

Education as a situated practice of emancipation: Alice Hallgarten Franchetti

L'educazione come pratica situata di emancipazione: Alice Hallgarten Franchetti

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the figure of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti; the analysis is based on texts and testimonies produced by her contemporaries, understood as narratives through which educational roles, practices, and models are constructed and articulated. The study highlights the richness of the modes of engagement adopted by Alice—as an educator, cultural promoter, and mediator between social and pedagogical contexts—interpreting her work as a situated practice of emancipation. Through the design and management of the rural schools of Montesca and Rovigliano, a form of educational agency emerges, expressed in curricular, organizational, and relational choices, and giving shape to a model of schooling capable of combining contextual observation, adaptation of curricula, and public responsibility.

KEYWORDS

Alice Hallgarten Franchetti, rural schooling, women in education, agency, political philanthropy.
Alice Hallgarten Franchetti, scuola rurale, donne nell'educazione, agency, filantropia politica.

Il presente contributo esamina la figura di Alice Hallgarten Franchetti; l'analisi si fonda su testi e testimonianze prodotti dai suoi contemporanei, intesi come narrazioni attraverso cui si costruiscono e si articolano ruoli, pratiche e modelli educativi. Lo studio mette in luce la ricchezza delle modalità di impegno assunte da Alice – come educatrice, promotrice culturale e mediatrice tra contesti sociali e pedagogici – interpretando la sua opera come una pratica situata di emancipazione. Attraverso la progettazione e la gestione delle scuole rurali della Montesca e di Rovigliano emerge una forma di agency educativa, che si esprime nelle scelte curriculari, organizzative e relazionali, dando forma a un modello di scuola capace di coniugare osservazione del contesto, adattamento dei programmi e responsabilità pubblica.

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1. Introduction

The present contribution proposes a study of the figure of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti¹, situating her within the debate on those women who, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, made a significant contribution to the construction of pedagogical knowledge not so much through systematic treatises as through educational practices, social initiatives, cultural networks, epistolary writing, institutional mediation, and school experimentation. From this perspective, the figure of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti proves particularly relevant, as her experience is located at a fertile crossroads between political philanthropy, rural education, the promotion of women's work, the reform of school methods, and the international circulation of pedagogical ideas.

The analysis presented here is grounded in a corpus of texts and testimonies by contemporaries, considered not as mere external descriptions of her work, but as narratives through which roles, practices, and educational models are defined. These sources progressively construct the image of Alice as an educator, a cultural promoter, a mediator between social and pedagogical contexts – a figure capable of combining observation of reality, institutional planning, and moral responsibility. Within this framework, the contribution adopts as its interpretative hypothesis the notion of a situated practice of emancipation, useful for reading the action of Alice Hallgarten not as the application of an abstract system, but as a dynamic, relational, and contextual process. From a methodological perspective, accordingly, the study adopts a historical-interpretative approach grounded in the critical reading of documentary and narrative sources. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which these sources construct educational agency through the intersection of gender, social context, and institutional practices. In this sense, the analysis is informed by an implicit intersectional perspective, aimed at understanding how different dimensions – social, cultural, and gendered – converge in shaping Hallgarten's educational action.

The category of emancipation is here employed in a historically determined sense. It does not coincide solely with literacy or formal access to education, but refers to a broader set of choices through which education intervenes in the material, cultural, and symbolic conditions of life: schedules, work, health, nutrition, access to books, the dignity of teachers, the recognition of local knowledge, the valorisation of children's experience, and the possibility of thinking with one's own mind. In this sense, the work of Alice Hallgarten may be understood as inscribed within a pedagogy of emancipation that does not exhaust itself in a philanthropic gesture, but is structured as a concrete response to the needs observed in the contexts in which she operates.

Two main nuclei orient the reflection. The first concerns the way in which the rural schools of La Montesca and Rovigliano emerge from the sources as a model capable of combining observation of context, adaptation of curricula, and public responsibility. The second concerns the richness of the educational postures assumed by Alice Hallgarten Franchetti: founder, inspirer, organiser, interlocutor of teachers, promoter of libraries, supporter of women's education, mediator between pedagogical knowledge and social life, between local dimension and international networks.

