



Fig. 5. Ink stains on a page of *La vita militare* by E. De Amicis (n.d.)

have an undoubted charm, but also a big heuristic potential, which allow another dimension of the school library – intended as a place of memory and as a cultural asset of the school – to be enhanced. This investigative perspective has enormous research potential and, in order to offer a small sample of the possibilities of this perspective, we will examine a text preserved in the “G. Leopardi” library, which appears largely annotated: *La vita militare* by Edmondo De Amicis.

2. «Military life is beautiful»: the extra-textual notes in a work by De Amicis

As we have anticipated, De Amicis is one of the most represented authors in the “G. Leopardi” library. One of the works by De Amicis preserved in the Macerata library is his first great publishing success: *La vita militare*²⁰. This «good book of popular educational

²⁰ On this best seller by De Amicis, see S. Jacomuzzi, «Cittadini forti ... soldati intrepidi». *L'epica del quotidiano e la pedagogia dei buoni sentimenti nella Vita militare*, in F. Contorbia (ed.), *Edmondo De Amicis. Atti del convegno nazionale di studi (Imperia, 30 aprile - 3 maggio 1981)*, Milano, Garzanti, 1985, pp. 41-54; M.

literature», as it is known, was written in the first decade post-unification and is the result of De Amicis' military journalistic activity, nourished by suggestions deriving from the close links with the Florentine salon held by Emilia Peruzzi Toscanelli²¹. The specimen of the work held in the boarding school library is very well used²². It has been trimmed and bound, therefore some readers' notes are not legible and there are no front guard page, preface, index, paper title page and also a significant part of the text (from p. 163 to p. 194, which corresponds to the beginning of the *Carmela* tale). In general, the pages are worn and, in many cases, damaged with ink stains (Figure 5). We do not have precise indications on the year of the edition, but it is certainly a copy of the work published before 1904²³, a date written in the oldest legible notation in the text, and after 1880, the year of the 3rd edition of work, in which De Amicis chose to remove some tales present in the first two editions.

The specimen examined by us is literally peppered with annotations of different types, which offer concrete evidence of the strong impact generated on the reading public by De Amicis' writing, already characterized in this first literary experience by a strong, enveloping and at the same time reassuring pedagogical *vis*, capable of establishing a direct line of communication with the text's users²⁴. There are several extra-textual notes that appear in the form of a simple signature, perhaps accompanied by a date, as in the case of the one left by Massimo Lanari, who three times says he read the book on 7 October 1929 («Lanari Massimo read 7-10-29»)²⁵. The annotations in the form of short comments, often anonymous, are equally well represented: «Nice, beautiful (book)»²⁶, «Military life is beautiful»²⁷, sometimes also with multiple signatures «Beautiful. Santuzzi Angelo, Barnabi Aldo, Properzi Benedetto, Mari Ninni, Fermo Permontagni»²⁸. For the most part they are short judgments with a positive sign, but among these – as was inevitable – there is also the negative annotation of those who say: «very ugly on my opinion»²⁹.

The presence of “cultured” notes, expressed in Latin («Hoc liber est multus pulcher»)³⁰, French («Ce livre est beau», «Ce livre est tres bel, Isaia Biribe, Macerata 5-3-1904»)³¹ or containing Latinisms («Letto da Barbanè Alio. Pulcherrimo»)³² is striking. Among these, an anonymous note in French stands out, as it reveals a genuine attachment to the

Dota, *La vita militare di Edmondo De Amicis: storia linguistico-editoriale di un best-seller postunitario*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2017, in particular chapter 2.

²¹ Cf. Dota, *La vita militare di Edmondo De Amicis*, cit., p. 243.

²² E. De Amicis, *La vita militare*, s.l., s.n, n.d.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁴ Jacomuzzi, «*Cittadini forti ... soldati intrepidi*», cit., pp. 13-14.

²⁵ De Amicis, *La vita militare*, cit., p. 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, inside side of the cover.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, inside side of the cover.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 19.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

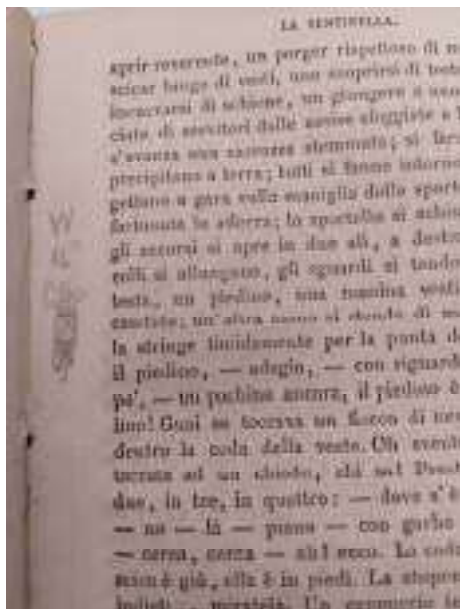


Fig. 6. Children writings praising fascism in *La vita militare* by E. De Amicis (n.d.)

mother country and to the family: «Je ne suis encore qu'un enfant mais j'aime de tout mon cher ma patrie»³³.

