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Recepcja pism Janusza Korczaka we Włoszech – perspektywa pedagogiczna

The reception of Janusz Korczak's writings in Italy: a pedagogical perspective

STRESZCZENIE: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie recepcji pism Janusza Korczaka we Włoszech i jej znaczenie dla włoskich studiów pedagogicznych oraz otwarcie nowych perspektyw na działalność pisarską autora. Artykuł składa się z trzech paragrafów. Po krótkiej prezentacji tego, co zostało przetłumaczone i przyjęte w naszym kraju, skupimy się na pewnych szczególnych

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aspektach praktyki pisarskiej Korczaka. W niniejszym artykule wychodzimy z założenia, że cała praktyka Korczaka jest doskonałym przykładem cyrkularności między doświadczeniem a refleksją; jego myśli i działania ucieleśniają integrację między założeniami teoretycznymi a wiedzą praktyczną. Pozwala nam to sugerować, że znaczną część twórczości polskiego autora można uznać za autobiograficzną, gdyż często jest ona wynikiem refleksji, która wynika z jego osobistych doświadczeń. W ostatniej części skupiamy się na Korczakowskim rozumieniu niemowlęctwa, na jego próbie oddania głosu dzieciom i na konsekwencjach epistemologicznych, jakie one sugerują.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Janusz Korczak, włoska recepcja Korczaka, pisarstwo pedagogiczne, cyrkularność między teorią a praktyką, spuścizna korczakowska

ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to present the reception of Janusz Korczak's writings in Italy and its relevance for Italian educational studies and to open some new perspectives on the author's writing activity. The paper is composed of three parts and each of them focuses on different suggestions. After a short presentation on what has been translated and received in our Country, we will focus on some peculiar aspects of Korczak's writing practice, in particular on its educational value. In this paper we assume that Korczak's whole practice is a perfect example of circularity between experience and reflection; his thoughts and his actions embody the integration of theoretical assumptions with a practical knowledge. This allows us to suggest that a great part of the Polish author's works can be considered autobiographical as it often results from the reflection that follows his personal experiences. In the last part we focus on Korczak's meaning of infancy, on his attempts to give children a voice and on the epistemological consequences they suggest.

KEYWORDS: Janusz Korczak, Korczak's Italian reception, educational writing, circularity between theory and practice, Korczak's legacy

1. Janusz Korczak's reception in Italy

The dramatic circumstances of Korczak's heroic death have largely overshadowed his legacy. This is the case in many European countries, Italy included. As Shner noticed, "Korczak's ideas and educational

work, as inspiring as they are, remain marginalized in the field of educational philosophy and the history of education”¹. Maybe because of the fragmentary nature of his writings, maybe because he repeatedly expressed his opposition to elaborate educational theories, among scholars who deal with his educational practice few have looked beyond the surface of a pedagogical thought that appears unsystematic. In recent years, in Italy, we have witnessed an increasing interest in Korczak’s legacy. Thanks to independent scholars, publishers, associations, and social circles interested in Korczak’s heritage, in recent years some new publications and translations have been realized.²

The majority of translated works include educational and philosophical writings³. Among them, the most popular among Italian readers are probably *How to love a child*, (*Come amare il bambino*), the “manual without prescription” and *The child’s right to respect* (*Il diritto del bambino al rispetto*), that has been presented in three different versions⁴. In the last two years the Luni publisher gave Italian readers two other Korczak’s works: *Infancy Memories* (*Ricordi di fanciullezza*) and *Face to face with God. Prayers for those who do not*

¹ M. Shenr, *Can education be the meeting place of all humanity? universal humanism in the thought and practice of Janusz Korczak*, “Quaderni di palazzo serra” 2014, XXIV, s. 54. <http://www.lcm.unige.it/ricerca/pub/24.php> [last consultation: 03.19.2021].

² For an index of Korczak’s publications in Italy see the following site <http://www.lcm.unige.it/ricerca/pub/24/LIBRI.pdf> [last consultation: 19.03.2021]. The site is updated to works published until 2013.

³ We owe the reception and introduction of Korczak’s educational principles in Italian pedagogical studies especially to university professors who devoted several articles and essays to the promotion of his legacy. Among the most important studies which focus on it, we have to mention *Korczak, l’umanesimo a prova di bambino* (ed. L. Giuliani, Il Margine, Trento 2018), *Ascoltare la luce. Vita e pedagogia di Janusz Korczak* (ed. D. Arkel, Milano 2009), *Il bambino vitruviano* (ed. D. Arkel, Castelvecchi, Roma 2019) and *Idiritti del bambino, La figura di Janusz Korczak*. (ed. G. Limiti, Milano, Proedi editore, 2006).