In this direction, alongside the testimonies of figures such as Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, Aurelia Josz, Sofia Bisi Albini, Maria Montessori, Giovagnoli, and other contemporaries, particular relevance is assumed by the three articles published by Angelica De Vito Tommasi in 1916 in the journal *I diritti della scuola*, which may be considered the first organic Italian study devoted to the Hallgarten schools. These texts, the result of direct observation and preceding the better-known Lombardo-Radician systematisation of 1931, make it possible to grasp with particular clarity the didactic and organisational choices that qualify the Montesca experience as an original form of situated pedagogy.

These sources are characterised by a marked heterogeneity in nature, tone, and purpose, which, however, does not constitute a limitation but rather a genuine interpretative resource, as it makes it possible to trace the progressive construction of the educational figure of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti through different registers: memory, document, commemoration, pedagogical judgement, school description, private correspondence. To assume these texts as narratives of educational agency means recognising that they do not merely record facts, but configure a field of meaning within which Alice's action becomes legible. Indeed, the sources, not only document, but also attribute meaning, select, order, emphasise, and at times idealise. Hence the need for a critical reading capable of holding together the documentary evidence and the narrative form of its transmission, according to a criterion of fidelity

1 This contribution forms part of a broader research project currently underway, aimed at a critical revision of the biography of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti and at reconstructing the cultural, social, and institutional networks within which her educational initiative took shape. While, for certain segments of her biographical trajectory – particularly the years of her activity in Italy and the educational experiences developed between Rome and La Montesca in the early decades of the twentieth century – we now possess a relatively substantial documentary corpus, other passages remain only partially clarified. In particular, significant gaps persist with regard to the years of her early formation and the period spent in Germany. The ongoing research therefore seeks to expand the archival and documentary survey in order to refine these aspects and to situate them more accurately within the framework of the formative experiences and cultural relationships that preceded Alice Hallgarten Franchetti's educational commitment. Within this perspective, contacts have already been initiated with several American archival and academic institutions, which have made it possible to identify promising lines of inquiry concerning her formative years and the family and cultural networks of the Hallgarten family.

that does not fill gaps with arbitrary inferences, but rather valorises the connections effectively returned by the documentation.

Such caution is particularly necessary in the case of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti, whose figure has often been transmitted through writings marked by intense emotional participation, commemorative language, and a form of veneration that, from the years immediately following her death, tends to construct her in almost hagiographic terms; one may think of the definition of her work as “lofty and gentle” (Lombardo Radice, p. 293), the insistence on the image of the “Franciscan little flame” (Josz, 1913) that does not extinguish, “sister of all”, or again the appellation of “saint” evoked by some teachers through the mediation of Lombardo Radice (1931). Far from being expunged, such elements must be interpreted as part of the process through which a female figure is recognised and inscribed within a shared pedagogical memory. The issue, therefore, does not consist in separating a presumed “pure datum” from its rhetoric, but in understanding how rhetoric itself contributes to defining what, in that context, is perceived as educational exemplarity.

From this perspective, the testimony of Maria Pasqui Marchetti acquires particular relevance, as it restores both the affective tone and the operational concreteness of this memorial construction:

La Baronessa Alice Franchetti fu una creatura d'Amore, non pensò non volle altro che il bene. Venuta sposa alla Montesca (ubertosa collina della campagna umbra) fu sorpresa di non trovarvi nelle vicinanze una scuola che accogliesse i bambini, e suo primo ardente pensiero fu quello di aprire una. L'ultimo piano della villa fu in breve adattato ad ambiente scolastico.

Rivedo e rivivo le ore d'impazienza e di trepida attesa del primo giorno di scuola.

All'alba del 15 ottobre 1901 salimmo sulla vasta terrazza adiacente all'aula.