Playful annotations were also to be expected, which go well with the young age of the readers and from which the “comradely” atmosphere that accompanies the letter of the text shines through. They range from the classic «My name is me, your name is you, who is more of a donkey, me or you?», very frequent in the annotated copies preserved in the Macerata library, to extemporaneous comments, which translate the thoughts of a moment into words, without any filter: «Read by Manuele Mercurio. Maybe it's nice but who knows, when I read it I'll tell you the result. You see what I wrote is nonsense»³⁴. Other annotations interact directly with the text in order to elicit a smile. So, following the header of the story *Una sassata* (*Hit with a stone*) a reader adds: «in head, well done»³⁵.

In one case a sort of question and answer is sketched out between two readers, whereby where one student writes «Beautiful», another, with a touch of irreverence typical of young boys, adds «a little bit» in front of «Beautiful» and specifies «in my opinion this story (referring to the *Carmela* tale) is very bad, especially since De Amicis's novels are copied all from my grandfather. Pignà»³⁶. The frequent treasure hunt for a name was inevitable, («This book is beautiful, do you want to know my name? Go to page 9»), which in the case of this book seems interminable, there are so many cross-references between the pages, and in the end there is no solution, i.e. we do not get to discover the name of this bold rascal³⁷.

We also have readers who intervene in the text trying to integrate it, as happens in the inaugural tale *Una marcia d'estate* (*A summer march*), where at the point where De Amicis states «Good! And we went, and we went...», a reader adds «there towards the distant...» and further on in the passage where the author notes «Oh you see how that tail goes! Body of...», the same hand cannot avoid adding «body of a thousand whales»³⁸. But there are also interventions which provide indications for the readers who will follow. So, in the first page of the volume we read «*Carmela* is the most beautiful story», a judgment

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 19, 89, 29, 16, 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

that is confirmed later on by another reader with a personal affirmation of disarming spontaneity: «The most beautiful story in this book is *Carmela*. Read it and you will be happy!!!???? Unfortunately, it's true! I thought it was bad and instead I was amazed»³⁹. We can imagine that the surprise of this reader to discover the beauty of the tale lies in the fact that, as can already be inferred in some way from the title, it has nothing but a tenuous link to the military life that the work promises to sketch⁴⁰.

Other extra-textual interventions are symptomatic of the historical period in which they were written. Here in the heart of the text, we find a part of the anthem of the Italian popular party founded by Don Sturzo: «White flag, beautiful flag / you are the star, you are the star / white flag, star flag / you are the star of society / shield crusader will protect us»; which is followed by the unsettling comment of a reader, probably from the Fascist era, who recites: «verses by Don Sturzo that imbecile»⁴¹. The squadrist attitude typical of the Fascist period emerges preponderantly in other notes too, which follow the regime's slogan rhetoric, emphasized by the use of capital letters: «Hurray the DUCE, Hurray THE KING, Hurray ITALY», «The nerves in place, the KING cannot be touched», «Nerves in order, the Duce cannot be touched»⁴². In this context, the symbol par excellence of Fascism, the fasces, could not be left out, which appears three times in the volume, in one of which it is preceded by an abbreviated form of Hurray (W) (Figure 6)⁴³. But the comments resulting from the Fascism era do not stop there and in one specific case, the full force of an ideology descended from on high in a non-critical way, permeating minds and hearts, appears. Thus, in the tale *Una sassata* (*Hit with a stone*), where De Amicis describes the moment in which a sentry is hit by a stone on the forehead by a scoundrel who has sprung up from a “shapeless crowd” of cocky villagers intent on insulting and provoking the soldiers of the guardhouse, a reader angered by the story comments solemnly:

It used to be like this, but now... now that we are in 1928 and the March on Rome has taken place, led by Mussolini... now everything has changed and even the soldier, and perhaps most of all, is considered according to his merit!⁴⁴

The annotations that refer to the boarders and the reading practices adopted in the boarding school are particularly interesting. In the first pages of the work, a reader reveals that: «This book was seized and not returned to Leto Pietro»⁴⁵, while further on another states: «This book is very beautiful and my brother has it. Montesi Salvatore»⁴⁶. These notes, on the one hand, confirm that the books passed from hand to hand between boarders, who at times came from the same family, and on the other, reveal to us that in particular situations, these same books were confiscated by the educators, due to, we

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 46.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jacomuzzi, «*Cittadini forti ... soldati intrepidi*», cit., p. 49.

⁴¹ De Amicis, *La vita militare*, cit., p. 283.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 28, 60.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 231, 234, 239.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.



Fig. 7. Children writings in *La vita militare* by E. De Amicis (n.d.)

note, which he shares with his companions and future users of the book, delivering a profound message of care and attention towards dearest loved ones: «Oh comrade, love your mother, because she is the dearest person in the family. I'm sorry but my poor mother poisoned herself when I was 8 years old. Cicolella»⁴⁸ (Figure 7).

