

The origins of the internationalisation
of Montessori pedagogy:
the ascetic circle of Montesca
*Els orígens de la internacionalització
de la pedagogia Montessori:
el Cercle Ascètic de Montesca*

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RESUM

L'article destaca el paper del cercle “La Montesca” i de la principal protagonista, la baronessa Alice Hallgarten Franchetti (1874-1911), en l'inici de la primera internacionalització de la pedagogia Montessori. Explorant les connexions culturals establertes al voltant d'aquell cercle d'Umbria, una autèntica cruïlla d'ànimes refinades que suggereix una atmosfera de retir espiritual, és possible descobrir una empremta profètica que imprimeix la confiança immediata mostrada amb el repte de Montessori en l'educació, dedicat a impulsar una àmplia reforma espiritual. La “flama franciscana” que anima la conducta d'Alice Hallgarten Franchetti, en el marc d'un extens horitzó de devoció als ideals de l'elevació humana i la fraternitat universal, reflecteix la recerca d'una llum espiritual al voltant de la qual els sentiments modernistes, neocristians i teosòfics entrellaçaven els seus impulsos motivadors i llenguatges culturals.

L'important suport proporcionat en primer lloc per l'Alice Hallgarten per a l'exportació de la pedagogia Montessori s'ha de llegir i valorar com el signe d'una confiança més gran en l'elevació humana, basada en la confiança en els tresors secrets de l'infant i orientada vers un sentit còsmic de l'espiritualitat.

PARAULES CLAU: Montessori, Modernisme, Neocristianisme, Teosofia, Escola activa.

ABSTRACT

The essay highlights the role of “La Montesca” circle and its main protagonist, Baroness Alice Hallgarten Franchetti (1874-1911), in triggering the initial internationalisation of Montessori pedagogy. Exploring the cultural connections gathered around the Umbrian circle—a true meeting point for refined souls suggesting an atmosphere of spiritual retreat—it is possible to discern a prophetic mark establishing the immediate confidence shown in Montessori’s challenge to education, devoted to driving wide-ranging spiritual reform. The “Franciscan flame” underlining Alice Hallgarten Franchetti’s approach within an extensive devotion to the ideals of human elevation and universal brotherhood reflects the pursuit of a spiritual light, around which modernist, neo-Christian, theosophical feelings interwove motivating drives and cultural languages. In this sense, the formidable support initially provided by Alice Hallgarten Franchetti in exporting Montessori’s pedagogy should be read and valued as the sign of a larger belief in human elevation, based on a confidence in the secret treasures of the child and embracing a cosmic sense of spirituality.

KEY WORDS: Montessori, Modernism, Neo-Christianity, Theosophy, Active School.

RESUMEN

El artículo destaca el papel del cenáculo de “La Montesca” y de su personaje principal, la baronesa Alice Hallgarten Franchetti (1874-1911), en el inicio de la primera internacionalización de la pedagogía Montessori. Explorando las conexiones culturales establecidas en torno a ese círculo de Umbría, un verdadero punto de encuentro de almas refinadas que sugieren un ambiente de recogimiento espiritual, es posible descubrir una huella profética que imprime la confianza inmediata demostrada con el desafío de Montessori en la educación, orientada a impulsar una amplia reforma espi-

ritual. La “llama franciscana” que anima la conducta de Alicia Hallgarten Franchetti, en el marco de un extenso horizonte de devoción a los ideales de la elevación humana y la fraternidad universal, refleja la búsqueda de una luz espiritual en torno a la cual los sentimientos modernistas, neocristianos y teosóficos entrelazaron impulsos motivadores y lenguajes culturales. En este sentido, el formidable apoyo brindado primeramente por Alicia Hallgarten Franchetti para la exportación de la pedagogía Montessori debe ser leído y valorado como el signo de una mayor confianza en la elevación humana, basada en la confianza en los tesoros secretos del niño y encaminada a abrazar un sentido cósmico de la espiritualidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Montessori, Modernismo, Neocristianismo, Teosofía, Escuela activa

I. SPIRITUAL FERVOUR AND MYSTICAL ECSTASY: THE UMBRIAN CRADLE OF MONTESSORIAN FORTUNE

Before going into the subject of the present work, it would seem appropriate to develop certain preliminary considerations. These will be necessary for defining some historical, cultural and even geographical frames of reference, and also help to better clarify the aims of this essay.

From a historical standpoint, focusing on a theme of analysis essentially connected to issues regarding the initial internationalisation of Montessori pedagogy—and the recovery of a distinctive cultural background of intellectual circles gathered around Villa Montesca and mainly enlivened by the figure of Baroness Alice Hallgarten Franchetti—is not aimed at simply bringing to light a prominent reason to clarify situations that objectively determined the successful international launch of the Montessori Method.¹ The aim

¹ In order to begin framing the cultural background that binds the development of Montessori history with the spiritualistic impulses of early 20th century culture, including the relational environments close to Montesca, we would suggest firstly looking at DE GIORGI, Fulvio. “Maria Montessori modernista”. *Annali di storia dell’educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche*, 16 (2009), p. 199-216. In turn, in order to begin drawing a portrait of the notable cultural figure represented by Alice Hallgarten Franchetti within the framework of the powerful spiritualistic ferment in the transitional period the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we particularly recommend: FOSSATI, Roberta, *Élites femminili e nuovi modelli religiosi nell’Italia tra Otto e Novecento*. Urbino: QuattroVenti, 1997; BUSEGHIN, Maria Luciana. *Alice Hallgarten Franchetti, un modello di donna e di imprenditrice nell’Italia tra ‘800 e ‘900*. Selci-Lama: Pliniana, 2013; BUSEGHIN, Maria Luciana. «Introduzione», *Cara Marietta...Lettere di Alice Hallgarten Franchetti (1901-1911)*. Città di

behind such an historiographical approach particularly involves highlighting an ascetic-religious stamp that distinctly characterised the conditions within which Montessori education became a consolidated method and qualified its release into international circulation.

It is remarkable that this process emerged within a fully original environment, emblematically located in Umbria—a region historically recognised as a land of saints, powerful intimate conversions and spiritual retreats—and at a time where contemporary cultural assets deeply combined and committed to enshrine a principle of ideal sublimation in understanding the evolutionary direction of living beings.

