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## «The Greatest Merit Of A Writer». Popular Literature, Youth Literature And Pedagogics In Italy In The Second Half Of Nineteenth Century.

Alberto Carli<sup>a\*</sup><sup>a</sup>*Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Educational, University of Molise, Campobasso 86100, Italy*

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### Abstract

The history of Italian popular literature during the second half of nineteenth century is studded with events which are not solely referable to aesthetics and the creative process, being instead integrated in a mission aimed at a social intent, with the full awareness of the authors. Still, their literary value is undeniable. Most notably, such works were made to order, with the primary purpose of requesting donations for charities. De Marchi, a famous writer from Lombardy, was involved in the development of social pedagogics literature, and his contribution to such genre wasn't self-satisfied, or vapid. Literary works, according to the authors' inspiration and their purposes, became an effective tool to cast in the collective imagination good values and shared teachings, making the most of the powerful tools of the thriving publishing industry.

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### 1. Introduction

The connection between literature and disease appears frequently within the laic humanitarianism rooted in Milan in the second half of Eighteenth century. Such correspondence is moulded from the deepest cultural attitude of Positivism, which encompassed also literary production. It must be noted, first, that modern hospitals were

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\* Alberto Carli. Tel.+ 331 6265157.

E-mail address: [alberto.carli@unimol.it](mailto:alberto.carli@unimol.it)

operating also in the social sphere. During the so called “heroic” age of modern science, Italian health care facilities developed the first buds of national modern clinic, introducing a thorough study of the hygiene and aiming at a «total education» (Bonetta, 1990, p. 11) in which health education played a pivotal role. Examples to be followed, or averted, were also taught by fictional tales, such as those by Paolo Mantegazza. Thanks to Positivism culture, illness, including its course and outcome, became together with its settings the driving force of a mechanism moving a literary genre intended primarily for entertainment and more specific genres. Some works, indeed, had very different and distant goals, yet they shared the same inspiration which had originated such “educational” productions. Their main purpose wasn’t *épater le bourgeois*, but rather approaching the *bourgeoisie*, convincing its members to donate funds thanks to fictional artifices. For instance, a large part of the works published in Milan, starting from 1879, on the «Nuovo Presagio» shared the goal of fulfilling artistic expression, yet they frequently resorted to themes and literary techniques *ad hoc*, aimed at arousing strong emotions, trying to promote financial support to the Pio Istituto dei Rachitici. (Polenghi, 2006, 2009). The gift book was a mean to raise donations for the institution established in 1874 by Gaetano Pini, physician and a philanthropist. The Pio Istituto nursed poor children suffering from rickets for free, supplying, besides treatment, an adequate education. Concerning this kind of institutes, it must be noted that, in Italy, «cities like Turin and Milan were among the very first ones in the Western world which opened a School for rachitic children, in the Seventies of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century» (Polenghi, 2009, p. 8). Moreover, «the story of the cure and care for these children, often coming from poor families, is linked with the development of orthopaedics as an academic discipline and is therefore connected with the history of university and medical sciences» (Polenghi, 2009, p. 8). Highlighting the nature of the Pio Istituto, its health and pedagogical intents, the large literary production published in the «Nuovo Presagio» allows us to identify the ever-intertwining literary, pedagogical and historical themes of that age, and moreover to sense its cultural complexity, whose fabric was made of different twines and exchanges woven together.

## 2. Rickets recounted

The authorial production made up of short stories, rhymes and poetry became therefore a philanthropic, literary and extra-literary tool. The different issues of «Nuovo Presagio» and the many gift books that followed suit since 1885 shared the same goals, representing a paradigm of the virtuous circle established between philanthropy and literature, abounding throughout the Nineteenth century. One of the most striking examples is the work of Emilio de Marchi, a famous writer, who authored several “coffee-table” books for the Pio Istituto dei Rachitici in Milan. De Marchi was involved in the development of social pedagogics literature, and his contribution to such genre wasn’t self-satisfied, or vapid. On the contrary, he was fully aware of his role as an educator, writing, in 1873, that «the greatest merit of a writer doesn’t lie in good ideas and noble feelings typical of any true gentleman; it is rather in his skill in instilling such things in the reader’s heart, so that they could take root and bear fruit». Rickets, which tortured the frail bones of the lower class kids, was one of the most recurring themes in popular and children’s literature of that time. De Marchi, acute observer of his town, couldn’t refrain to cast a light on the social and cultural meaning of the gift books published by the Pio Istituto established by Gaetano Pini. «This gift book for the stunted is a tradition enduring for a long time. However, as far as I know, nobody complains about it, but rather it seems to me that every year more and more people long for it. It becomes more and more desired, almost indispensable, like an old friendship. The old subscribers and donors see in it the chance to do some good; and I know that they feel good, doing so. Therefore, they perceive it as a pleasure, and at the same time as a need, for their heart. Those who see it for the first time are attracted by this rarity. Seeing such a masterfully printed and edited book, they’re naturally tempted to know more about people suffering from rickets and about its remedy». (De Marchi, 1894, p.5).