Eravamo mute e il cuore palpitava d'emozione e di ansia!... Finalmente vedemmo arrivare dalle diverse straduciole i primi bambini, accompagnati dalle madri. Movemmo loro incontro con tutta la nostra gioia, con tutta la nostra gratitudine.

Da quel giorno la scuola fu il principale pensiero di quella Santa: per renderla sempre migliore, intraprese studi e viaggi in Italia e all'Estero, portò, adattandolo al nostro ambiente agricolo, quanto aveva in altre scuole notato di utile e pratico” (M. Marchetti, 1916)².

2. Origins, Formation, and Commitment: the Life of an Extraordinary Woman between Cosmopolitanism and Political Philanthropy

Alice Hallgarten Franchetti was born in New York on 23 June 1874 into a family context marked by a strong cosmopolitan imprint and by an intertwining of cultural and economic capital. Her American roots appear, so to speak, “rather shallow” (Caracchini, 2023), since her mother Julia Nordheimer – a pianist “born into the profession” – was the only one born in the New World. The maternal line, with her grandfather Abraham Nordheimer, a musician and entrepreneur active between the United States and Canada in music production and dissemination, and the paternal line, with Adolph Hallgarten, a successful pharmaceutical entrepreneur and a prominent figure within the German-Jewish community of New York, together contribute to outlining a cultivated, enterprising, and internationally open family environment. The family lived in Manhattan, in a socially and culturally vibrant context; her brother Walter attended the Sachs School for Boys, while Alice is only presumed to have attended the female section. After her father's death in 1885, the family moved to Hamburg; this mobility between the United States and Europe, combined with her background, constitutes a decisive matrix in the formation of her outlook, oriented not toward imitation, but toward critical selection, adaptation, and mediation among different educational models.

From 1894 onwards, Alice undertook increasingly long journeys to Italy, staying in Rome during the winter months in search of a more favourable climate for her mother's health. In 1897, Alice and Julia Nordheimer appear to have established their residence in Rome. Here again, lexical caution is significant, as the move is not described in purely bureaucratic terms, but as a gradual process of settlement in a city that becomes a place of commitment and transformation.

2 Baroness Alice Hallgarten Franchetti was a creature of Love; she thought of nothing, she desired nothing, but the good. Having come as a bride to La Montesca (a fertile hill in the Umbrian countryside), she was surprised not to find in its vicinity a school that could receive the children, and her first ardent thought was to open one. The upper floor of the villa was soon adapted into a school environment. I see again and relive the hours of impatience and anxious expectation of the first day of school. At dawn on 15 October 1901, we went up to the wide terrace adjoining the classroom. We were silent, and our hearts beat with emotion and anticipation... At last we saw the first children arriving along the various little paths, accompanied by their mothers. We moved towards them with all our joy, with all our gratitude. From that day, the school became the principal concern of that “saintly” woman: in order to make it ever better, she undertook studies and journeys in Italy and abroad, bringing back – adapting it to our agricultural environment – whatever she had observed in other schools to be useful and practical (M. Marchetti, 1916) (*author's translation*)

Rome represents for Alice a veritable social laboratory. It is here that, in 1898, she begins her participation in the *Unione per il bene*. The decisive point, however, is that such commitment does not reduce itself to a charitable gesture. In the available testimonies, Alice does not appear as a benefactress who distributes aid from above to those in need; rather, a posture emerges grounded in observation, listening, identification of needs, and situated response (Filomia, in press). It is precisely this aspect that makes it possible to speak, in her case, of a pedagogy of emancipation: not a unidirectional movement from the baroness toward the poor, but a circular dynamic in which the observed context interrogates and redefines educational action.