By focusing the gaze on the universe of spirituality and mysticism that circulated around Villa Montesca in the early years of the 20th century, and on the wider circle of prophetic suggestions and charismatic magnetism given off by the great soul of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti²—herein fully considered as elements capable of triggering a true workshop of “new spirituality”—the intention is to establish a useful support to further understand many of the reasons that historically underpinned the commitment to the internationalisation process.

The overview proposed in this essay, highlighting a reason for an immediate harmony with the code of cosmic spirituality that organically links Montesca to the desire to embrace Montessori pedagogy, constitutes a proposed interpretation able to follow the dynamics of internationalisation of the new Montessori educational principles, in terms of developing a consistent cultural subject. In this regard, the encouragement given to any educational method historically worked as a way to promote a deep regeneration of education, in harmony with the awareness of a common destiny, and encourage education reform based on a religious sense of universal sympathy.³

Castello: Tela Umbra, 2002, p.22-84.

² FOSSATI, Roberta. *Verso l'ignoto. Donne moderniste di primo Novecento*. Florence: Nerbini, 2020, p.66-70.

³ For different interpretative approaches delving into the religious-spiritual profiles of Montessori training and on the immanentist implications of a cosmic religiosity that has been looked at in-depth in recent studies, see DE GIORGI, Fulvio. “Maria Montessori tra modernisti, antimodernisti e gesuiti”, FABBRI, Fabio (Ed.). *Maria Montessori e la società del suo tempo*. Rome: Castelvecchi, 2020, p.37-88; RAIMONDO, Rossella. “Origini, caratterizzazioni e sviluppi dell’educazione cosmica in Maria Montessori”, *Rivista di Storia dell’Educazione*, 1 (2019), p. 69-79; MORETTI, Erica; DIEGUEZ, Alejandro Mario. “Il difficile equilibrio tra cattolicesimo e teosofia”, FOSCHI, Renato; MORETTI, Erica; TRABALZINI, Paola (Eds.), *Il destino di Maria Montessori: promozioni, rielaborazioni, censure, opposizioni al Metodo*. Rome: Fefè Editore, 2019, p. 95-112; RAIMONDO, Rossella. “Origini, caratterizzazioni e sviluppi dell’educazione cosmica in Maria Montessori”,

Thus, the historiographical line taken in this study proposes to confer a meaningful recognition of the role historically exercised by the Montesca setting, which was fully relevant not only in promoting the emergence of Montessori education, but also in enhancing certain intrinsic spiritual figures and in restoring the strength of a cultural project. This project aimed to uncover a keystone in childhood, with a view to fulfilling a prophecy centred around the foreshadowing of a new humanism that structurally reformed and actively pursued its objectives through familiarising education with the development of a cosmic awareness.⁴

On the basis of these assumptions, it is legitimate to hope that this work will contribute to develop a different picture of an emblematic site such as “La Montesca”,⁵ which was originally one of the first international bases spreading public consideration of the Montessori phenomenon.

By virtue of the protection and encouragement found at the noble estate of the Franchetti Barons, promotion for the Montessori method would see greater sympathy, enthusiasm, recommendations, concrete support and the establishment of relationship networks. Nonetheless, this investment of material and intellectual energy would not have occurred if the method had not been consciously identified as containing a pedagogical project capable of steering a stream of spiritual energy, akin to the feeling of starting a new stage of civilisation.⁶

In other words, by proposing an expressly suggestive comparison, it is legitimate to hypothesise that in time—given the specific thrust of a profound cultural reform in pedagogy and, therefore, the ability to symbolically represent a value of epochal renewal in education—the Montesca circle will be recognised as akin to the Platonic academies of the Renaissance.

The comparison may at first appear forced if we consider the less than purely academic aspect of Montesca. However, since it does embody a place of

Studi sulla formazione, 21, 2, 2018, p. 249.-260; CIVES, Giacomo. “Scienza, spiritualità e laicità in Maria Montessori”, CIVES, Giacomo; TRABALZINI, Paola (Eds.), *Maria Maria Montessori tra scienza, spiritualità e azione sociale*. Rome: Anicia, 2017, p.81-120; and DE SANCTIS, Leonardo (Ed.), *La cura dell'anima in Maria Montessori: l'educazione morale, spirituale e religiosa dell'infanzia*. Rome: Fefè Editore, 2016.

⁴ MORETTI, Erica. “Pedagogia della terra. Gli esperimenti educativi di Alice Hallgarten e Leopoldo Franchetti”, *Zapruder. Storie in movimento*. 26, 2011, p. 140-145.

⁵ For further information, we would recommend FOSSATI, Roberta. “Alice Hallgarten Franchetti e le sue iniziative alla Montesca”, *Fonti e Documenti*, 16-17, 1987-88, p. 269-347.

⁶ STANDING, Edwin Mortimer. *Maria Montessori, her Life and Work*. New York: Plume Printing, 1988, p. 57.

qualified intellectual encounters, it certainly reveals itself to be a place of study and an acolyte of elected spirits dedicated to cultural development, as well as a meeting point for souls dedicated to introspection, a focus on the inner self and asceticism.⁷ In turn, the comparison may also be useful if we consider, above all, the aspect of wisdom attributed to a pedagogical investigation of the soul and the religious-sacred value attributed to unmasking the primitive expression of childhood spirit, with regard to which an elective investment in Montessori education acquires a very specific significance. If this pedagogy was deemed worthy of welcome, acceptance, funding and cultural dissemination through appropriate international channels, it is precisely because it was deemed capable of rediscovering and celebrating protection for a spiritual treasure in childhood able to transform the value of education, combining the goal of educational commitment with an intention to trigger and continually nourish a vibrant inner spark in the child.

The comparison is even worthwhile in the sense of celebrating widespread spirituality: the perceived substantial similarity of Montessori pedagogy to a religious sense of life, extended to a perception of a pulsating soul in the universe which is instinctively pervasive and present within multiple phenomena of nature. Thus, it should be placed in the foreground for historically clarifying a cultural challenge, where Montescia would be an original centre of international outreach for this pedagogical approach.⁸

This new pedagogy, ready to follow worldwide paths, would, in view of its sensational international successes, seem to have found unique fertile ground in Umbria: a land nourished by the noble tradition of sacred stories and symbolically depicting a region of choice for the fulfilment of forms of ascetic retreat and practices of spiritual exercise. In the same way, it would have found the first populariser and supporter in disseminating the new pedagogical method “unveiled” by Dr Montessori,⁹ given the enthusiastic trust placed in it by Baroness Franchetti’s fervent spirit of ascetic religiosity.