## 3. Emilio De Marchi and the Freemason philanthropy of Reason

The social commitment of De Marchi originates from his collaboration with popular literature publications having pedagogics aims, such as «Prime Letture», edited by Luigi Sailer since 1870, addressing children and parents, teachers and educators. De Marchi co-operated with «La famiglia e la scuola», edited by Ludovico Corio. Its front-page flaunted compasses and a triangle, well-known masonic symbols. If, at first sight, one could be astonished by the collaboration between De Marchi, a catholic, and such heterodox milieu, it must be noted that the

philanthropists from Lombardy were characterized by a noble and unconditional attitude driving them to reach for a wider agreement, acting across the aisle. The social commitment of De Marchi reached its apex in the local elections of 1891. He was nominated for the town council of Milan, in the ranks of *Circolo Liberale Indipendente*, coasting to an easy election, being conveniently located, in the political arena, close to the prominent members of a liberal *bourgeoisie* willing to bring together all the different sides of moderate parties. It was the very same class promoting institutions such as the Pio Istituto dei Rachitici. De Marchi, champion of that social class, conveyed his support and approval of such programmes, even when, as aforementioned, they originated from a political lobby quite far from his own ideas. The social issues beyond their political meanings become a De Marchi's view especially a matter of ethics. Renewing the relationships between different classes and pursuing the *concordia ordinum* is obviously desirable, yet the author places the revival of the individual conscience before the social matters. According to Spinazzola, De Marchi is driven by a «renewed consciousness of individual ethics» (Spinazzola, 1971, p. 133) rather than by the solicitation of social democracy. Gaetano Pini, on the contrary, is absolutely aligned with the principles and the thoughts of the lodge La Ragione, operating in Lombardy, which aimed at integrating the *concordia ordinum* with the individual philanthropic process pictured by the writer. The physician joined a lodge close to «democratic and garibaldian thought, clashing with the moderate, cavourian and spiritualist ideas, grounding its roots in the egalitarian and solidarity principles of the French Revolution, from which it borrowed the idea of ethical and physical regeneration [...]. The political redemption had to be the foundation of the construction of the new Italian citizen, recalling the Jacobin myth of the *homme régénéré*» (Polenghi, Gaetano Pini e il suo istituto, p. 206). However, both the physician and the writer, in different ways, champion the extolling of will, absolutized as a supreme value, which shall prefer «the pride coming from enduring the effort» to «the gratification for having fulfilled a goal» (Spinazzola, 1971, p. 129). It is clear, hence, that the *bourgeoisie* could reach its fulfillment, according to De Marchi, only through a beneficent attitude, managed wisely and with the aim of «making real the value of the individual», experiencing a grievous, yet essential, stress. Concerning this feeling, De Marchi wrote: «I wish to fulfill slowly the people's education, in the same way you take care of a seriously ill person. You don't cut off his head to treat his thoughts». (Ravasi, 2005, p. 8).

#### 4. The literary evolution of disability: an hypothesis

The writer signed several titles, amongst the monographical gift books which would eventually take the place of «Nuovo Presagio», keeping its yearly frequency and the same social and economic purposes. In 1892 De Marchi wrote *Le quattro stagioni* for the gift book of Pio Istituto; in 1894 he signed *I nostri figliuoli*, and in 1899, a few months shy of his death, the verses of *Vecchie cadenze e nuove* were reprinted. At the beginning of *I nostri figliuoli* the writer leads the readers through the streets of the old, and hidden, Milan, eventually reaching the institute established by Pini. «At a first glance, you'd take it for a villa [...] Here are [...] little boys and girls, around seven years old. One has a weary and wrecked posture, another has a large head swaying on his chest, there's one who's dangling on a side. One is dragging himself, clutching his little chair, another walks on clutches, one is sleeping wearing a gloomy look, one is staring at the sun in a sort of stupefied stillness, there's another who seems to be waiting for someone who will never come [...]. Those are ill-conceived frames, often encasing fine and delicate souls, doomed to grow little by little in a narrow and stiff body. Sometimes, their souls grow much more than their body could ever hold» (De Marchi, 1894, p.6). We deem these «ill-conceived» bodies as heirs and descendants, by then almost in the twentieth century, of a Romantic mechanism of fascination and repulsion between *sublime* and *anti-sublime* that, through Scapigliatura and the earliest Realism from Lombardy, reaches interesting themes, both literary and pedagogic, which will be typical of twentieth century.

#### 5. Conclusions

Also in Italy «the cliché of the nasty and idle deformed still survived, but alongside came the image of the poor lame, good-hearted and kind» (Polenghi, 2009, p. 14). Recognizing in rickets the hint and condition of an unique spiritual strenght comes naturally. Gaetano Pini himself maintained several times the high intellectual and human resources of rachitici. Although in 1899, on the dawn of the new century, Sofia Bisi Albini clamoured for the «exclusion of mental handicapped from public school» on the pages of «Rivista delle signorine» (Polenghi, Gaetano Pini e il suo istituto, p. 221<sup>n</sup>), just one year before, in 1898, in the volume *I rachitici nella storia e nella leggenda*, edited by Bianchi, Negri wrote how the human intelligence often «shone of the brightest light in a pitiful and faulty

case» and, with reference of the work by Amelia Bianchi, glossed: «I'll just say that reading a book like this enhances and deepens the compassion towards many unfortunates who have been struck so cruelly by the very same fate that still has given them [...] such a precious treasure of intelligence and virtue» (Negri, 1899, p.6).

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