedagogists and psychologists continuously state the need to talk of death, to understand it in the events we speak of, in the need to face even traumatic events together with children and be able to listen to them and even when they express negative and sad emotions, in order to be able to reassure them and embrace them in a dimension of acceptance and hope; leaving no space for anxiety. We also know that in those days children had direct and frequent contact with death.

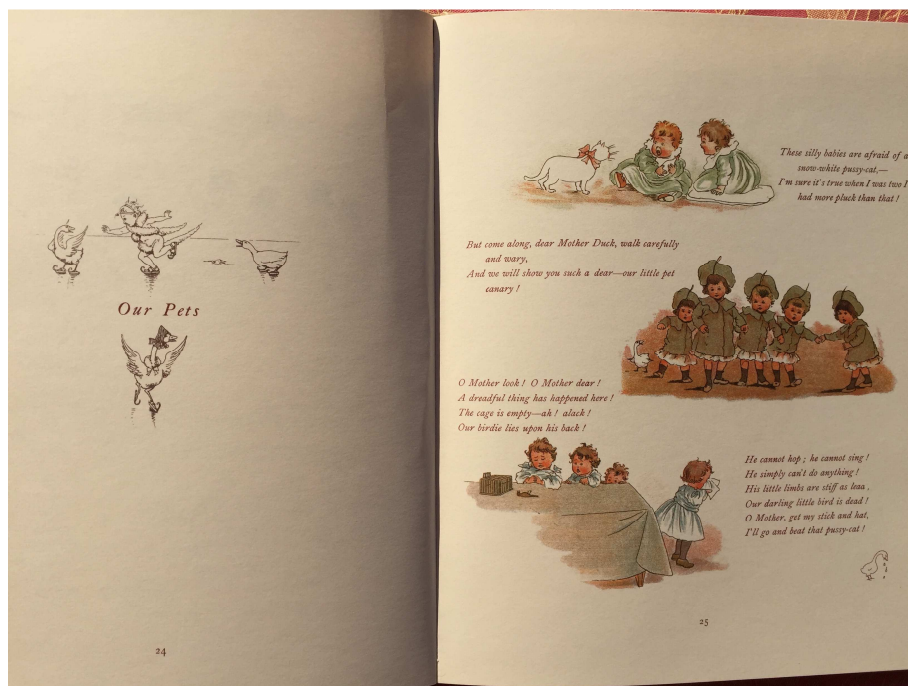


Figure 5 – “Our Pets”; *Mother Duck’s Children*

Here, with psychological skill, Gugù not only captures the ambivalence of sentiments and the life of relationships (including the unrelenting judgement towards infants or the desire to show off one’s own objects of affection) but also the impact with death, disappointment, anger which follow closely behind. The children now want to take it out on the cat, and want revenge. In speaking they bring shape, make dialogue, listening and acceptance possible, perhaps a catharsis, perhaps not violent (we hope, for the cat!).

The little bird lies on the table with its feet in the air. There is no room for interpretation, it is an anti-bird, it does not fly or sing but lies, heavy, stiff, immobile and silent. There are four child-witnesses, the first holds his

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hands in an almost ecstatic pose with a contrite yet peaceful expression, the second is shocked, the third can hardly reach the table and tries to see what's happening (we can see only his or her hands and eyes), the fourth looks the other way, sobbing into a handkerchief. Our Mother Duck, on the lower right corner of the page, is crying (fig. 5). Sadness and tears are understood and explained. In those days children almost certainly experienced the death of their peers, which was so frequent at that time, and knew the grief, tears and pain of adults, and were not excluded from them. Gugù makes all this into children's literature, as if restoring the wholeness of an existential, sociological and phenomenological painting of children, while the adults never appear.

And then we turn the page and find the sea, where everyone enjoys the beach, the water and the games in their own way. What we see is a portrait of "outdoor education", where children's dynamics stand out against the sea horizon.

There are rosy-cheeked girls with white bonnets, resting on a beach, which could be the one where the author spent her summer holidays. On the horizon, the peaceful outline of small sailing boats, in the foreground we can clearly imagine the sound of crying and screaming, of babes wanting a bottle, or something else. The text says that if Mother Duck could hear all these cries she would decide to disappear for years and years. She too gives an authentic voice by threatening to escape, she too, one might say, is human. Does she not remind us of Mary Poppins, who came on the wind and is always about to leave again?

The page tells us that small children are taken to the beach clothed, while the older ones, dressed in delightful rompers, dive into the sea from a makeshift diving board.