⁷ BUSEGHIN, Maria Luciana. “La rete sociopedagogica di Alice Hallgarten Franchetti tra femminismo, istitutrici e maestre”, NARDI, Isabella; VALOROSO, Antonella (Eds.), *Governanti e istitutrici tra Ottocento e Novecento. Ruolo sociale e immagini letterarie*. Bologna: Pendragon, 2020, p. 107-138.

⁸ BUSEGHIN, Maria Luciana. “Leopoldo Franchetti, Alice Hallgarten e Maria Montessori: un sogno comune di educazione innovativa”, FABBRI, Fabio. (Ed.) *Maria Montessori e la società del suo tempo*. op.cit., p. 154-171.

⁹ This essay will mention the specific function performed by Alice Hallgarten Franchetti in protecting and supporting the fortunes of Montessori pedagogy several times, as well as provide several bibliographic references. However, in the meantime we would initially recommend the valuable testimony and rich

Nevertheless, at this point it would be advisable to look at concrete elements and historically well-defined circumstances that justify this interpretation.

2. COLONIES OF PILGRIMS IN THE PARADISE OF ITALY: THE MYSTIQUE OF THE LAND OF FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND THE NEW SPIRITUAL WAVE IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Before moving on to analyse certain interesting circumstances leading to the internationalisation process of Montessori pedagogy, one should also highlight some fundamental steps in Montessori's biography that testify to the special material and symbolic value of her stay at Villa Montesca, and the hospitality received at the Franchetti estate. As is well known, these are absolutely essential steps in the establishment of Montessori pedagogy, alongside the striving for accomplished internationalisation.¹⁰

It is here indeed where, at the specific invitation and warm suggestion of the Franchetti, Maria Montessori would have worked on writing out the regulatory ideas and meaning of her pedagogical principles, which had already thrived and been tested brilliantly at the first Children's Houses in Italy, thus consolidating the writing of *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica*.¹¹ Moreover, it is also here that the soon-to-be renowned Italian pedagogue undertook an essential activity for the spread of her method, comprising an initial first training course for teachers organised in line with her principles of scientific pedagogy.

The Umbrian estate of the Franchetti was in many ways set to become a fundamental setting where Montessori pedagogy bloomed: it was the physical location where the Montessori Method was drawn up and where a training experience was organised for the first time, leading to the birth of new educational professionalism based on Montessori pedagogical principles.¹²

pedagogical analyses documented in LOMBARDO RADICE, Giuseppe. "I fanciulli di Alice Franchetti", *Athena Fanciulla. Scienza e poesia della scuola serena*. Florence: Bemporad, 1926, p. 9-61.

¹⁰ KRAMER, Rita. *Maria Montessori. A Biography*. Boston: From Capo Press, 1988, p.136-145; BABINI, Valeria Paola; LAMA, Luisa. *Una donna nuova. Il femminismo scientifico di Maria Montessori*. Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2000, p. 253-272

¹¹ DE SALVO, Dario. "*Lei può morire e tutto questo andrebbe perduto*. Maria Montessori alla Montesca", *Quaderni di Intercultura*, X, 2018, p. 210-217.

¹² SCAGLIA, Evelina. *La scoperta della prima infanzia. Per una storia della pedagogia 0-3*. Vol.2 *Da Locke alla contemporaneità*. Rome: Edizioni Studium, p.183-184; HONEGGER FRESCO, Grazia. *Maria Montessori, una storia attuale. La vita, il pensiero, le testimonianze*. Turin: Il leone verde, 2018, p.93-95; GIOVETTI, Paola,

Likewise, and alongside these truly formidable experiences in Montessori's biography, it is also widely known that the Umbrian town housing Villa Montesca, Città di Castello, would publish the first edition of *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica applicato all'educazione infantile nelle Case dei Bambini*, as well as the first reports on the initial scientific pedagogy course held at the villa.¹³

Rita Kramer, in her well-documented and reasoned Montessori biography, pointed out the fortunate alignment in a favourable conjuncture between the work of the pedagogue, caught in a crucial moment of promising development, and the setting of Montesca, specifying that she would have found there “the right condition for a piece of work that would carry her name around the world”.¹⁴

In this sense, the considerable gap between the intuitively provincial location in Umbria, where decisive steps were taken to achieve a qualitative leap in the history of Montessori pedagogy, and the destiny of these principles to spread internationally from this place and its protagonists, primarily Alice Hallgarten Franchetti, may at first appear dissonant and incongruous.

Nonetheless, this dissonance is more apparent than real, and whose impression should be appropriately inverted in considering the lively paths of confluence between the social circles operating in the “province” and the “great world”.¹⁵ Moreover, the consideration of these connections acquires greater cogency through the value of attraction exercised by the Umbrian setting on a truly cosmopolitan intellectual profile, given its status as a pole of attraction as a mythical and almost enchanted location of primordial sacredness.

Sir James Renell Rodd, a senior British diplomat serving in Rome, wrote about constant and repeated stays in Umbria with family, friends and his stable network of international relations. He recounted the inexorable attraction of a place of spiritual concentration, an extraordinary capacity for regeneration and recovering inner serenity, and enjoying a sense of harmony and peace; providing perhaps a succinct depiction of the sense of alignment between high

Maria Montessori. Una biografia. Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2009, p. 47-57.

¹³ MONTESSORI, Maria. *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica applicato all'educazione infantile nelle Case dei Bambini.* Città di Castello: Lapi, 1909; MONTESSORI, Maria. *Inaugurazione del Corso di Pedagogia Scientifica.* Città di Castello: Tipografia Cooperativa, 1909.

¹⁴ KRAMER, Rita. *Maria Montessori. A Biography.* op. cit. p.137.

