

## Anti-fascism for children: Ada Gobetti's story of Sebastiano the rooster

Jomarie Alano\*

*Cornell Institute for European Studies, Ithaca, NY, USA*

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Ada Gobetti's *Storia del gallo Sebastiano* represents one of her many anti-fascist activities. By the time of the story's creation, Ada Gobetti had lived under fascism for 16 years. While *Sebastiano* descended from a long line of non-conformists in children's literature, it imparted a very specific ideological and political agenda, since *Sebastiano* was born at the height of fascism. Read by thousands of Italian children during the war, the story provided a clever critique of Mussolini's attempt to make children conform to the fascist ideal. Through *Sebastiano*, Ada Gobetti enlisted parents and their children in her efforts to urge Italians to resist fascism. After the war, as vice-mayor of Turin, the first woman to hold such a position in Italy, Ada Gobetti worked diligently to effect positive reforms in the schools, and fought openly for the rights of Italian women and children. She also wrote extensively on child rearing and devoted much of the remainder of her life to pedagogic activities to promote a 'democratic education' for both children and their parents.

**Keywords:** anti-fascism; fascism; children; educational reform; Mussolini; Turin; Italy; Ada Gobetti

One day in 1938, on the occasion of a visit by Mussolini to the city of Turin, inveterate anti-fascist Ada Gobetti, her second husband, Ettore Marchesini, and her 12-year-old son, Paolo Gobetti, decided to go hiking in the mountains in the Susa Valley near Meana. They wanted to escape the parades and fanfare in Turin that celebrated the fascist dictator's arrival. But even in remote Meana, at the railway station, important because the train led to France through the Frejus tunnel, they saw the words 'AL DUCE' and 'ALL' IMPERO' written in giant letters. Disgusted, they decided to go farther up the mountain. While they were walking, in order to 'distract themselves and vent their scorn', they decided to tell a story. After concluding that an animal would provide the best choice of subject matter for their tale – 'better adapted to making it more human while at the same time lending itself to fantasy' – Ada spent some time discussing with Ettore and Paolo what animal to choose:

But what animal? A dog? Too commonplace and pathetic. A tom-cat? Given my deep passion for cats the idea attracted me, but I rejected it, fearing that it would give the story a character that was too autobiographical. A horse? Too detached. A wild beast? Too difficult to adapt. A fish? Too silent. For this very reason, Ettore would have liked it, but it did not fit our purpose. One cannot write a story about someone who never talks! A swallow? Too intellectual and sentimental. A rooster? Why not? One of our neighbours, who was really a bit

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\*Email: [jma49@cornell.edu](mailto:jma49@cornell.edu)

odd, had at home in her residence in the city a little rooster who acted in an unnatural way...singing during the hours of the night.... This type would do fine for a protagonist.

A name for the rooster became the next problem. Among the names of Paolo's schoolmates, Sebastiano seemed the most fitting. By the end of their outing, Sebastiano was born, had a family and began to demonstrate his characteristic qualities, 'that were not always very appropriate'. This *bastian contrario*, to use a familiar Piemontese expression, loved to question and contradict, often just for the sake of doing so.<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, one might think Sebastiano descended from a long line of non-conformists in children's literature. Isa Tutino called Sebastiano the 'grand-nephew of Andersen's famous ugly duckling'.<sup>2</sup> Laura Almazià Coppola placed *Sebastiano* within the 'tradition of literature for children that elects as protagonists characters who do not conform to the rules of society, and are therefore destined to live difficult moments before they find a key to incorporation with the surrounding world'. She gave as examples Collodi's *The Little Pink Monkey* (1887), different from his siblings because of his colour; Vamba's *Ciondolino* (1895), who, since he did not adapt to the life of a student, preferred to transform himself into an insect; and Bonsels' *Apemaia* (1912), who rebelled against roles imposed upon him. Yet while the story of Sebastiano championed thinking for oneself, maintaining a positive attitude and finding one's own place in society – values that can be applied to any time period – it imparted a very specific ideological and political agenda. Almazià Coppola hinted at this when she wrote that Sebastiano scandalised because of his unexpected personal choices, arguing that the allusive symbols in the story were meant to transmit a message to the children of the time, a message that remained a 'valid warning...for every time period,' but that 'in those years carried even greater implications' (1988, 45–6). But Ada Gobetti claimed a more explicit intention:

The strange little rooster, who never succeeded in walking in step with the others, who always did exactly the opposite of what was expected of him, on the contrary embodied in himself a symbol of the need for anti-conformity that has been alive in all children since the beginning of time. It assumed a particular meaning and value in that period of almost absolute and complete conformity, because Sebastiano the rooster was born at the height of fascism.<sup>3</sup>