It is in Rome that Alice meets Leopoldo Franchetti, himself a member of the *Unione* (Bistoni, 1997). The sources emphasise how Franchetti accompanied her in home visits and in inquiries in the San Lorenzo district, sharing her attention to abandoned children and to young people released from prison. Together they devised the project of an agricultural school-colony in the Flaminio district, intended for the agricultural education of destitute orphans, with moral education entrusted to Brizio Casciola (Pomi, 2004; Pazzaglia, 2006). This Roman phase is crucial because it allows us to grasp the passage from philanthropy to educational institution: the observation of social needs, the encounter with urban poverty, and the inquiry into living conditions do not produce merely assistance, but lead to the construction of a stable educational framework.

Alice Hallgarten and Leopoldo Franchetti were married in July 1900. From this moment onward, the sources construct their relationship as an educational and politico-philanthropic partnership (Buseghin 2002; Buseghin, 2022; Zangarelli 1984; Bistoni 1997; Filomia, in press). It is not simply a matter of a couple sharing cultural interests, but of a convergence of will, sensibility, and action. Valitutti, in one of the most significant testimonies, observes that Alice would not have been able to realise her works without Leopoldo's strong will, while Alice's presence softened his spirit and refined his sensitivity toward educational values (Buseghin, 2002). In similar terms, Giuseppe Lombardo Radice describes the two spouses as having arrived, by different paths, at the same conclusion, namely that "il solo bene è educare"³. These readings, though imbued with participation, restore an essential point: education, for Alice and Leopoldo, is situated at the crossroads of human promotion, social reform, and economic emancipation. Their relationship is effectively defined as a form of political philanthropy, that is, a mode of intervention that does not limit itself to assistance but aims to transform the conditions that produce marginality.

The modernity of this relationship has been aptly interpreted as one founded on a genuine equality of conditions, of thought, and of action. Alice is a wealthy woman, endowed with economic autonomy, who uses her resources not to reproduce a paternalistic model, but to create opportunities for autonomy, especially for women. In this sense, her action is inscribed within those forms of practical feminism that the sources repeatedly evoke.

Marriage therefore does not mark a subordination of Alice's biography to that of her husband, but the construction of a shared mission, which finds in La Montesca its operational centre. From 1900 onwards, the two spouses divided their time between Rome and the villa of La Montesca, near Città di Castello, progressively transforming the Umbrian countryside into an educational workshop.

The educational experience of Alice Hallgarten cannot be understood if isolated from the other social initiatives she promoted; the schools of La Montesca and Rovigliano are in fact part of a constellation of works that affect the material conditions of life and make education a diffuse process. In 1908, under her auspices, the *Aiuto materno* opened at the local hospital, intended to provide medical support, medicines, and milk for children under three years of age. In the same year, the *Tela Umbra* was founded, a textile workshop aimed at enhancing the female skills widespread in the area. Testimonies insist that Alice did not impose strict working hours on the weavers, so that they might reconcile work and family life. The workers are indicated as the sole beneficiaries of the proceeds, and the *Tela Umbra* itself was provided with a nursery that facilitated mothers' access to work. Here emancipation takes shape as the simultaneous transformation of time, space, labour, and care. Alongside this, Alice donated nine small libraries to local schools, supported the municipal kindergarten, financed daily meals in Citerna, and in 1909 opened an institute for courses in practical education for women, entrusting its direction to Felicitas Buchner. All these works are not peripheral to her school action; on the contrary, they constitute its context of intelligibility. Education, for Alice, does not concern only the classroom, but the system of conditions that makes a more dignified life possible.

Alice died in Leysin, Switzerland, on 22 October 1911, after – as Giuseppe Lombardo Radice emphasises in a passage entitled "How She Burned Her Life" – having fallen ill and consumed herself in ardour for the people she loved and for her works: "indeed her sin was an excess of vigour, in her desire for the good" (p. 20). Alice wrote, at the point of death, a moving letter that confirms the depth of her feeling, a "farewell" letter (Lombardo Radice, p. 26) dated 16 October:

3 "the only good is to educate" (*author's translation*).

Alla mia Marietta, le consorelle conlavoratrici, i bambini amati, tutti e tutto a La Montesca e Rovigliano, perchè tutto ugualmente da me amato. «Laudato sii, o Signore, per la nostra morte corporale.» Prima di entrare a conoscere la nostra cara sorella Morte, Viglio mandarvi la mia parola di amore, di pace, di addio.