¹⁵ WELCH, Rhiannon Noel. *Vital Subjects. Race and Biopolitics in Italy, 1860-1920.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016, p.67-71

aspirations of an ideal order belonging to a prestigious intellectual élite and an experience that diffusely embodied forms of religious pilgrimage: “Umbria is the paradise of Italy”.¹⁶

These words are imbued with additional specific importance as they express the thoughts of the British ambassador stationed in Rome throughout the early years of the century up to the First World War.¹⁷ He is a particularly interesting figure in the story of the international fortunes of the Montessori Method for having embraced and actively promoted the establishment of one of the first Children’s Houses built in the Italian capital, hosted within the British embassy.¹⁸

Such testimonies are even more valuable when better contextualised in reference to circles, groups and close interpersonal ties around charismatic personalities who, again in Umbria, found a decisive meeting of minds. This must have been the case, for example, of the Protestant theologian Paul Sabatier, who had close ties with Alice Hallgarten Franchetti and was a figurehead for the surprising excitement manifested by a religiosity identified with Franciscan-inspired spirituality.¹⁹ This spirituality linked to the myth of the most emblematic saint of Italy and prophetically announced the affirmation of a new eminently modern model of religious conscience that identified the poor man of Assisi as a symbolic icon bearing a message of human liberation.²⁰

¹⁶ RENNELL RODD, James. *Social and Diplomatic Memories*, III vol. (1902-1919), (text originally published in 1925). Auckland: Pickle Partners Publishing, 2013, p. 319 (e-book edition).

¹⁷ POIDOMANI, Giancarlo. *Un inglese a Roma: l'ambasciatore britannico sir James Rennell Rodd e l'Italia (1858-1941)*. Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2020.

¹⁸ KRAMER, Rita. *Maria Montessori. A Biography*. op. cit. p. 136.

¹⁹ The figure of Sabatier is particularly known for initiating a modern reinterpretation of religious themes linked to Franciscanism and for the strong influence of his studies on orienting modernist movements at the beginning of the 20th century, including in Italy. On the relative aspects, including conceivable pedagogical interest and in terms of connections to the development of Montessori pedagogy, see SABATIER, Paul. *Vie de S. François d'Assise*. Paris: Fischbacher, 1894; DE GIORGI, Fulvio, *Rileggere Maria Montessori. Modernismo cattolico e rinnovamento educativo*, MONTESSORI, Maria, *Dio e il bambino e altri scritti inediti*, Brescia: La Scuola, 2013, p. 5-104; DE GIORGI, Fulvio. “Neofrancescanesimo e misticismo”, *Millenarismo educatore: mito gioachimita e pedagogia civile in Italia dal Risorgimento al fascismo*. Rome: Viella, 2010, p. 200-205; GIOVAGNOLI, Agostino. “Amicizie moderniste”, SCARAMUZZA, Emma (Ed.), *Politica e amicizia. Relazioni, conflitti e differenze di genere (1860-1915)*. Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2010, p. 205-216; GAIOTTI DE BIASE, Paola. “Introduzione alla nuova edizione”, *Le origini del movimento cattolico femminile*, Brescia: Morcelliana, 2002, p. XIX-LXI; BEDESCHI, Lorenzo. “Circoli modernizzanti a Roma a cavallo del secolo”, *Studi Romani*. XVII, 2, 1970, p. 189-215.

²⁰ SCOPPOLA, Pietro. *Crisi modernista e rinnovamento cattolico*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1969, p. 234-235.

Within an ecumenical reinterpretation of the figure of the saint proffered to an intelligentsia eager to recognise itself in joining an impulse of religiosity capable of making the inner strings of the soul vibrate, Francis was no longer just described as a saint belonging to the tradition of a specific faith, but was seen as the expression of an heroic impetus of human conscience and an emblem of liberation that spoke in the name of all humanity.

The paradigm of new religiosity converged in the icon of Francis, the result of inner-worldly asceticism and the maturation of a correspondent authentic feeling of conscience in light of a discovery of the intimate communion between all men and living beings. This discovery could only lead to the transfiguration of the original bond of solidarity into a bond of universal brotherhood, nourished by the ultimate awareness that we cannot save ourselves unless we save others.²¹

The echo of Franciscan spirituality, understood in the sense of a wave of revival of hidden Platonic suggestions enlivened by the representation of the transfiguring and overwhelmingly attractive force of Good, and polarised by the intuition of a secret mutual love—widely operating among all living beings—thus inspired a spiritualistic “new wave” phenomenon, where “La Montesca” stood as a charming sanctuary in the early 20th century.

The integration of the “Montesca phenomenon” in the context of impulses that encouraged the launch of modernist tendencies also indicates the acquisition of a whole symbolic universe deduced from Christian symbolism, within the context of non-confessional religiosity. This was definitively idealised in the primal sentiment of Good and placed at the service of the evolution of human conscience, as well as directed towards the growth of a new civilisation of universal brotherhood, generously dedicated to solidarity and sensitive to charitable dedication to the needs of others.²²

On the embers of 18th-19th-century materialism, as well as those of a feeling of disappointment and despair at the conclusions of its latest versions linked to the purely naturalistic interpretations of Darwinian evolutionism, the religious “new wave” of the dawning century intended to return to the task of giving a strong significance to human education as discovery, growth

²¹ In the original Italian version: “non ci possiamo salvare se non salvando gli altri”. SABATIER, Paolo. *Vita di San Francesco d'Assisi*. Rome: Loescher, 1896, p. XIX.

²² FOSSATI, Roberta. “Dal salotto al cenacolo: intellettualità femminile e modernismo”, BETRI, Maria Luisa; BRAMBILLA, Elena. (Eds.) *Salotti e ruolo femminile in Italia tra fine Seicento e primo Novecento*. Venice: Marsilio, 2004, p. 455-473.

and care of the inner soul, and the celebration of evolutionary movement of the spirit.²³

It comprised a pedagogy based on an awareness of the evolutionary orientation of life towards the blossoming of a psychic dimension, capable of returning to the revelation of consciousness itself through the observation of a well-established tendency of the soul to pursue a reflection of inner light. Similarly, this intuition led to enhancing the ability to feel the flow of a communion stream that deeply binds each individual personality to the whole universe: a spark that is part of a whole.

