

## Dino Buzzati and Anglo-American Culture



Dino Buzzati and Anglo-American Culture:  
The Re-use of Visual and Narrative Texts  
in his Fantastic Fiction

By

Valentina Polcini

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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In its various phases this book has accompanied some years of my life, so that many people, knowingly or otherwise, have taken part in its completion. In a sense, this project started long ago, when, as a teenager, I picked out *Sessanta racconti* from my father's collection of Strega Prize winners. I still remember the sense of despondency Buzzati's stories left in my mind, and I am glad that first the PhD thesis, and now this book, have given me a chance to explore his work further.

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Finally I should say, that parts of this book have already been published elsewhere. Chapter Two has appeared as: "Buzzati e Rackham: una lettura intertestuale e intersemiotica di *Barnabo delle montagne* e *Il segreto del*

*Bosco Vecchio*", *Studi Buzzatiani* 13 (2008): 27-47, and "The Re-Use of Arthur Rackham's Illustrations in Dino Buzzati's Early Fiction", *Comparative Critical Studies* 8, no. 1 (2011): 61-79. While article versions of Chapter Three and Five respectively are: "Mysterious Apparitions in the Land of Darkness: The Influence of Conrad in Buzzati's Short Fiction", *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 12 (2013): 197-209; and "Between Two Traditions: The Fantastic in Dino Buzzati's Christmas Stories", *MLR* 105, no. 3 (July 2010): 713-31.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AB – *Album Buzzati*

ACC – “*A Christmas Carol*” and *Other Christmas Writings*

BDM – *Barnabo delle montagne*

CCR – *Il colombre e altri cinquanta racconti*

CDB – *Il crollo della Baliverna*

CFDB – *Le cronache fantastiche di Dino Buzzati*, vol. 2 (“*Fantasmì*”)

CSF – *Complete Shorter Fiction*

DBA – *Dino Buzzati—un autoritratto: Dialoghi con Yves Panafieu*

DT – *Il deserto dei Tartari*

IBS – *Il Buzzati “secondo”*

ISM – *I sette messaggeri*

LAB – *Lettere a Brambilla*

LBM – *La boutique del mistero*

LJ – *Lord Jim: A Tale*

MD – *Moby-Dick*

MI – *I misteri d’Italia*

ND – *Le notti difficili*

PNB – *Il panettone non bastò*

QPM – *In quel preciso momento*

RVW – *Rip Van Winkle*

SBV – *Il segreto del Bosco Vecchio*

SDC – *Il sudario delle caligini*

SR – *Sessanta racconti*



## INTRODUCTION

The imagination is never governed;  
it is always the ruling and Divine power:  
and the rest of the man is to it only  
as an instrument which it sounds,  
or a tablet on which it writes.

John Ruskin

Dino Buzzati is mostly known and acclaimed as the author of the novel *Il deserto dei Tartari*, which is indisputably the work that gained him notoriety.<sup>1</sup> However, this has brought about the commonplace notion of Buzzati's fame being associated almost exclusively with that novel, to the detriment of his varied and intense career. He was indeed a multifaceted writer and artist. His relationship with writing encompassed professional journalism and creative writing. At the age of 22 he entered the national daily *Corriere della Sera* for which he worked all his life covering different duties, from apprentice news reporter to assistant editor for the music column, war correspondent in Africa, crime news reporter, sports correspondent for the 1949 edition of the "Giro d'Italia", art critic and editor. Besides, Buzzati was a short story writer and novelist,<sup>2</sup> as well as a painter of some note,<sup>3</sup> poet, playwright, librettist and stage designer.

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<sup>1</sup> *Il deserto dei Tartari* first appeared in 1940. By that time Buzzati had published two novellas, *Bàrnabo delle montagne* and *Il segreto del Bosco Vecchio*, and a few short stories in *La Lettura*, the monthly literary supplement of the *Corriere della Sera*. The clichéd idea of *Deserto* being Buzzati's masterpiece was reinvigorated in the late 1970s thanks to Valerio Zurlini's award-winning film *Il deserto dei Tartari* (1976), a joint Italo-Franco-German production starring Jacques Perrin, Vittorio Gassman, Giuliano Gemma, Philippe Noiret, Jean-Louis Trintignant, Max von Sydow, and soundtracked by Ennio Morricone.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction I have made between short story writer (in the first place) and novelist is not at all accidental in Buzzati's case, since short fiction is arguably the form that best dovetails with his style. Of the same opinion is Rawson, who opens her presentation of Buzzati by writing that "[h]e had a particular flair for the really short story"; Judy Rawson, "Dino Buzzati", in *Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy*, ed. Michael Caesar and Peter Hainsworth (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1984), 191.