⁴ One edited by Edizioni dell’asino with an introduction of G.H. Honegger Fresco, one of the learners of Montessori’ legacy (*Il diritto del bambino al rispetto*, tr. it. by A. Butitta, preface by G. Honegger Fresco, Roma, Edizioni dell’asino, 2011), the second by Luni with a preface by Giuliana Limiti (*Il diritto del bambino al rispetto*, tr. it. by G. Frova, preface by G. Limiti. Milano, Luni, 1999, 2004) and the third with a preface by Ernesto Caffo (*Il diritto del bambino al rispetto*, tr. by it. G. Frova, Il telefono azzurro, Milano, Luni 1994).

pray (Solo a solo con Dio)⁵. Quite popular among scholars is also the ghetto diary, translated three times, which has already been the object of some studies⁶. We also have a short biography of Korczak, written by Monika Pelz and translated as *Io non mi salverò*⁷.

Of course, the decision of the Parliament of the Republic of Poland, to pronounce 2012 as the Year of Janusz Korczak has helped with the diffusion of his works. A great number of associations has organized events to remember his extraordinary example. Much has been contributed by the Istituto Polacco di Roma, the Polish Institute in Rome, which has organized photography exhibitions devoted to Korczak (Janusz Korczak-Henryk Goldszmit 1942–2012: Il re dei bambini)⁸, as did Polish language and culture scholars of the University of Genoa, who in collaboration with Polish Foreign Minister created a website constantly updated with information about cultural initiatives⁹, articles and essays; they also published a monographic issue of *Quaderni di Palazzo Serra* entirely dedicated to the figure of Janusz Korczak¹⁰.

Korczak the writer is generally best known as a children's author. It is probably a consequence of the great popularity of one of his novels addressed to children, that is *King Matthew the first* (*Re Matteuccio primo*)¹¹. Luigi Marinelli has already written about the various editions and adaptations of this book by Italian scholars in his preface to the last Italian edition of *King Matthew*, in which he explained the need

⁵ The first translation of that book appeared in 1982 translated from German by Bruno Bellerate (J. Korczak, *A tu per tu con Dio. Preghiere di un uomo che non prega*, tr. it. B. Bellerate, Rivoli, Elle Di Ci, 1982).

⁶ L. Quercioli Mincer, *La prigioniera era la mia casa*, Aracne, Roma 2014 and J. Leociak, *Il Diario e gli altri scritti come fonte per un ritratto biografico ed esistenziale*, [w:] C. Tonini (ed.) *Janusz Korczak, educatore, letterato, filosofo*, Erikson 2014, s. 25-38.

⁷ M. Pelz, *Io non mi salverò. La vita di Janusz Korczak*, Castelvecchi, Roma 2013.

⁸ <https://www.piuculture.it/2012/05/janusz-korczak-non-ci-e-concesso-lasciare-il-mondo-cosi-come-e> [last consultation: 21.03.2021].

⁹ <http://www.disclic.unige.it/lastradadikorczak>, (last consultation: 22.03.2021).

¹⁰ L. Quercioli Mincer, L. Battaglia, *Janusz Korczak, un'utopia per il tempo presente*, "Quaderni di Palazzo Serra" 2014, t. 24, <http://www.lcm.unige.it/ricerca/pub/24.php> [last consultation: 21.03.2021].

¹¹ J. Korczak, *Re Matteuccio Primo*, A. Ceccherelli, L. Costantino, M. Wyrembelski (ed. by), Villaggio Maori 2018.

for a new version of it due to the serious deficiencies that the previous translations presented. In particular, the first Italian translation, from French, was incomplete, lacked some parts; so was the second one, which is in fact an abridged version – illustrated – rather than a faithful rendering.

Among other novels Korczak wrote for adults, only *Children of the Bible* (*I Bambini della Bibbia*)¹² and *When I was a child again*¹³ (*Quandoritornerò bambino*) have been translated. This proves that despite various efforts, there still is a lot of work to do in order to spread Korczak's narrative legacy in Italy.