In this sense, the spirit of the Montessori lectures held in the first introductory course to the Montessori Method of scientific pedagogy could highlight a substantial coherence and congruity with respect to a cultural atmosphere that reflected the flashes of an absolutely typical spiritual context, pervaded by mystical echoes and prophetic ferments.

Rereading the passages, one senses the harmony of an evidently participatory identification framework in its symbolic references and figurative reference codes, whose recipients were called to assimilate its meanings. The code reproduced religious inspiration oriented towards the goal of human elevation and evidently belonged to an ideal heritage shared both by the promoters and generous organisers of the course, i.e. the Franchetti, and by the trainee teachers: devoted listeners gathered at the Montesca Castle as pilgrims, moved by a great internal fire, and eager to listen to the voice of the child's soul and its educational destinies in the pedagogical communication created by the method.²⁴

The setting of the inaugural lecture given by Dr Montessori clearly aligned with prophetic intent:²⁵ "I am not the one who has created something new in the art of educating. It is the spirit of the child that has revealed itself to me and that I was able to contemplate in its manifestation."²⁶

²³ RIGOBELLO, Armando. "Lo spiritualismo del Novecento", SCIACCA, Michele Federico, (Ed.), *Grande Antologia Filosofica*, vol. XXVI. Milan: Marzorati, 1976, p.456-487. Sui riflessi di questo sentimento presenti e diffusi nella pedagogia Montessori: PESCI, Furio. "The moral and religious education in the work of Maria Montessori", *History of Education & Children's Literature*, VI, 2, 2011, p. 159-167.

²⁴ MONTESSORI, Maria. *Inaugurazione del Corso di Pedagogia Scientifica*. Op. cit., p. 7-8.

²⁵ O'DONNELL, Marion. *Maria Montessori*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007, p. 28-29.

²⁶ In the original Italian version: "Non sono io quella che ha creato qualcosa di nuovo nell'arte di educare, ma è lo spirito infantile che si è rivelato a me e che io ho saputo contemplare nella sua manifestazione". MONTESSORI, Maria. *Inaugurazione del Corso di Pedagogia Scientifica*. Op. cit., p. 8.

Thus, while the status granting scientific authority to the “Dottoressa” to train teachers in following the new method used in the Children’s Houses certainly covered her competence in medical science and in the relative hygienic applications regarding the development of children’s minds,²⁷ it is also true that an attribute of Montessori pedagogical teaching concentrated around a capacity for clairvoyance, entirely *sui generis*, into the constructive powers of the human soul, as well as the revelatory clarity of profound intuitions that recognised the primal place of this constructive capacity in children.²⁸

In turn, the sublimity that the method applied in the Children’s Houses, which generated so much amazement in external observers due to its ability to determine and achieve surprising education results, was exalted in terms of possibly offering those same observers a singular experience of spiritual purification. Certainly, the understanding of that regenerative power could not be more transparent and clearer than in the eyes of an elevated spirit, now closer to the celestial than the human: “many have visited the Children’s House to restore themselves in that spiritual bath, but only the angelic B. Franchetti understood that that water would have revitalised humanity. Today here we see the first implementation.”²⁹

3. A BROTHERHOOD OF MAN: THE MEANING OF ALICE HALLGARTEN FRANCHETTI’S COMMITMENT TO THE INTERNATIONAL DISSEMINATION OF MONTESSORI EDUCATION

Maria Montessori’s words cited above are direct proof of the full consideration gained by her educational work and her methods which, as she stated, “tend only to guard the spiritual fire of men and save their true nature”,³⁰ under the auspices of Baroness Franchetti. They also disclose the

²⁷ PIRONI, Tiziana. “L’osservazione per Maria Montessori, alla base di una nuova professionalità educativa”. PIRONI, Tiziana; ZUCCHI, Lucia (Eds.), *Maria Montessori al nido tra storia e attualità*. Parma: Edizioni Junior, 2018, p. 27-39.

²⁸ PIRONI, Tiziana. “La Casa dei Bambini di Maria Montessori”. *Percorsi di pedagogia al femminile. Dall’Unità d’Italia al secondo dopoguerra*, Rome: Carocci, 2014, p. 45-87.

²⁹ In the original Italian: “Molti hanno visitato la Casa dei Bambini per ritemperarsi in quel bagno spirituale, ma solo l’angelica B. Franchetti ha compreso che quell’acqua avrebbe rinvigorito l’umanità. Oggi qui ne vediamo la prima attuazione”. MONTESSORI, Maria. *Inaugurazione del Corso di Pedagogia Scientifica*. Op. cit., p. 37.

³⁰ In the original Italian: “non tendono ad altro che a custodire il fuoco spirituale degli uomini e a

sense of a sincere confidence the Baroness had in an educational practice which, evidently, in her eyes was structurally integrated into a pure religious drive. In short, a religious motivation that is free from restricted identifications within defined creeds: one that is indeed universalising and ecumenical, composed into an immanent consciousness of the sacred; vibrant and resonant in the pursuit of Good and in the search for Truth; and the loving practice of sharing needs in service of others.

This life practice was embodied by a soul consumed by a convulsive urge in search of the sacred and pursued with the framework of an asceticism that was not merely contemplative but rather filled with the desire to disseminate good works. It certainly highlights an important element of the generous dedication of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti in spearheading an apostolic mission in favour of spreading Montessori pedagogy.³¹

Giuseppe Lombardo Radice³², an excellent witness to the early 20th-century events in Italian pedagogy who was open to the teachings of New Education, would later recall—and then also vigorously denounce and protest—the debt of recognition contracted by Maria Montessori with Alice Hallgarten Franchetti for endorsement, patronage, promotion and advertising in appropriate spaces of specialised pedagogical culture. The support of this woman of exceptional intellect with the ability to aggregate intellectual forces and a capacity for cultural initiatives would have been essentially immeasurable³³. Moreover, as Lombardo Radice would have argued with

salvarne la loro vera natura". MONTESSORI, Maria. *Inaugurazione del Corso di Pedagogia Scientifica*. Op. cit., p. 66.

³¹ On these aspects, see FOSSATI, Roberta. "L'impegno sociale dell'Unione per il Bene", BARTOLONI, Stefania (Ed.). *Per le strade del mondo. Laiche e religiose fra Otto e Novecento*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007, p. 313-336.