Quanto è stata bella la nostra vita in comune, quante ricchezze dello spirito abbiamo potuto godere insieme! È venuto il momento pel quale dobbiamo separare; ma, se sentite come me, saprete che per chi veramente ama non c'è separazione, che *l'amore è più forte anche della Morte*. Perciò sentitemi sempre con voi, e ciò che di forza, di bontà non potete più dare, come tanto avete fatto sinora alla mia persona, impegnatelo ora per l'innalzamento di voi stessi, per la devozione allo studio, all'amore del prossimo, al servizio del bene in ogni forma.

Ogni atto, ogni pensiero buono sarà un bene per la mia anima, mentre il contrario mi farebbe soffrire. Questo pensiero vi aiuti. Le mie parole d'addio sono: Amore! Pace! (lettera 16 ottobre 1911)⁴.

3. The hallgarten “educational experiment”⁵: intelligent observation and the cyclical method

One of the most significant contributions of the sources, and in particular of De Vito Tommasi's articles⁶, consists in the restitution of the educational method of the Hallgarten schools. Such a method is grounded on two cornerstones: guided observation and the cyclical method. The work of adaptation arose from careful observation; it was then prefaced in the daily conferences with the teachers of La Montesca and Rovigliano, and shaped on the basis of the critique of the lessons, of the children's responses, and of their assignments. The result was a “new and ingenious form of objective method.” This testimony is crucial because it shows how the method does not arise from theoretical abstraction, but from observation, comparison, selection, adaptation, and collegiality. Pedagogical knowledge is constructed in practice and reflected within practice:

l'opera è dunque tanto esemplare e completa per quanto localizzata a un piccolo lembo leggermente montano di una regione centrale italiana, Come opera, è un'esperimento riuscito; come esperimento, è una *questione scolastica* di primissimo ordine pp. 308-309)⁷.

A characteristic feature of the educational style proposed at La Montesca is *intelligent observation*, an expression used by Alice herself, indicating a way of looking at the world that transforms the environment into an object of study. The customary excursion to Monte Santa Maria, for example, becomes an occasion for observing what is seen along the road, directions, natural elements, and the relations among things.

The cyclical method, described by De Vito Tommasi with particular care, instead organises knowledge as a co-ordinated progression: from the first scribbles of the sky in the first class to the use of meteorological instruments in the upper classes; from simple observation to experimentation; from elementary recording to the formulation of conclusions. The meteorological diary, the theme of the month, the observation notebook, the studies “from seed to seed,” the experimental kitchen gardens, the aquarium, the terrarium, the collections, the herbaria, the monographs on fruit trees, the drawings in coloured pencils: everything contributes to making living nature the pivot of the curriculum.

Drawing, in particular, is not an ancillary subject but a method of study. The *Calendario della Montesca*, later incorporated into the programmes of 1923–1925, constitutes an emblematic example of this: each day a pupil

4 o my Marietta, to my fellow sisters and co-workers, to the beloved children, to all and everything at La Montesca and Rovigliano, for all are equally dear to me. “Praised be You, O Lord, for our bodily death.” Before entering into the knowledge of our dear sister Death, I wish to send you my word of love, of peace, of farewell. How beautiful our life together has been, how many riches of the spirit we have been able to share! The moment has come in which we must part; yet, if you feel as I do, you will know that for those who truly love there is no separation, that love is stronger even than death. Therefore, feel me always with you, and what strength, what goodness you can no longer offer to me in person, as you have done so much until now, devote it instead to the elevation of yourselves, to the dedication to study, to the love of others, to the service of the good in every form. Every act, every good thought will be a good for my soul, while the contrary would cause me suffering. Let this thought sustain you. My words of farewell are: Love! Peace! (letter, 16 October 1911) (*author's translation*).