Sebastiano's anti-fascist message should come as no surprise. By the time of his creation, Ada Gobetti had lived under fascism for 16 years. Moreover, she resided in Turin where, as Nicola Tranfaglia has argued, the thousands of manifestations of subversive activity and cooperation between members of the working class and bourgeois intellectuals made it one of the first cities in Italy to manifest opposition to the dictator Mussolini (*Mezzosecolo* 7, 308). After 1922, Ada's first husband, Piero Gobetti, published openly his opposition to Mussolini, and the anti-fascist battle became the main focus of his journal, *La Rivoluzione Liberale*. In reprisal, fascist thugs beat Piero on several occasions, so severely that he developed a permanent heart lesion, which contributed to his death at the age of 24 from bronchitis while in exile in Paris, leaving Ada and their newborn son alone. Anti-fascist compatriots of Ada and Piero Gobetti in Turin included writers Primo Levi, Carlo Levi and Natalia Ginzburg; historian of the Enlightenment Franco Venturi; communist leaders Antonio Gramsci and Camilla Ravera; philosopher Norberto Bobbio; musicologist Massimo Mila; economist Luigi Einaudi; and attorney and women's rights activist Bianca Guidetti Serra. During the 1930s, Ada engaged in an eclectic variety of resistance activities. She translated foreign titles from English into Italian, in particular Herbert Albert Laurens Fisher's *A history of Europe* (1935), which Sergio Caprioglio called 'a testimony to those

values of liberty that were becoming trampled upon in Italy', censored by the Fascists in 1939 because of its severe criticisms of Adolf Hitler (*Mezzosecolo* 7, 233). She provided a place for anti-fascist colleagues to meet, kept communication lines open among other anti-fascist individuals, produced and distributed leaflets attacking Mussolini's regime and maintained contacts with Italian anti-Fascists living in France. She also participated actively in the Turinese cell of Carlo Rosselli's underground *Giustizia e Libertà* movement, along with many other women such as Barbara Allason, Giuliana Segre Giorgi and Luisa Sturani Monti. Stanislao Pugliese acclaimed Ada as 'the most active woman' in both *Giustizia e Libertà* and its political heir, the *Partito d'Azione* (1999, 175).

In addition to Sebastiano's anti-fascist roots, he represented Ada's longstanding interest in children and educational reform. Reform of the Italian educational system occupied the minds of many after the First World War, and Ada and Piero were no exception. A group known as the neo-idealists boasted three eminent figures in educational reform – Giovanni Gentile, Ernesto Codignola and Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice. They broke off from the *Federazione nazionale degli insegnanti delle scuole medie* and, along with Balbino Giuliano, founded the *Fascio di educazione nazionale* in the belief that education should remedy the 'moral and political failings revealed by the war' (Koon 1985, 39–40; Lyttelton 1973, 404–5). Gentile and Lombardo-Radice wrote many of the articles on education in the student periodical, *Energie Nove*, which Piero founded and where Ada was a member of the editorial board. In the March 1919 issue, Piero advocated the 'development of the critical mind', arguing that 'to transform the schools' was 'to transform men and society' (Gobetti 1919, 125). Wilda M. Vanek argued that the decision to cast their lot with the idealists in the autumn of 1919 and to propagandise the work of the *Fascio* to promote the idealists' reform of schools in the last issues of *Energie Nove* proved unfortunate, since the *Fascio* ultimately became aligned with Mussolini (1965, 4–5). As this became evident, Piero severed his relationship with the *Fascio*, and he and Ada realised they would not be able to effect changes in the educational system in Italy during that time. After Piero's death, Ada taught English in Bra and Savigliano outside Turin, but had to wait until after the Second World War to advance her ideas regarding child rearing and education.

Ada's story of Sebastiano the rooster warrants a thorough examination for several reasons. Themes that appeared in the children's story – optimism, motherhood, friendship and the power of education to change a nation – would reappear in her later life of resistance and reform. Her clever sense of humour, so evident in the children's story, endeared her to children and adults alike, and made her ideas accessible to a diverse audience. Characterisations of the animals mirrored Italian society of the 1930s. In response to fascism and its myths, Ada offered a fable of her own. The book began as a very personal act of resistance by Ada and her family – leaving Turin to avoid Mussolini's arrival. She shared it first with her immediate family, then with the family of Italian senator and philosopher Benedetto Croce, her close friend and mentor, and later with other friends and acquaintances. With the book's publication, it reached a wider audience. By writing the story, Ada enlisted parents and their children in her efforts to urge Italians to resist fascism.

Read by thousands of Italian children during the war, the story provided a clever critique of Mussolini's attempt to make children conform to the fascist ideal, and gave them a spark of optimism during a time of oppression of basic freedoms. By making children her primary audience, Ada reached beyond the present difficulties of life under

fascism and spoke to those who would direct the future of Italy. Ada addressed the mothers of Italy – women who in 1938 could not vote, share in the ownership of property or participate in many aspects of government, but who could influence their children. Finally, Ada cheered her anti-fascist friends by providing reading material for their children – children who faced fascist propaganda daily in school, and who had to join one of the several fascist youth groups, comprising nearly 200,000 children in the Province of Turin alone.

Ada's choice to turn her anger and frustration into something positive and constructive had many important implications. While she could not keep Mussolini from visiting Turin, she could go to her beloved mountains, amuse her son and begin a new family project. Family outings became not only an escape from the fascist world that was growing increasingly restrictive, but also a creative venture that gave the threesome something to look forward to at the end of the week. While they avoided the fascist atmosphere, they also confronted it as they verbalised their feelings while crafting the story. Always a person who could maintain her sense of humour and optimism, even during the gravest of situations, Ada found joy amidst the despair that surrounded her. She used the story as a way of keeping her own family together during a period of turmoil and fear.