³² On these aspects, see CHIOSSO, Giorgio. "La pedagogia cattolica e il movimento dell'Educazione Nuova", PAZZAGLIA, Luciano (Ed.) *Chiesa, cultura e educazione in Italia tra le due guerre*. Brescia: La Scuola, 2003, p.287-303; CIVES, Giacomo. *Attivismo e antifascismo in Giuseppe Lombardo Radice*. Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1983, p. 141-159. Also see TODARO, Letterio. "'L'Educazione Nazionale' come Organo dell'Educazione Nuova (1927-1933): aspirazioni, idealità, contraddizioni e fatali approdi di un giornale pedagogico controcorrente nell'Italia fascista", ALBANA, Mela; SORACI, Cristina (Eds.), *Amicitia res plurima continet. Omaggio a Febronja Elia*. Acireale-Rome: Bonanno, 2018, p. 433- 456. Lastly, also, SCAGLIA, Evelina. "Giuseppe Lombardo Radice e il suo tempo. Ragioni di una nuova pubblicazione", *Una pedagogia dell'ascesa. Giuseppe Lombardo Radice e il suo tempo*. Rome: Edizioni Studium, 2021, p. 7-42.

³³ In this regard, we should recall the harsh controversy raised by Lombardo Radice against the ingratitude shown by Montessori for the memory of that debt contracted with her first patron. In the third edition of the method, published in 1926, not only was the initial dedication to the Baroness removed but any sign of a connection with a pedagogical imprint derived from contact with Alice was also missing: LOMBARDO RADICE, Giuseppe. "La nuova edizione del 'Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica' di Maria

perfect precision, a significant portion of that debt was to be ascribed to the generosity of the Baroness in working tirelessly to spread the Montessori Method outside Italy.³⁴

But before proceeding to recover the extensive meaning behind the gates opened by Alice Hallgarten Franchetti for the internationalisation of the method, it is worth dwelling on some notes of merit reported by Lombardo Radice, at least on two fronts: one relating to the underlining of the Franciscan vocation operating at the basis of the practical and philanthropic commitments pursued by the Baroness; the other related to a true pedagogical calibre associated with this vocation, so much so that Alice herself is deserving of inclusion among the great revolutionary spirits and protagonists of the New Education movement, which for some time had been working to deeply regenerate modern approaches to educational processes.³⁵

The appropriately attributed description of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti's personality in terms of a "Franciscan flame"³⁶ must be valued in terms of historiographical reinterpretation of the events around Montesca, in the sense of the need to fully understand the value exercised by this atypical sanctuary where a sense of faith gathered around the possibilities of human elevation and spiritual communion. It served as an emblematic focal point for the vigorous pursuit of spiritualistic rebirth, entirely expressive of the ferments stirring culture at the turn of the century.

Montesca, as well as the mythical and sacred places of Umbria (especially those linked to the poetised mythology of Francis, from Assisi to Gubbio), embodied all the characteristics of the "places of the soul" chosen for "Franciscan walks" appealing to an absolutely cross-cutting but certainly elitist world, thanks to the ability to apply a sense of intimist and psychological-introspective research to a work of personal refinement. An élite segment that in a desire for passionate dedication to motives ascetically exercising the

Montessori", *L'Educazione Nazionale*, VIII, July 1926, p.33-50. For critical insights, see MORETTI, Erica. "Recasting *Il Metodo*. Maria Montessori and Early Childhood Education in Italy (1909-1926)", *Cromohs*, 16, 2011, p. 1-18.

³⁴ LOMBARDO RADICE, Giuseppe. "I fanciulli di Alice Franchetti », *Athena Fanciulla. Scienza e poesia della scuola serena*. Op. cit., p. 12.

³⁵ MONTECCHI, Luca. "Alla ricerca della "scuola serena". Giuseppe Lombardo radice e la cultura pedagogica italiana del primo Novecento di fronte al mito della scuola della Montesca", *I contadini a scuola. La scuola rurale in Italia dall'Unità alla caduta del fascismo*. Macerata: Eum, 2015, p. 185-224.

³⁶ Jozs, Aurelia. "Fiammella Francescana". *Nuova Antologia di lettere, scienze ed arti*. 164, 1913, p. 278-285

spirit, exhibited the distinguishing mark of a refined intellectual category that actually aligns with the most diverse of worlds and can be ascribed to multiple national backgrounds.³⁷

In itself, and also thanks to the intrinsically international and transcultural profile of its main elements, the ecumenical spirit of Montesca already expressed an engagement with an adventure of transformation of the paradigms of modernity. This adventure belonged to an eclectic community of minds and hearts, and enthusiastic intellects exploring the sacred in life as a projection towards a religiosity raised beyond confessional affiliations, and in line with a phenomenology of consciousness pulsating with aesthetic tensions.

In turn, at Montesca and in the wider Umbrian area, learning to tune in to the notes of the inner spirit largely implied learning to recognise the intimate vibrations triggered by the admirable commotion of a surrounding “virgin” world, where Nature expressed herself in a completely genuine and exuberant manner, generating and feeding powerful impressions of being before the sublime.³⁸

Returning to Lombardo Radice’s notes of merit, at this point a Franchetti pedagogy had to emerge (already launched and experimented in Montesca schools) that systematically projected and developed a sense of cosmic consciousness starting from continuous contact with elements of natural life.³⁹ This approach was consequently projected on the promises of the Montessori education system, which came to represent the outcome of entrusting assignment to a line of pedagogical research already begun by Alice on her own and germinated through extremely fertile exchanges with Hermann Lietz, Lucy Latter and the Anglo-Saxon pedagogical school of Nature Studies.⁴⁰

Therefore, the “Franciscan flame” as an image should be developed hermeneutically to also understand the pedagogical investment that Alice Hallgarten Franchetti decided to make in the Montessori Method. In the same vein, it should be used to understand how, based on the similar feeling of elevation drawn from finding sacred sparks in contact with Nature,

³⁷ WALDBAUM, Roberta K. “Alice Hallgarten Franchetti: Cultivating Learning Landscapes”. Di LUZIO, Alessandra (Ed.) *The Grand Tour Lives On*. Bologna: Clueb, 2006, p. 119-135.

³⁸ BETTINI, Francesco. *La scuola della Montesca*. Brescia: La Scuola, 1953.