This represents one of the many surprises that can be discovered by leafing through the pages of annotated texts conserved in the “G. Leopardi” library in Macerata, from which the echoes of the voices that resounded through the classrooms, corridors and rooms of a long-lived educational institution often emerge, where generations and generations of students were welcomed, all animated by the hope of building a better future through education.

Conclusions

The story of the “Giacomo Leopardi” boarding school library in Macerata reconstructed here constitutes an exemplary case study, which allows us to highlight the multiple possibilities of analysis offered by a “polysemic” and versatile object of study such as school libraries. We started from the typological study, regarding literary genres,

imagine, valid reasons. Another student, alongside a frequent positive judgment on the text, name and the date on which he finished reading it, also tells us one more detail: «This book is very beautiful and this is assured by Bicolella Ferdinando born in Foggia on 2 November 1914, who finished reading the *Military Life* on 23-7-1927 in Fontespina»⁴⁷. The locality of Fontespina, in Civitanova Marche, appears, which is where the boarders used to spend the summer period in a villa lent to the boarding school. We often find this fact in the extra-textual notes left on specimens in the Macerata library, as proof of the fact that the warmer months included reading among the recreational activities.

However, the personal annotation that more than any other causes surprise due to the intensity of the emotions it arouses is the one that appears at the start of the tale *The Mother*. This word evidently evokes a painful memory in the reader signing the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

then moving on to the authorial one, focusing on the most frequently found authors, reaching the analysis of typographical data, developing reflections regarding the years of edition and the publishers. We also examined donations and the indications related to class libraries inside the boarding school library. Finally, we concluded our analysis path with ideas and suggestions deriving from a completely new field of study in the historical-educational field, the extra-textual elements. We thus intended to show some of the various facets that characterize a school library, the ones that in our opinion are most significant and capable of restoring the image of a precious and unique place of memory, as it tells many stories, which we can read as part of a cultural heritage waiting to be revealed, understood and shared.

In this direction, historical analysis is assigned the essential task of stimulating processes of re-discovery and re-appropriation of that heritage, capable of promoting the perception of that school library as a cultural asset belonging to a community, not just a school one, but also civil, as it brings together different generations and helps to determine the identity of a place. And then, the school library becomes that “deposit” of school memories, where the personal experiences of those who attended that school are intertwined with the processes of transmission of cultural and educational canons, which the catalogs of that library allow to be reconstructed, thus revealing the complex web of individual and collective variables that a school institution welcomes and that a school library bring to light. As we have tried to demonstrate here, through the study of the books of a specific school library, one can make the leap that leads from the great scenarios of a national nature on school history to local realities. It is that passage that allows us to explore cross-sections of micro-history, from which it is possible to understand the ways in which educational practices have been translated into specific geographical and socio-cultural contexts, and more. As both a source and heritage, these “school books” in some cases allow the recovery of individual, collective and even public memories⁴⁹. In fact, we find ourselves faced with objects that shed glimpses of light on slices of real scholastic and non-scholastic life, concerning individuals, but which – through historical research – can become part of the heritage of a community. This heritage has a tangible side, made up of concrete physical objects, but also contains intangible elements of unparalleled value, textures of memories, sensations, experiences and personal opinions, which are waiting to be rediscovered and enhanced⁵⁰.

⁴⁹ In this case, we want to refer to the concept of school memory, which – as noted by Antonio Viñao and Juri Meda – can be declined in an individual form, which pertains to one’s scholastic experience and how it is reconstructed personally by the individual, and in an individual, collective and/or public form that implies a shared school background. We intend to refer to the latter meaning. Cf. J. Meda, A. Viñao, *School Memory. Historiographical Balance and Heuristic Perspectives*, in Yanes-Cabrera, Meda, Viñao (edd.), *School memories. New Trends in the History of Education*, cit., pp. 1-9.

⁵⁰ Cf. C. Yanes Cabrera, J.M. Somoza Rodríguez, *Museos escolares: el patrimonio material e inmaterial de la educación como conciencia crítica*, in A. Mayordomo Pérez, M. del Carmen Agulló Díaz, G. Garcia Frasquet (edd.), *El patrimoni historico-educatiu valencià. V Jornades d’Història de l’Educació Valenciana (Gandia, 30 i 31 d’octubre de 2009)*, València, Universitat de València – Departamento de Educación Comparada e Historia de la Educación – Centre de Estudis i Investigacions Comarcals Alfons el Vell, 2011, pp. 97-111.

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The School and Its Many Pasts

History is not memory; both, however, affect the way we perceive the past. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on memory in order to critically analyze shared narratives of the past and their implications. Memory studies not only allow us to expand our knowledge about the past, but also help us to define the way in which today's people, social groups and public bodies look at it and interpret or re-interpret it. In this sense, school memory is not only of interest as a gateway to the school's past but also as a tool to understand what they know or believe they know about the school of the past and how much what they know corresponds to reality or is influenced by prejudices and stereotypes deeply rooted in common sense. These volumes aim to address these complex issues and broaden the perspective from which the schooling phenomenon is analyzed to better understand the school and its many pasts.

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