During their Sunday outings, either in the mountains or on bicycles, Ada, Ettore and Paolo continued their story. Each family member contributed episodes, modelling new characters after friends and acquaintances. At one point Ada decided to write down the story, and Ettore began to illustrate it. Throughout the story, Ada confronted with humour the realities of life under fascism, exposing their absurdity without attacking them head-on. Cleverly and subtly, she provided a glimpse into several aspects of fascist life: fascist insistence on absolute conformity; the fascist educational system; fascist blind adherence to rules and regulations; fascist leisure-time activities; fascist militarism and the young; and the fascist focus on physical education. Ada's fable drew upon aspects of life in Italy under fascism that became part of the daily experience of every Italian during Mussolini's reign.

Ada's story also provided a critique of the members of the bourgeoisie who emphasised outward appearances over substance and adherence to convention over integrity and individuality. Many bourgeois had accepted fascism on the surface, without questioning its motives, thinking more about promotion or saving their skin than long-term consequences for Italy and the Italians. Nor was the bourgeoisie shaken by the March on Rome. In her memoirs, Ada's contemporary Barbara Allason observed:

Sceptical and inattentive by nature, little educated politically, accustomed to consider politicians to be meddling people, if not exactly dishonest, always individuals with a conscience that was a bit elastic, they [the bourgeoisie] placed them all [the Fascists] in a group . . . .

. . . Of Mussolini, they said, 'We will see what he will do.' Meanwhile, he was acting honestly (or seemed to be) and this always pleased the great majority. (1961, 25)

Allason remembered Mussolini's 'too seductive' voice, promising the Italians that their legal rights would be protected, and criticised the members of the bourgeoisie who believed him. In contrast to the fascist conformity and bourgeois adaptability it mocked, the story of Sebastiano paid tribute to individuality, liberty and optimism, offering a kind of survival manual for children living during very difficult times.

Sebastiano's family, the Perbenino family, had a reputation for conformity and bourgeois good repute. (The diminutive adjective *per benino* implied mediocrity elevated to a standard of quality and respectability.) Sebastiano's mother, Piumaliscia, so named for the smoothness of her feathers, had the same name as her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, in fact, like that of all of the first-born hens of the family, who all had an invariably smooth comb and were 'wise, prudent and orderly' (Figure 1). Ada described Piumaliscia's exemplary characteristics:

She opened her eyes (first the right and then the left) exactly when the sun rose. She always made the same number of pecks on the *polenta*. She scratched in the place established by the rules, and according to the seasons. She sang 'cluck cluck' in the same identical tone. And she laid with precision one egg each day for all of the days of the week except for Sunday, which was a day of rest. (*GS*, 8, 12)<sup>4</sup>

Nicomede the pheasant, a prominent member of farmyard society known for his good breeding, admired Piumaliscia greatly: 'She is magnificent . . . magnificent, I tell you, for her regularity and precision' (*GS*, 36). Such exactness and precision recalled the official fascist style of greeting, dressing, walking, eating, writing, speaking and talking demanded of Italians during Mussolini's reign, exacerbated by the imposition of the Roman salute upon all state employees in 1926, and the prohibition against shaking hands (Koon 1985, 11, 65, 111–12).

In the world of the Perbenino family, perfection meant compliance with one established norm. Each of Piumaliscia's broods of eggs formed a perfect dozen, each egg of exactly the same size and perfect oval shape. As a counterpart to Piumaliscia, Ada introduced her first exception to the rule, a certain hen named Arcadia, one of Piumaliscia's ancestors, who 'was neither wise nor prudent nor orderly' (*GS*, 8). Arcadia admired herself in a puddle for so long that she fell asleep, falling into the water and splashing herself with mud. She cackled in the middle of the night, disturbing the entire hen coop. She regularly forgot to lay eggs. One day Arcadia became so preoccupied

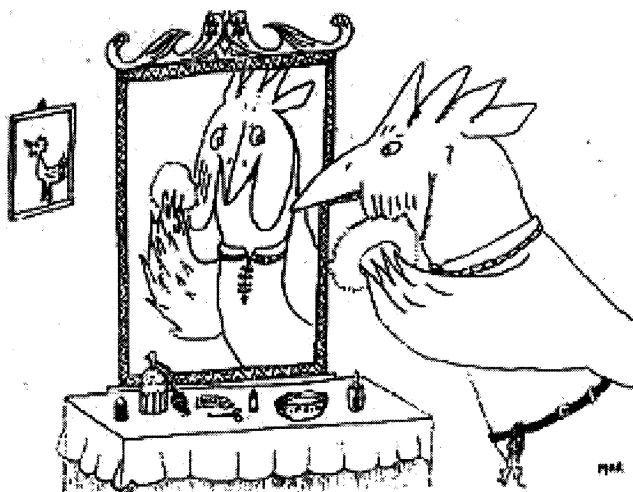


Figure 1. Piumaliscia.