³⁹ DE SALVO, Dario. “Educare alla ruralità. Le scuole elementari a *sgraviò* di Montesca e Rovigliano”, *Pedagogia Oggi*, XVI, 1, 2018, p. 277-290.

⁴⁰ GILSOUL, Martine. *Maria Montessori. Une vie au service de l'enfant*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2020, p.112-119. Bucci, Sante. *Educazione dell'infanzia e pedagogia scientifica. Da Froebel a Montessori*. Rome: Bulzoni, 1990, p. 113-133.

personalities with a similar spirit gathered around Montesca and prepared themselves to enhance Montessori education systems.

It is certainly worth pointing out here the closeness of the world of Montesca to certain typical religious phenomenology that was particularly in vogue at the start of the century and encouraged by aesthetic drives, introspective impulses and philanthropic-universalist instances, such as the scope represented by the theosophical universe.

In addition, while we recalled earlier a socio-cultural élite attributable to the flow of Anglo-Saxon ancestry that tended to seek heavenly relief for body and spirit in the Umbrian countryside, we could also highlight the close relationship of the daughter of the French ambassador to Rome, Jeanne Barrère, to Montesca who was emblematically made the subject of a dedication by the poetess Vittoria Aganoor Pompilij⁴¹ in a work paradigmatically entitled *Passeggiata Francescana*.⁴²

It was precisely from the verses of this poem that the young Barrère drew a symbolically representative image of the small pedagogical kingdom of Montesca, which also housed a Montessori kindergarten for young children: a kingdom entirely and generously dedicated to spiritual education made up of many practical activities but never devoid of a religious tone, and reflecting a mixture of poetry and idealism for which the children, with their fresh faces and contemplative and calm eyes, gave the impression of “having spoken with the stars”.⁴³

Driven by an enthusiasm for the pedagogical work launched at Montesca and also convinced of the validity of Montessori methods, Jeanne Barrère, a practitioner of theosophical knowledge who was connected to the networks of theosophical culture, distinguished herself among pioneering figures who actively worked on initially taking Montessori pedagogy to France.⁴⁴

⁴¹ The poetess frequented Baroness Franchetti and is recognisable among those who enriched the *parterre* of elegant ladies attending the presentation of the first Montessori course at “La Montesca”, and her modernist acquaintances, CHEMELLO, Adriana; ALESI, Donatella (Eds.), *Tre donne d'eccezione: Vittoria Aganoor, Silvia Albertoni Tagliavini, Sofia Bisi Albini, dai carteggi inediti con Antonio Fogazzaro*. Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2005.

⁴² AGANOOR, Vittoria. *Poesie complete*. Florence: Le Monnier, 1912, p. 285.

⁴³ GIOVAGNOLI, Enrico. *Conferenze alla Montesca. Anno 1925*. Città di Castello: Il Solco, 1925, p. 14.

⁴⁴ WAGNON, Sylvain. “Les théosophes et l’organisation internationale de l’éducation nouvelle (1911-1921)”, *REHMLAC*, 9, 1, 2017, p.146-180. Furthermore, with regard to the continuity of figures connected to the theosophical movement who, through the networks of Baroness Franchetti’s acquaintances, would have introduced the Montessori education system in France, it is worth mentioning the work of Mme Pujol, whose organisational commitment led to the opening of the first Maison des Enfants in Paris

Moreover, in one of the very first presentations of the method to the community of French scholars in pedagogical disciplines, she would point out a basic recommendation to enter into the spirit of Montessori teaching after an articulated exposition of the salient points that characterised the methodological and technical innovations of the education system: to keep in mind that all these methods and actions needed to be substantiated by feeling and transmit a kind of faith. A faith that was understood as a burning fire that nourished action and trust, and for which Montessori pedagogy was not just an effective system with regard to better intellectual and psychological development of children, but was understood in its value as germinating in goodness and as a practice of communication with Good.⁴⁵

Furthermore, even among the records of close cultural ferment akin to the growth of the theosophical movement in Italy, the connection between the generous action in favour of educating young children by Baroness Franchetti, the underlining of its special value of spiritual elevation and the correlative support given to the initiation and dissemination of Montessori pedagogy were organically woven into a continuous theme of reading.

At the untimely and painful death of the Baroness, the pages of the main theosophical magazine in Italy, directly linked to the activities of the Italian Theosophical Society, greeted the sad loss as one of a deserving personality in theosophy, specifically for morally and materially encouraging the Montessori education system, which in fact proved to validly correspond to an ideal of theosophical education.⁴⁶

In truth, one can glimpse in the background to these annotations the strength of a revolutionary conviction for the development of innovative pedagogy, which led to the educational requests by Alice Franchetti to provide the Montessori system with maximum credit: a conviction based on the idea that there were treasures to be uncovered in the depths of the soul of every child and a confidence in the growth of a seed that relied on expansive life force. A force which then basically required freedom of action, time to

in October 1911. For further information see GILSOUL, Martine. "Maria Montessori et la France. Genèse d'une histoire". *History of Education & Children's Literature*, IX, 2, 2014, p. 379-398.

⁴⁵ BARRÈRE, Jeanne. "L'oeuvre d'éducation et la méthode de M^{lle} Montessori en Italie". *Revue Pédagogique*, 1912, p. 250-265.

⁴⁶ GUERRIER, Sonia. "Notizie dai Gruppi Italiani". *Bollettino della Società Teosofica Italiana*. V, 11, November 1911, p. 373-374. For further information, see TODARO, Letterio *L'alba di una nuova era. Teosofia ed educazione in Italia agli inizi del Novecento*. Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli-Apogeo Education, 2020.

mature, removal of obstacles and impediments, and devotion to a principle of universal order present in the hidden depth of all things.