In order to do what we hope will be the next step to fill this gap, to the best of our ability, at the Department of Human and Social Sciences of Bergamo University we have been trying, in the last two years, to present to the Italian public Korczak's fundamental works that haven't been translated yet. So far, we selected some educational works as *Pedagogiascherzosa*¹⁴, *Momentieducativi*¹⁵, and autobiographical writings, such as some of his letters and important reports from the ghetto. We aim, in this way, to give Korczak the possibility to reveal his thoughts and his plans, so current and inspiring to so many students, scholars – and not only them – thanks to his great personality and the warm sentiment he displayed for those in his care. As noticed by Lewowicki, "The model he left behind is perhaps his most valuable legacy. He also left future generations a challenge expressed in the words: 'It is inadmissible to leave the world as one finds it'".¹⁶

2. The educational value of Korczak's autobiographical writing

Given the diversity of Korczak's writings, finding a common denominator between his works for children poses quite a challenge. Starting from general considerations, an in-depth observation of

¹² J. Korczak, *I bambini della Bibbia*, op. cit.

¹³ Idem, *Quando ridiventerò bambino*, tr. it. G. Frova, Milano, Luni 1995.

¹⁴ Idem, *Pedagogika Żartobliwa*, J. Mortkowicz, Warszawa 1939.

¹⁵ Idem, *Momenty Wychowawcze*, Warszawa 1919.

¹⁶ T. Lewowicki, *Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education* (Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education 1994), t. 24, nr 1/2, s. 37-48.

Janusz Korczak's biography lets us examine the educator's activity as a perfect example of circularity between experience and reflection, or theory and practice, that should be the nature of each educational activity. Korczak's thoughts and actions embody the integration of theoretical assumptions with practical knowledge and have timeless importance.

From the moment he gave up family life and decided to devote himself to children¹⁷, especially to orphans, Korczak understood that it is not possible for a man to take care of children and of their education if not constantly reflecting on educational processes and the transformations and contradictions that emerge from empirical practice. Korczak's activities are closely related to his writing practice, to his reflection, and to the necessity he felt to recount what happened in the moments he spent with "his" children. It's not by chance that all his literary work stems from what he directly observed in his practical work, that is from reflections on the possibility to educate a child. One could assume that his whole literary production can be seen as autobiographical writing.

This autobiographic dimension does not appear only in his declaratively autobiographical writings, such as the ghetto diary and the letters, but it also emerges from the ones we consider pedagogical, educational or literary. For this reason, it is important to stress the role that writing activity plays in Korczak's work. The physician considers writing as a fundamental activity enabling him to give a voice to children. This attempt to give children a voice is realized by the author thanks to Korczak's capacity to stand by children's side and present the world as they see it, assuming their particular point of view. This characteristic constitutes the autobiographical essence of his writings. Korczak's capacity to go back to his own childhood has already been noticed by Monika Pelz, who said:

As a writer, Korczak is one of the few adults able to go back to his childhood, to enter his childhood as a man enters his home. His memories are clear, they are not idealized. He remembers the pleasure of hours of endless play, but also the duties, those of washing ears included. He remembers the confusion caused by the fire alarm, the

¹⁷ In a letter to Mieczysław Żybertal, written on March 3, 1937, Korczak reveals his choice to renounce his own family to dedicate himself entirely to orphans.

bothering afternoons when there were guests. He remembers the sense of helplessness he felt as a child and the greatness of his dreams for the future, the bitterness when he faced injustice and the sincere purpose to love his neighbor¹⁸.

This capacity emerges clearly in some of Korczak's novels, such as *Bobo*¹⁹, in which the author describes the world through the eyes of a newborn baby, or in *When I am little again*²⁰, in which he talks about insights into sibling relations, schoolyard traumas, and general life from the perspective of a child. The aptitude for taking the child's perspective and the ability to evocate childhood through his own memories constitutes the specific educational value of autobiographical writing activity. Korczak's writings are characterized by a reflective, honest, and self-critical retrospective on the inquiry process. In his writings he reveals his doubts, his mistakes, and through a critical approach he immediately suggests solutions to them, by elaborating new plans for the future to improve his educational methods. His great ability to observe is a powerful tool for him to analyze childhood and elaborate educational strategies, but it is the peculiar capacity to access his childhood memories and let the reader "touch" them, as if they were real, that give his literary production such remarkable training value. This capacity, so typical of Korczak's activity as a writer, also gives his works autobiographical value. But can we assume this ability to access childhood memories to be sufficient in order to claim Korczak's predisposition to understand childhood better than others? To answer this question, we must start by explaining the meaning of childhood for the Polish educator.

As we have already said, Korczak considered the moment of writing as a fundamental phase of his educational practice²¹. Writing is also

¹⁸ M. Pelz, op. cit., s. 13.

¹⁹ J. Korczak, *Bobo*, Warszawa 1914.

²⁰ Idem, *Kiedy znów będę mały*, Warszawa–Kraków 1925.