counting the feet of a centipede, an exceptionally difficult task since she could only count to 10 and had to begin over and over again, that she forgot to guard the *polenta*. A *Piemontese* favourite, *polenta* would be an appropriate meal for refined chickens, a sort of substitute for the unrefined corn of chicken feed. Serafina the owl, another non-conformist who slept during the night and woke up during the day, jumped on the *polenta* and devoured it. Serafina suffered a cruel fate for her gluttony. She had to drink castor oil. Many suffered a similar fate at the hands of fascist squads, who administered castor oil by the litre in order to purge individuals of dissident behaviour (Mack Smith 1982, 356). After discovering that the *polenta* had disappeared, Arcadia cried 'Oh, poor me!' and suffered 'a blow that made her lose what little brain she had and conducted her prematurely to the pot' (GS, 9–10). Arcadia's story might seem a moralistic tale worthy of the Fascists who upheld conformity as an ideal, and punished non-conformity exceedingly. But conformity was not Ada's message. Ada's hero, Sebastiano, surpassed his ancestor Arcadia in lack of conformity and not only survived to tell about it, but learned a great deal about the world and himself in the process.

The Perbenino family created its coat of arms from the story of Arcadia the hen and Serafina the owl. On the shield, an owl arose, armed with a spoon and fork, in a hen coop full of *polenta*. A Latin motto intersected the figure: 'Civitas magna et opulenta opperuit me'. In parentheses, Ada wrote: 'For those of you who do not know Latin, this means 'The owl eats all the *polenta*, oh poor me!' (GS, 10). But her translation into Italian was a play on the Latin words. Instead, the Latin motto really meant, 'the great and powerful city has subjugated me':

*civitas* (city) – *civetta* (owl)

*magna* (great) – *mangia* (eats)

*opulenta* (powerful) – *polenta* (*polenta*)

*opperuit me* (has subjugated me) – *o povera me* (Oh, poor me) (GS, 10)

A large version of this coat of arms graced the central wall of the classroom, and Piumaliscia trained her chicks to repeat the Latin motto on the shield. Tracy H. Koon argued that the use of Latin in the schools had a twofold purpose: to provide mental stimulation and to kindle national feelings. Another hen, Adalgisa, envied Piumaliscia her coat of arms with its Latin motto. Cassandra the guinea fowl also dreamt of a noble past. She was so fond of the idea of descending from the pharaohs of ancient Egypt that she had her house built in the shape of a pyramid, always spoke in riddles and maxims, and tried to resemble a mummy as much as possible. Such characters served to satirise fascist propaganda that created a fictitious noble past for Italy, just as the Latin motto evoked Mussolini's claim to return to the glory of the Roman Empire. Koon called the political myths of fascism 'the appearance rather than the substance of fascism, what the regime said it was rather than what it was in reality'. Since these myths were 'inculcated from infancy and insistently repeated', they offered 'an answer to youthful aspirations and hopes... [and] to their desire for progress and liberty' (1985, 8, 50–1).

Ada also used the story of Arcadia the hen to poke fun at a fascist educational tactic – that of using repetition as a way to educate, instead of forming critical intellects. Koon indicated that, at the beginning of the *fascistizzazione* of the schools, 'a tug of war' existed between 'teachers who did not want the school to lose its true function of developing critical minds and those who stressed political education' (1985, 63). Following what Ada

called their 'pedagogical system', Piumaliscia taught her chicks about Arcadia, employing instructive verses and maxims 'designed to instil in their tender minds a horror of carelessness and a love for wisdom, order, and precision'. As a result, 'the little chickens grew up to be so wise and orderly that it was a beauty' (*GS*, 10–12)!

One day Piumaliscia's precise, ordered world came apart. While she prepared to put her eggs into the nest that had been in the Perbenino family for generations, she discovered, among the other perfectly shaped 11 eggs, one ugly, misshapen egg with a strange protuberance. She had never seen such an ugly egg, especially not among her always-perfect brood. Piumaliscia was so distraught that for the first time in her life she skipped her fixed schedule for sitting on her eggs (every day from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and from 2:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m.) and went out for a walk. When she returned, the misshapen egg had disappeared. Somewhat relieved, Piumaliscia laid another, completing her perfect dozen. But she subsequently found the distorted egg under her hat, and faced her odd-numbered brood of 13 with dismay:

The situation bordered on the dramatic. It was terrible enough that there had been a crooked egg in the brood, but even more terrible to have a brood of thirteen eggs. Who had ever heard of a thirteen of eggs? And what would she do for half a thirteen? Cut an egg in half? Never! (*GS*, 16)

Beside herself with anxiety, Piumaliscia decided to seek the advice of Calisto, a revered old rooster who lived on the edge of town. The respect accorded Calisto arose not only from his age and good judgement, but also from his many eccentric traits, which provided a welcome contrast to the rigidly governed lives of the hens. Calisto, with his nearsightedness, stuttering, deafness and absent-mindedness, was so unlike the 'perfect' hens that they thought of him as a creature from another world. Everyone turned to Calisto when they needed advice on an important matter.

Ada's daughter-in-law Carla Gobetti said the wise rooster Calisto was modelled after Benedetto Croce.<sup>5</sup> Like Ada in her relationship with Croce, Piumaliscia found her meeting with Calisto to be enlightening and freeing. To her surprise, Calisto told Piumaliscia to hatch the misshapen egg and name the chick Sebastiano, a name unheard of in the Perbenino family, since the family scroll listed only 12 names, one for each chick in the dozen. Piumaliscia went home, surprised at what Calisto had said, but somehow feeling lighter. Calisto had lifted her worries and given her a feeling of serenity and peace (*GS*, 22–4).