5 The designation “educational experiment” is attributed to Giuseppe Lombardo Radice.

6 The three articles are published in the section *Questioni scolastiche* under the title “Le scuole della Montesca.” The article is the result of the author's field research, who recounts having been—most likely in the month of March 1916—at La Montesca, where she was able to observe directly how the school was organized, particularly appreciating its learning outcomes. The importance of this study lies in its preceding the publication by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, *Athena fanciulla*, from which, as is known, much attention to method would derive, and which would also be regarded by Marchetti, the headmistress of the schools, as a presence that brought “comfort and relief” at the dawn of the baron's passing and that continued until her death.

7 “the work is therefore all the more exemplary and complete inasmuch as it is localized within a small, slightly mountainous tract of a central Italian region. As a work, it is a successful experiment; as an experiment, it is a school question of the very first order” (pp. 308–309). (*author's translation*)

draws an observed object, thus constructing over time a visual memory of the changing surrounding nature. To draw means to observe, to choose, to represent, to understand.

Alongside the curricular and methodological choices, the sources make it possible to grasp the relational dimension of Alice Hallgarten's agency. Her care for her collaborators emerges as a recurrent trait. Lombardo Radice reports the words of Rinaldi, who recalls having been called by Alice into the library, urged to open her heart, kissed, and invited to consider her as a mother. From that day, she confesses, her work became more fruitful.

This is not a sentimental detail. In it one may discern a model of educational leadership that recognises the value of relationship, listening, spiritual attunement, and shared responsibility. The teachers must be "chosen," that is, endowed with a particular disposition of heart; yet this moral dimension is accompanied by a concrete attention to their material conditions, through the provision of dignified salaries, lodging, meals, and savings booklets set aside for the future; here too emancipation is not merely declared, but organised. The school is sustained by the quality of the relationships among founder, headmistress, teachers, children, and families. The governance of the institution is not exercised as mere administration, but as care for the moral environment within which educational work may flourish.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the sources makes it possible to restore Alice Hallgarten Franchetti as a figure of extraordinary complexity, whose educational action is fully situated within the panorama of those women who, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contributed to the construction of pedagogical knowledge through practices, mediations, and institutions. Her work takes shape as a situated practice of emancipation. Situated, because it is constructed in close relation to the concrete contexts of the Umbrian countryside, to the rhythms of agricultural labour, to the needs of families, to the material conditions of childhood, to the real possibilities of teachers and of the women of the territory. Of emancipation, because it is oriented not only toward instruction, but toward the transformation of living conditions, through attention to health, to work, to women's autonomy, to access to books, to care of the self, to the dignity of children regarded as capable of thinking with their own minds.

The schools of La Montesca and Rovigliano thus emerge as a model of schooling capable of combining observation of context, adaptation of curricula, and public responsibility. Within them, the school moves toward the peasants, rejects the rigidity of a single calendar, constructs knowledge upon living nature, uses drawing as a method of study, values epistolary writing, organizes learning in cyclical form, promotes freedom of thought and personal expression.

Yet the strength of this model does not reside solely in curricular choices. It is rooted in the posture of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti as educator, cultural promoter, and mediator: an attentive observer of needs, founder of institutions, interlocutor of teachers, supporter of women's labour, promoter of libraries, protagonist in the early dissemination of the Montessori method, a figure capable of translating a cosmopolitan vision into interventions deeply rooted in the local. In this sense, the case of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti invites us to rethink the genealogy of pedagogical knowledge not only starting from great theorists and systematic works, but also from those figures who have constructed pedagogy by making school, by organizing spaces, times, relationships, and forms of life. It is precisely in this practice, at once concrete and reflective, that her experience continues to challenge the history of education. In this perspective, Hallgarten's experience offers relevant insights for contemporary educational thought and practice, particularly with regard to the relationship between education and social context, the integration of school and community, and the role of education in promoting forms of situated emancipation. Her work invites renewed reflection on the possibility of designing educational environments that are responsive to local needs while remaining open to broader cultural and pedagogical horizons.

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