²¹ Korczak did not write novels and short stories only to tell them to "his" children; on the contrary, on many occasions he demonstrated he considered the activity of writing as a fundamental educational strategy. From the moment he started his work as director of the Orphanage in Krochmalna 92, he established "Mały Przegląd", where children were asked to write short articles in order to express their claims or their opinions about different topics. The review was entirely managed by children and they also received modest fees for their cooperation.

a pleasure for him, he seems to like writing and uses it to reflect on particular moments of the day and to produce useful consideration for his educational practice. The pleasure of writing directly derives from the pleasure he feels when he writes down his memories, both the ones from the past and the ones that facilitate his reflection on actual pedagogical topics. This kind of delight that he proves shaping his own identity through a life-long process of dynamical transformation and training, the purpose to find new meaning to events he attends to, fades in a short time. The desire to write faces, almost immediately, the concrete practice of writing and the difficulty of writing down what he really feels, his emotions and thoughts that seem to appear largely inaccessible in their integrality because Korczak is not able to communicate, to translate in a written form what Goldszmit feels and thinks. The process of writing remains to a great extent incomplete. The attempt to rethink and recast is doomed to fail.

The impossibility to faithfully reconstruct one's memories to prove that the training process is going to reach a clear conclusion properly belongs to autobiographical writing. In this regard, the autobiographical writing doesn't simply match with the practice of writing as properly meant, but consists in the modality that a subject activates his own conscience through signs:

The auto-biographical does not have to occur to an "I," living or dead, that would come to speak of itself. The auto-bio-graphical derives from the fact that the simple instance of the "I" or of the autos can be posed as such only to the extent that it is a sign of life, of life in presence, the manifestation of life in presence, even if the what, or who, male or female, that thereby gives this sign of life finds itself to have passed over to the side of death, and even says "I am on the side of death or rather on the other side of life. Even if this "I" – as is always possible – is quoted, mechanically repeated by a technique of reproduction or by Descartes' animal-machine. We are here analyzing this sign of life within the very structure of the auto-position of the I or of ipseity (even if this auto- position in neither a discursive nor a thematic utterance). We situate within the minimal phenomenological structure, in the simple appearing of the "I" in general, the trace of this manifestation of self, of this auto-presentation as living present (thing), this autobiographical guarantee, even if such a tracing can give rise to fantasy and to nonrigorous philosophical interpretations, even

if it is in no way contradictory, far from it, with this “I am dead,” which, as I tried to show in the past, was in some way implied in every *cogito ergo sum*.²²

Derrida underlines that the auto-bio-graphic dimension concerns the manifestation of a conscience, of an “I” that acquires awareness of itself and leaves a mark of that manifestation and of the training and self-training that follows. There is no life, no *bios*, without auto-bio-graphical reflection, with no repetition by signs of what is happening in present life. This repetition facilitates the formation of memories and activates the process of recognizing and generating relations between one’s intimate life and that of other’s. This kind of existence – the autobiographical one – differs from a mechanical one, the *zoè*, and is aware of itself and of its individual, social and political transformational processes²³. In this auto-bio-graphical structure there is no guarantee of success, but it consents the generation of a laborious journey to an ethical horizon to come.

Korczak fits into the general canon of autobiographical writings. Through the act of writing, the Polish author presents himself as an educator who loves childhood and, reflecting on educational practices he realized in the past, aims to transform educational practices he will use in the future. It is in this circularity between theory and practice, thoughts and experiences, is a the peculiar feature of his writing practices and it clearly emerges in articles, essays and letters in which he explains activities he pursues in managing orphanages and in the novels he writes, that is, both in fiction and non-fiction. By

²² J. Derrida, *The animal that therefore I am*, tr. eng. by D. Willis, Fordham University Press, New York 2008, s. 56.

²³ Greeks used two different terms to define our idea of life, that of *zoè*, to indicate the simple existence, as that of an animal; *bios*, on the other hand, indicated social and civil life, and it was typical only of human beings. On this theme Agamben argues: “In any case, however, the entry of *zoe* into the sphere of the polis—the politicization of bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought. It is even likely that if politics today seems to be passing through a lasting eclipse, this is because politics has failed to reckon with this foundational event of modernity” (G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign power and bare life*, tr. eng. by D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, California 1998, s. 4).

adopting writing in his self-formation, Korczak detaches, for example, from Rousseau's statement that it's impossible for a man to be both educator and pedagogue²⁴. On the contrary, Korczak seems to follow the model of Pestalozzi, and despite increasing difficulties, he never abandoned his educational duties²⁵.

The constant circularity between theory and practice is not the only peculiarity that makes Korczak's writing an autobiographical practice, but also his need to give children a voice has great relevance in this definition. This inclination shows the complexity of writing that aims to give a voice to those, by definition, without voice.