When the day for hatching the chicks arrived, Piumaliscia was nervous about facing her most important neighbours who had gathered for a sort of 'coming out party' to welcome the chicks and receive them into good society. Here Ada portrayed the bourgeoisie at its finest – Adalgisa the hen, hardly able to contain her envy for Piumaliscia's noble family; Graziella the duck, a ballerina who won the International Prize for Good Department; Nicomede the pheasant, complete with his top hat, monocle and expertise on good breeding; Cassandra the guinea fowl, proclaiming maxims when not trying to model her Egyptian ancestors who were mummies; turtle doves Ida and Odo Cuormío, so in love that they hardly noticed those around them; and Il Pavone the peacock, who held up the ceremonies by being late. Piumaliscia worried about her misshapen thirteenth egg and the gossip that would follow: 'Ugly is ugly...crooked is crooked...and what is more, it is the thirteenth. How can I present it to all these curious eyes? Imagine the gossip!' (*GS*, 35). Contrary to Calisto's advice, Piumaliscia hid the

misshapen egg outside and proudly but nervously brought forth her perfect dozen, just as she had in previous years. With a tap on each shell, she watched proudly as each of her 12 chicks came into the world:

Suddenly, the shell opened in two exact halves and a little yellow chick came out, all combed, with a little blue tassel around its neck. It bowed graciously to the guests . . . . The operation was repeated another eleven times. At the end, all that remained in the cradle were twenty-four half shells that were then distributed to the guests for good luck. (*GS*, 38–9)

Piumaliscia's favourite part of the ceremony was the parade across the threshing floor with her chicks behind her. Animal observers from all over the farmyard threw worms and pebbles, transforming the walk into what Ada called a 'real and true triumphal march' (*GS*, 41–2). Ada may have been thinking of the fascist parade she had avoided on the day she and her family began the story of Sebastiano. Parades, fanfares and militarism formed a large part of fascist spectacle and education. Writer Rosetta Loy recalled her brother's schooling around 1937: 'Every Saturday in all the schools of Mussolini's Italy, the program includes drill: exercises, marches, and muskets to train the boys for war' (2000, 25). Susanna Agnelli, granddaughter of the founder of Fiat, also cited the importance of parades:

I am eleven years old. Mussolini is coming to Turin. They are going to have an enormous *adunata*, a meeting of all the schoolchildren in their fascist uniforms doing a gym display at the stadium and then a parade across the middle of the town in military fashion. I love it (1975, 16).

While Piumaliscia was showing off her newborn chicks, the farmer's daughter found the thirteenth egg, thought Piumaliscia must have abandoned it because it was so ugly, and put it into a pan of water to hard-boil it for her lunch. Suddenly, the egg cracked, and out stepped a bewildered and very badly shaken Sebastiano:

'It's a chick,' she exclaimed, 'But what an ugly, ugly chick.' And no one could say she was wrong, because as ugly goes, it was truly ugly: a tiny, tiny little body with two thin little legs and an enormous head that it continually pulled down, its eye terrified, its beak very long, its feathers all tousled. (*GS*, 44)

Unlike his siblings in every possible way, Sebastiano entered the world affirming his non-conformity (Figure 2).

Sebastiano never would have succeeded in a fascist or bourgeois world. He did not look like anyone else, he had a misshapen physique and his birth was questionable. Here Ada spoke to the mothers of Italy, encouraging them to welcome individuality in their children. She commiserated with their problems, especially if they had a difficult child. Most importantly, she taught them to look at situations involving their children with understanding and humour. In her 2000 interview with the author, Carla Gobetti remarked that Ada used her own experiences as a mother to empathise with other mothers, patterning many of Sebastiano's precocious and often mischievous antics after those of Paolo, who did not always behave. In a letter to Ada from Naples, October 1928, Croce's eldest daughter Elena likened Paolo's misbehaviour to that of her younger sisters: 'You wrote me that Pé (Paolo) is not civilised – if you saw my illustrious sisters, you would be consoled' (*Mezzosecolo* 7, 47). Through Piumaliscia, Ada connected with the mothers of her readers. Piumaliscia mustered 'the courage of a lioness' when she dismissed the thought of scandal and introduced Sebastiano to farmyard society. Ada described the 'wave of sentiment [that] stirred the heart of poor Piumaliscia' when she gazed at her son



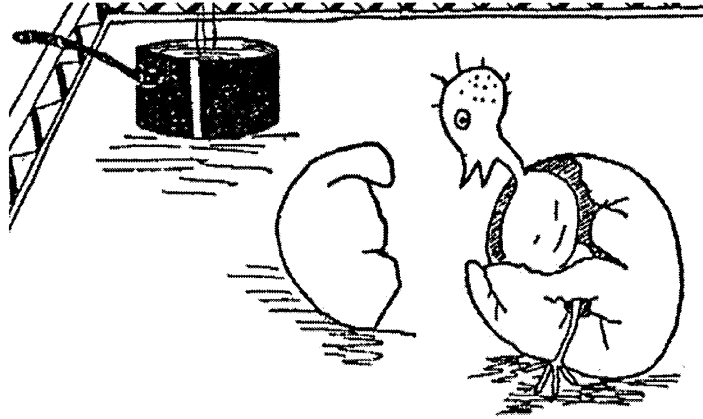


Figure 2. Sebastiano's birth.

for the first time, while the poor little chick struggled to hold up his enormous head. Ada concluded parenthetically, 'Maternal love and fundamental honesty can do so much, even in a nature corrupted by convention' (*GS*, 46). Piumaliscia – with her pride, protective feelings and courage – would appeal especially to mothers living in a society where they had little control over their children's lives. Like many mothers raising their families under fascism, Piumaliscia had to learn how to protect and accept a child who did not conform.