Two babes in tears, in another scene, probably point to the sea, as the rhymes say, speaking to Mother Duck, that they are not afraid of sharks or whales, and that they will never stop playing, even though they ask the duck to come with them so that they can show her that they can swim like she does. The title *Swimming lessons* is therefore ironic, as the picture shows tears, tantrums, fear and games, but certainly no swimming lessons (fig. 6).





Figure 6 – “The seashore – The swimming lessons”; *Mother Duck's Children*

Here the child's universe sees Gugù as a singer of delicious loyalty and purity: the page with the games, then the page with “forbidden games”, like climbing on the piano, blowing soap bubbles, fun things that must not be done. There is even a programmatic declaration of the children, in response to the reaction of the adults, perhaps a pedagogic hint, which may still be useful today. Why are fun things forbidden? They wonder in their little, playful manifesto in verse. Should we not revise these prohibitions, rather than deny such delicious games? “Isn't it hard that the jolliest games/End in Nurse calling us horrible names?/We'd be as good as they want us to be,/if we played bubbles from breakfast to tea!” (Rasponi, 2007, p. 31).

The Duck is the only one invited beyond the mirror of the children's world; she monitors and reigns silently over this often cancelled, removed, unknown kingdom, from which she emerges with precious and light-hearted narrative evidence. The whole child's day is made of games, right up to the evening: soap bubbles or dolls or balls, hoops to spin, trumpets to victimise the smaller children with, or simply puppets: they never want their play to end, yet the open wings say enough, it's time for bed, it's late, unfortunately it can't be afternoon forever.

There are games like the concert, playing the piano with shod feet and singing, or the circus, where they can imitate trapeze artists and acrobats, or the delightful, horrific games of little Tommy: chasing after the smaller ones with a horrendous mask, or playing doctor. Mother Duck is asked to open the door, when someone knocks and is very frightened. And they complain forever when, at six on a Saturday afternoon, they are forced to undress – what a horror! And have a bath, here they state and swear that when they grow up they will never ever wash again!

More than one hundred years have passed since Gugù's first infants, and today we could investigate the presence of infants and children drawn in picture books to build a rich bibliography.

Gugu's modern sensitivity heralded a discovery of forms and narration that, even between the pages, justify the existence of early childhood as a place worthy of being narrated, a light, crucial and golden age able to take its rightful place today in the history of children's literature.



Figure 7 – *Mother Duck's Children*; Cover

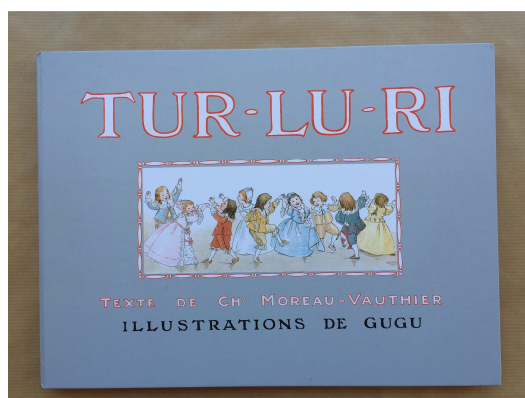


Figure 8 – *TUR-LU-RI*; Cover

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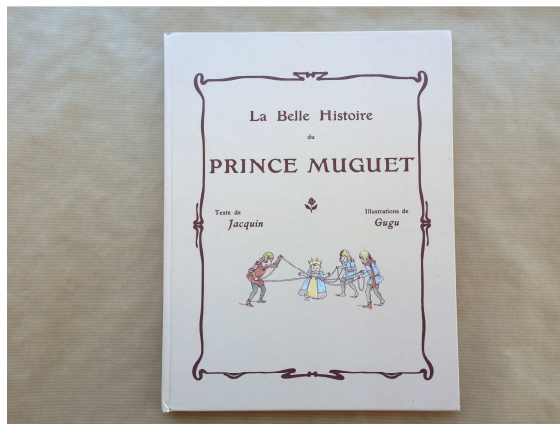


Figure 9 – La Belle Histoire du Prince Muguet



Alba rosea, «GdD», n. 2, a. IV, Firenze, 10 gennaio 1909. Cop. di Gicci (Augusta Rasponi del Sale).

Figure 10 – “Alba rosea”; 10 gennaio 1909; Il giornalino della domenica. Cover

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Literally “Academy of duck’s friends”; this playful title refers to an “academy”, a specific type of cultural or scientific institution created in the XVI Italian society, and last till contemporary times, a non-institutional association that group people who share the same interests at a high level.

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