3. The illusion of giving the children a voice

In the first part of one of his most important essays, Korczak reflects on the etymology of the Polish word that stands for baby, that is *niemowlę*, which means no-speech. It's interesting to notice the way Korczak associates childhood with the no-speech phase of infants. Korczak certainly believed, as did important pedagogists such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori, Makarenko, that childhood is not merely a preparatory phase for adulthood, but, on the contrary, it is a fundamental moment in the process of human growth and it has

²⁴ With these words J.J. Rousseau confirms his intention to dedicate himself to reflection on educational matters only from a theoretical and pedagogical perspective, not practical, as he considers himself, due to natural reasons, or talents, a thinker and not an educator: "In the past I made a sufficient trial of this calling to be certain that I am not proper for it, and my condition would excuse me from it if my talents made me capable of. I believed I owned this public declaration to those who appear not to accord me enough esteem to believe me sincere and well founded in my resolution. Not in a condition to fulfill the most useful task, I will dare at least to attempt the easier one: following the example of so many others, I shall put my hand not to work but to the pen: and instead of doing what is necessary, I shall endeavor to say it" (J.J. Rousseau, *Emile or on education*, tr. eng. by A. Bloom, Basic Books, USA 1979, s. 50).

²⁵ The devotion to the cause of children is the more evident similarity that relates Korczak to Pestalozzi, but not the only one. In all of Korczak's work we can underline others common features between the two educators, as for example the circularity between hand, heart and mind.

specific characteristics and specific needs. It can no longer be meant as a transitional phase of a newborn waiting for adulthood, it can no longer be assumed to be a preface to real life.

Starting from careful observation of children, the Polish educator understood that to measure stages of growth and write formularies and give educators universally valid instructions to be followed to the letter is not enough.²⁶ Each child is different and needs different attention and different methodological approaches. Even though he was a great observer, he knew it could not be enough for a pedagogical purpose. It is for this reason that he uses storytelling to approach the infant's world. Korczak believed that by sharing stories and listening to the youngest narrating their life experience, he could establish contact with them so as to better comprehend their feelings and their needs. In a less popular pedagogical novel, *Bobo*, devoted to infancy, Korczak reflects on the subject of difficulties that accompany everyday efforts of exploring and learning the world by the youngest. He describes life's events from the point of view of a newborn and tries to explicate unknown objects he finds in the world around him, parents included, exactly as a newborn would. However, when observing infancy one must always keep in mind that perspective is always mediated by language and an infant structurally remains incapable of speech, with no linguistic or logical categories able to explicate children's identity and how they approach the world. In this regard, Agamben argues:

The idea of infancy as a pre-subjective "psychic substance" is therefore shown to be as mythical as a pre-linguistic subject, with infancy and language seeming to refer back to one another in a circle in which infancy is the origin of language and language the origin of infancy. But perhaps it is in this very circle that we should seek the site of experience for human infancy. For the experience, the infancy at issue here, cannot merely be something which chronologically precedes language and which, at a certain point, ceases to exist in order to spill into speech. It is not a paradise which, at a certain moment,

²⁶ In the preface to the Italian version of *Rules of life*, Paolo Peticari put the attention on this characteristic and noticed how Korczak avoided violence and humiliations in his pedagogical practices in support of a pedagogy of respect and love (P. Peticari, *Preface*, [in:] J. Korczak, *Le regole della vita. Pedagogia per giovani e adulti*, Milano 2017).

we leave for ever in order to speak; rather, it coexists in its origins with language – indeed, it itself constituted through the appropriation of it by language in each instance to produce the individual as subject. (...) Only by arriving at a point when the human individual existed, but language still did not, could we encompass this “pure wordless experience”; an infancy both human and independent of language.²⁷

The person who observes, educates and narrates infancy can analyze it and reconstruct it only by using logical and linguistic categories, because their own identity begins no longer remembering their experiences of infancy. Therefore, it is not possible to completely give children a voice and one can recount infancy only partially recognizing and respecting its enigmatic nature that cannot be explained through logic categories.

The epistemological structure we we have elucidated helps to understand Korczak’s works and his writing practice. The remarks we made assume that the Polish author’s works should not be read as a mere celebration of infancy, its purity and innocence, and rather suggest scholars focus on other aspects of Korczak’s production, such as the circularity between theory and practice, experience and reflection that permeate the author’s works.

²⁷ G. Agamben, *Infancy and History. The Destruction of Experience*, tr. eng. by L. Heron, Verso, London–New York 1993, s. 48-49.