Still unwilling to believe that Sebastiano was strange, ugly and nothing more, Piumaliscia hoped Sebastiano might grow up to be an extraordinary rooster, maybe even a genius, and add more lustre to the Perbenino coat of arms. Yet Sebastiano's personal habits left much to be desired. He drank the soapy bath water and jumped into the clean drinking water. He pecked on the head of one of his siblings, mistaking it for *polenta*. Yet he never seemed to get discouraged. Piumaliscia dreamt that Sebastiano might have the mathematical abilities of an Archimedes, the inspiration of a musician or the soul of a poet. When she noticed that Sebastiano was absent-minded, she tried not to think of Arcadia, but instead of Calisto, whose absent-mindedness betrayed the characteristic of a true genius. Would her dreams 'remain in that realm of illusion in which mothers often construct the future of their children' (*GS*, 53)? Ada posed the question.

Ada's presentation of the Perbenino family's educational system offered a counterpart to the limitations and absurdities of fascist schools. Formal education for the chicks took place in a classroom with Piumaliscia the teacher and her chicks the only pupils. Ideas from outside the hen coop never reached this closed world. Koon argued that, 'without understanding how the fascist regime spoke to the young' through textbooks, organisations and youth-directed media, one could not 'really understand that the development of dissent or antifascism among them was not merely a change of political views but for many a deep internal struggle for liberation from an illusion once accepted as real' (1985, 8). Carmela Levi, who went to school under fascism and later fought in the *Resistenza*, contended that Mussolini's ability to attract young people was a reason for his long tenure in power.<sup>6</sup> While the chicks learned about ancestors like Arcadia, they gazed at portraits of heroic members of the Perbenino family displayed on the classroom walls. Piumaliscia lectured from a podium. Subjects included mathematics, music, antifascism

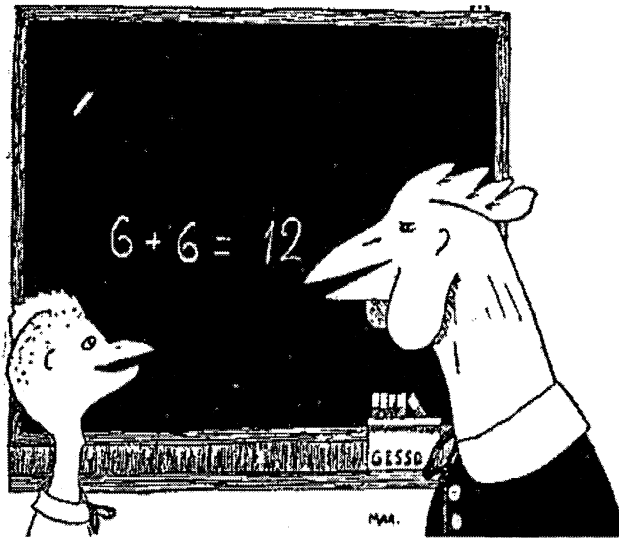


Figure 3. Sebastiano and arithmetic.

department and physical education. Ada remarked, ‘This first-rate hen gave her children a perfect education, not neglecting physical exercises designed to invigorate and develop their tender little bodies harmoniously’ (*GS*, 77).

Sebastiano eagerly tried to respond appropriately during the lessons, please his mother and satisfy his insatiable curiosity at the same time. Yet repetition of the family motto turned into a farce, as Sebastiano mixed up the words. During music lessons, he tried every note first before choosing the one the others were singing. Unwittingly, Sebastiano dashed his mother’s hopes, one by one. But Piumaliscia reached the end of her rope during the arithmetic lesson.

At first, Sebastiano seemed to have a true gift for mathematics (Figure 3). Then Piumaliscia posed what she thought was a simple question: ‘How much are two plus two?’ Sebastiano analysed the situation: ‘Why do two plus two always have to be four?’ he asked. ‘Can’t they be five just this once?’ While Piumaliscia tried to explain that arithmetic was not subject to opinion, Sebastiano continued:

- Can’t they at least equal four and a half?
- No, I tell you.
- Not even four and a quarter?
- No!
- Not even four and a little tiny bit? (*GS*, 65)

When it came to the question of six plus six, or to the twelve-times tables, Sebastiano simply refused to cooperate. As the thirteenth, he had a total aversion to the number 12. Piumaliscia had to admit to herself that Sebastiano would never be another Archimedes (*GS*, 67–8).

Teaching her chicks to march in step was one of Piumaliscia’s most important duties, but it seemed that Sebastiano would never master this activity. Then one day, Sebastiano

finally learned to keep pace with the others. In his enthusiasm, however, he marched right out of the farmyard. Piumaliscia did not realise he was gone until it was too late. Sebastiano was about to embark on an adventure that would change his life forever.