4. FROM MONTESCA TO THE WIDER WORLD: THE AMPLIFYING EFFECTS OF A SUCCESSFUL EDUCATIONAL METHOD

An Italian project from several years back, specifically aimed at emphasising the most significant biographical moments in Maria Montessori's life and the aspects of her intellectual, scientific and pedagogical commitment in generating civic momentum with significant and powerful effects on affirming a new feminist emancipation—aimed at consolidating a progressive vision of society—underlined the crucial value of the patronage provided by Alice Hallgarten Franchetti.⁴⁷

Indeed, it would perhaps be useful to outline certain considerations in that study to summarise the clear value of the crucial role played by the Baroness in opening up extraordinary paths for the internationalisation of Montessori pedagogy and, in particular, towards the Anglo-Saxon world: a further precious and fundamental role for enabling information on the new pedagogical system to make its way into the United States. In turn, the indications developed in that text would also seem useful for discussing and reconsidering certain conclusions drawn from the analyses presented therein.

Meanwhile, with regard to the initial incursions in the US and the propagation of news on the promising innovations offered by the Montessori Method in early childhood education, it is beneficial to recall that an explicit reference to the links and intermediation provided by the Baroness was quite clearly recognisable among the first voices introducing Montessori pedagogy on the other side of the pond.⁴⁸

Jenny Merrill, author of the article that facilitated the entry of Montessori pedagogy into America, clearly stated that the impetus to write an informative essay on this new method in infant education, deserving of careful consideration for its ability in obtaining surprising results, had come directly

⁴⁷ BABINI, Valeria Paola; LAMA, Luisa. *Una donna nuova. Il femminismo scientifico di Maria Montessori*. Op. cit

⁴⁸ GRAZIADEI, Alice. *Attraverso i confini. Traduzioni e diffusioni di Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica di Maria Montessori. Uno studio comparato*. University of Bologna, PhD thesis. Ph.D. Philosophy, Science, Cognition and Semiotics, XXXII Series, 2020, p. 9-51.

from Alice Franchetti: “the Baroness, who is personally deeply interested in the education of the children upon her own estate in Italy, has found the results of the method remarkable”.⁴⁹

However it is likely that beyond the recommendations from Alice and the relative evaluations of merit on the effectiveness of these education systems, which were also emphasised in the Baroness’ wish that the volume on the method be translated into English as soon as possible, one of the most important indications for the wider impact on the internationalisation of Montessori pedagogy concerned the recommendation addressing the American people to go and directly observe the educational activities at the Children’s Houses in Italy, since this would really enable their full effectiveness to be admired and considered: “the Baroness Franchetti says the Montessori occupations need to be seen to be fully appreciated”.⁵⁰

Even in the later and highly beneficial introduction to Montessori pedagogy directed at the wider American public by Josephine Tozier in the pages of McClure’s Magazine,⁵¹ it was clearly noted how the sponsorship ensured by personalities who were organically connected to the American sphere proved highly effective for the education method reaping interest and sympathy in the New World,⁵² recalling even more precisely: “to the encouragement of the Baroness Franchetti (Alice Hallgarten) and her husband is due her admirable book *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica* in which Maria Montessori expounds the practical aspect of her work”.⁵³

Thus, considering all of the above, it would actually have been a sign of a fair and more than deserved tribute if Maria Montessori had decided to dedicate the first American edition of the method to the memory of the late Baroness.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ MERRILL, Jenny. “A New Method in Infant Education”. *The Kindergarten-Primary Magazine*, XXIII, 4, December 1909, p. 106.

⁵⁰ MERRILL, Jenny. “A New Method in Infant Education”. Op. cit., p. 107.

⁵¹ TOZIER, Josephine. “An Educational Wonder-Worker. The Methods of Maria Montessori”. *McClure’s Magazine*. XXXVII, 1, May 1911, p. 3-19.

⁵² TOGNI, Fabio. “Maria Montessori va in America. Una rilettura pedagogica di un episodio di incontro-scontro tra attivismo pedagogico italiano e Progressive Education americana”. *Rivista Formazione Lavoro Persona*. IV, 10, 2014, p. 1-10.

⁵³ TOZIER, Josephine. “An Educational Wonder-Worker. The Methods of Maria Montessori”. op. cit., p.19.

⁵⁴ KRAMER, Rita. *Maria Montessori. A Biography*. Op. cit., p. 137.

The various biographical works on the life of Maria Montessori are filled with the rapid and astonishing success that Montessori pedagogy received in the United States in the years shortly after the death of the Baroness, and the generous expectations around it, as well as the enthusiasm among the American public for the Italian pedagogue's personality.

Nonetheless, at this point it would seem better to now proceed to the conclusion and attempt to confirm the significance of the subject developed thus far. As previously anticipated, the significance of the conclusions proposed here may also be framed by presenting a critical discussion and review of certain judgements constructed around an unwillingness to allow the partnership established between Alice Franchetti and Maria Montessori to share a horizon of common faith. This means having to rely on substantial scepticism on the possibility of tracing fragments of modernism in the works, in the pedagogical project and in the social commitment of the "Dottoressa", and including a consideration of the method's scientific system for reasons of discontinuity or, again, accentuating the depth in the Montessori vision that takes a form of unshakable civic belief in progress or other vaguely political reasons, harking to alleged socialist sympathies.⁵⁵

More appropriately, it is worth going back and asking what the decisive impulse was that motivated the leading figure of the Montescia Circle, Baroness Franchetti, to lend such high repute to Maria Montessori's pedagogical experiment and spend both material and moral energy on its recognition. This would actually seem to have emerged from an urgency to actively work on encouraging the birth of a new model of a new man, an expression of a reformed faith.⁵⁶

The arguments developed in this essay propose to frame such a demanding question along these lines, endorsing the hypothesis of a prophetic horizon being developed where Montessori pedagogy prepared itself to become the standard bearer of a wider and more complex spiritual movement, tending to idealise the purpose of human elevation and linking a philosophy of education to it.

⁵⁵ BABINI, Valeria Paola; LAMA, Luisa. *Una donna nuova. Il femminismo scientifico di Maria Montessori*. Op. cit., p. 263.

⁵⁶ BABINI, Valeria Paola; LAMA, Luisa. *Una donna nuova. Il femminismo scientifico di Maria Montessori*. Op. cit., p. 267.

This spiritual movement intended not only to highlight the result of a complex operation in education aimed at actively intervening in the construction of the inner self, but also in an effort to celebrate within the child an original willingness of the soul for knowledge, for recognising Good, for a vocation for progressive elevation, and for participation in life with a sentiment of universal communion.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ SCHWEGMAN, Marjan. *Maria Montessori*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011, p. 101-104 (e-book edition).