In a section of the book entitled 'Sebastiano on a Tour of the World', Sebastiano travelled from place to place, meeting animals he had never seen before, most of whom rejected him, not because of the way he looked, but simply because he was not like them. For example, the calves would not accept him into their school because he did not know how to say if he was absent or present. Since everyone's name was Vitello, roll call proceeded as follows, mimicking the ritual calling of the roll required at fascist youth group meetings:

- *Vitello*
- Present!
- *Vitello*
- Present!
- *Vitello*
- Absent!
- *Vitello*
- Present! (*GS*, 92)

Sebastiano encountered beaver, rabbits and pigs as well, but no one gave him a place to sleep or anything to eat. Overcome by misery, Sebastiano felt something caress his beak and saw a little blue butterfly flying around him, its wings illuminated by the sun, who seemed to sing: 'Poor rooster . . . your cruel luck has ended . . . Turn your gaze to the open skies . . . Smile and hope. Who knows, perhaps you will find new happiness' (*GS*, 108). Sebastiano looked around, noticed some greens that would make a nice little salad, dug up a few worms and found a pile of earth for a bed. He was pleased with himself. He had learned to be alone (*GS*, 109).

After many adventures, Sebastiano finally found his way home. Piumaliscia was overjoyed, but Sebastiano still did not fit in. He had seen so much of the world, and the others had not left the confines of the hen coop. Piumaliscia understood, and took him to see Calisto, where he would live for a while and learn from the elderly rooster. In what Almazià Coppola called 'the conclusion that does not conclude', Ada left it to the reader to imagine what adventures would challenge Sebastiano when he next left his home (1988, 45–6).

Among the story's first readers, Croce's younger daughters, Silvia, Lidia and Alda, were enchanted with Sebastiano and his adventures, and told their father about the book enthusiastically. Several months later, in a letter to Ada from Milan on 4 January 1940, Croce wrote that he had brought her story to the attention of a possible publisher:

I asked the reader-consultant Schinetti to come and pay me a visit. I then spoke to him about your work and enthusiastically recommended it to him. I don't know if it will come to anything . . . Garzanti, a new and inexperienced publisher, began by taking on . . . too many obligations . . . His wife is one of the readers, and this book for children certainly will be judged by her . . . Naturally, in order to speak about your work with the greatest effectiveness, I looked through it, if not read every part of it. And I had an excellent impression of it as to its literary form, because it is lively and charming. As a book for children, I do not know how to judge it with certainty, because I lack experience. Also, Ettore's drawings turned out very well. (*Mezzosecolo* 7, 136)

Despite his disclaimer, Croce did not exactly lack experience with educational issues. He had been Minister of Public Instruction under Giovanni Giolitti from June 1920 to July 1921. In an article in the 6 September 1925 issue of *La Rivoluzione Liberale* entitled 'Croce oppositore', Piero Gobetti had praised Croce's educational activities:

If you look closely at what he tried to do as Minister of Education, you will find that his constant preoccupation was not to . . . reform the institution but to make it function honestly. Therein lies the difference between Gentile, the dogmatic, authoritarian dictator . . . and Croce . . . capable of reflection and doubt, open to every human need, anxious to listen even to the simple voices of instinct and good sense. (2000, 51)

Minister of Education under Mussolini from 1922 to 1924, Giovanni Gentile had co-edited the periodical *La Critica* with Croce from 1903 to 1922. Croce ended his friendship with Gentile when the latter embraced fascism. After Mussolini's *coup d'état* of 3 January 1925 and the brutal speech that proclaimed force as the only course of action for Italy, Croce took a firm stand against fascism and, according to Charles Delzell, 'more than any other single Italian, best personified the unflinching, non-violent type of resistance to fascism' (1961, 87). On 1 May 1925, Croce had replied to Gentile's 21 April 1925 Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals with his scathing *Contromanifesto*, in which he described fascism as 'an incoherent and bizarre mixture of appeals to authority and demagogy, of professions of reverence for the laws, ultramodern concepts and moth-eaten bric-a-brac, absolutism and Bolshevism, unbelief and toadying to the Catholic Church, flight from culture and sterile reaching towards a culture without a basis, mystical languors and cynicism' (in Delzell 1961, 91 and n. 23). Croce's *Contromanifesto* marked the end of his relationship with Gentile and the beginning of his overt anti-fascist activities.

Ada was touched that Croce had gone to so much trouble to ensure the publication of her children's story, which she indicated in a letter to him from Turin on 22 January 1940 (*Mezzosecolo* 7, 137). In the interim, however, more important events had distracted Ada from the issue of the book's publication, namely the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. Ada decided it was time to solidify her contacts with her old anti-fascist friends in Milan. She concluded that the publication of a children's book would offer a perfect alibi for her frequent trips to the Lombard capital, where the publisher Garzanti had its headquarters.

On 22 March 1940, Ada wrote to Croce from Turin, saying that Garzanti definitely had decided to publish *Sebastiano* (*Mezzosecolo* 7, 140). Croce's letter to Ada from Naples on 30 December 1940 said that his girls were eagerly anticipating publication of her book, and were a little disappointed that it had not appeared for Christmas (*Mezzosecolo* 7, 158). By 11 January 1941, Ada finally sent *Sebastiano* to the Croce family, remarking in a letter to Croce from Turin: 'Its publication cheered me up and amused me a great deal.' Ada thanked Croce again: 'I am grateful to you for having helped me in this endeavour, as in everything else as well' (*Mezzosecolo* 7, 161).

Ada published *Storia del gallo Sebastiano ovverosia il tredicesimo uovo* under the pseudonym Margutte (Figure 4). Goffredo Fofi, a journalist and former editor of the historical and literary review *Linea d'Ombra*, suggested that political motives guided the decision to use a pseudonym, especially during a critical year like 1940, right after war broke out in Europe (*Mezzosecolo* 7, 314–315). Given that the police had been copying letters between Croce and Ada since May 1936, such precautions were not unwarranted. Ada Gobetti lived with other restrictions as well. At one point she could not cross the



Figure 4. *Sebastiano* by Margutte.

border into France and visit Piero's grave in Paris. Moreover, according to Carla Gobetti, she had been *schedata* by the Fascists (her name placed on some sort of list or card, most likely one filed with *Ovra*, the secret police).<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately for *Sebastiano*, a bombardment destroyed the first edition almost completely. From that time until Garzanti followed with a second edition in 1946, *Sebastiano* had to live 'an almost clandestine life, sought after only by those who knew him and wanted to introduce him to others'.<sup>8</sup> Ferdinando Virdia wrote that the 'optimistic conception of life' that emanated from the book concluded with 'a passionate faith in man, in his power to create, and in the intrinsic values of life' (1964). Henri Louette, who translated *Sebastiano* into French as *Un coq pas comme les autres*, paid tribute to the ageless values of the story:

A book of fresh originality, where the ancestral values that we violate each day, impertinent children that we are, so often blind and incorrigible, are vigorously renewed, to be so forever. A book of simplicity, that must be read several times on different levels, and, if it intends to charm the 'little ones,' also offers... many considerable morsels to 'grown-ups' (or those who believe they are)... The author... obviously... wanted it to be so. (1977, 11)

The teamwork between Ada and her family that created *Sebastiano* to lift their spirits during the summer of 1938 reappeared five years later, when Ada, Ettore and Paolo participated together in the *Resistenza* and offered their summer home in Meana as a



meeting place for *partigiani* in the Susa Valley. Ada chronicled daily her life as a partisan, and the notes became her *Diario partigiano*, which won the Premio Prato in 1956. Ada played a leadership role in two women's organisations born during the *Resistenza*, the *Gruppi di difesa della donna e per l'assistenza ai combattenti della libertà* and the *Movimento femminile 'Giustizia e Libertà'*. After the Second World War, she was a leading figure in the *Unione donne italiane* and a founder of the multinational *Federazione democratica internazionale delle donne*. As vice-mayor of Turin after the war, the first woman to hold such a position in Italy, Ada worked diligently to effect positive reforms in the schools, and fought openly for the rights of Italian women and children. She also wrote extensively on child rearing and devoted much of the remainder of her life to pedagogic activities to promote a 'democratic education' for both children and parents, including instituting the famous *scuole materne* before her death in 1968. Through her children's stories, books and articles for parents, and ideas for school reform, Ada could mould a new generation. Perhaps this generation of children – the first in nearly 25 years not to be schooled under fascism – could finally break the legacy of fascism.

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### Notes

1. Ada Gobetti. n.d. Unpublished manuscript concerning *Storia del gallo Sebastiano*. All translations from the Italian are my own unless otherwise indicated.
2. Tutino was referring to *The Ugly Duckling* by Hans Christian Anderson (1844).
3. Ada Gobetti. Unpublished manuscript concerning *Storia del gallo Sebastiano*.
4. Margutte [Ada Gobetti]. 1940. *Storia del gallo Sebastiano ovvero il tredicesimo uovo*. Milan: Garzanti. Croce appears to have proposed the pseudonym Margutte, perhaps because it combined Ada's two last names, Marchesini and Gobetti, or perhaps in reference to the character in Luigi Pulci's *Morgante*. The original drawings Ettore Marchesini created for the 1940 edition and signed 'Mar' are reproduced with the permission of Carla Gobetti. The name of Ada Gobetti appeared as the author and that of Ettore Marchesini as the illustrator for the first time in 1963, when Einaudi (Turin) published a reprint edition. Einaudi followed with another edition in 1981 and Einaudi Scuola (Milan) published an edition for Italian schools in 1992. The most recent edition by Fara Editore (Santarcangelo di Romagna) came out in 2004. A theatrical adaptation of the story, starring Serra Teatro and Marcello Chiarenza, debuted in 2004. Page numbers, given in the text and preceded by the initials *GS*, refer to the 1992 edition.
5. Carla Gobetti. October 9, 2000. Interview by author, Turin, Italy.
6. Carmela Levi. November 13, 2001. Interview by author, Turin, Italy.
7. Carla Gobetti. November 15, 2001. Interview by author, Reagle, Italy.
8. Ada Gobetti. Unpublished manuscript concerning *Storia del gallo Sebastiano*.

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