<sup>3</sup> On Buzzati's paintings see Nicoletta Comar, *Dino Buzzati: Catalogo dell'opera pittorica* (Mariano del Friuli, Gorizia: Edizioni della Laguna, 2006).

His interest in different art forms led him to create a few works combining fiction and drawing. For example, for his first novel *Bàrnabo delle montagne* Buzzati had drawn some illustrations, which were never enclosed in the book and are still unpublished for the most part. Moreover, he wrote the illustrated tale *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia*, the graphic novel *Poema a fumetti* and two illustrated books, *Il libro delle pipe* (written with his brother-in-law Giuseppe Ramazzotti) and *I miracoli di Val Morel*.

The acknowledgement of Buzzati's artistic versatility represents the first step towards the recognition of the author's original use of intertextual and intermedial strategies, which has often been downplayed to the extent that many scholars in the past dismissed it as plagiaristic. Buzzati's fiction is in fact permeated by literary and artistic references. Very strong indeed is the intertextual dialogue with some English and American authors, for whom he admitted to having a predilection.<sup>4</sup> This monograph investigates the relationship between Buzzati's fiction and Anglo-American culture by focusing on his re-use of visual texts (Arthur Rackham's illustrations), narrative sources (Joseph Conrad's novels), as well as *topoi* belonging to such genres as the seafaring tale, the ghost story and the Christmas story.

My argument follows a major thematic thread in Buzzati's works, the recurring theme of the loss of imagination. According to Buzzati, the loss of imagination is the result of both a natural process (growing-up makes human beings rational and pragmatic) and a social condition (there is no space for fantasy in a technology-dominated society). Especially through the adoption of intertextual strategies—such as intermedial translation,

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<sup>4</sup> In his book-length interview *Un autoritratto* Buzzati refers to them as “gli inglesi” and “la letteratura anglosassone”. Significantly, he mentions British and American writers in the first instance when talking about his favourite reading as a youth: “Nella mia giovinezza, nella mia adolescenza, ci furono gli inglesi: Oscar Wilde, Poe [...]. Naturalmente un po’ Stevenson. Conrad, eh, Conrad, parecchio! Dickens, anche. Per esempio, ciò che in Conrad per me è il massimo della bellezza è *Cuore di tenebra*. Di Oscar Wilde mi è piaciuto *De Profundis*, che è una cosa stupenda. Di Dickens ho amato *Il circolo Pickwick*. Un capolavoro. Di lui pure ho amato il racconto di Natale, sai, quella favoletta di una perfezione meravigliosa, dove c’è quel vecchio avaro che torna a casa la sera di Natale e vede lo spettro del suo amico e del suo socio morto. Allora vengono gli spettri di un Natale passato che lo conducono in giro alla terra... È bellissimo... Di Kipling ho letto con particolare interesse *Il libro della giungla*. Conosco pure *Kim*. Ma *Kim* non mi ha commosso. Di Kipling, pure, c’era quella storia intitolata *La luce che si spense*, che è la vicenda di un bambino il quale diventa cieco. Lì era proprio una commozione tirata fuori col rampino... Per quanto riguarda i francesi, non ne ho letto tanti” (DBA, 28). To these he adds Jonathan Swift, Emily Dickinson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Daniel Defoe and Herman Melville (cf. *ibid.*, 29).

allusion, inversion of genre's stereotypes, ironic treatment of the sources—Buzzati laments the lack of an imaginative urge in contemporary society and at the same time he attempts a recovery of the fantastic imagery created by the authors he took as models.

Thanks to its interdisciplinary nature, this study will lead, in the first place, to a reconsideration of Buzzati's intertextuality, with a view to demonstrating that, far from being mere imitation, it is an original and conscious re-working of pre-existing motifs. Secondly, my analysis gives new insights into Buzzati's work as a whole, particularly by putting forward its playful and ironic component, which critics have often neglected in favour of the more overtly pervading sense of gloominess and nostalgia. Thirdly, the book offers a reassessment of an author who has been considered as minor for many years, but who can rightly be ranked among the representatives of twentieth-century European fantastic fiction. Fourthly, I intend to introduce Buzzati to the English-speaking readership through a cross-cultural approach, which highlights the strong association between Buzzati's work and English and American authors.

Whilst the first three points will be explored in depth through the chapters, here it is necessary to reflect a little further on Buzzati's fortunes in the English-speaking world, in order to better contextualize this monograph. Among other reasons, the choice of my topic comes from the will to nurture an interest in Buzzati among English-speaking readers, thus redressing a long-lasting geographical disproportion in the reception of his work. Some countries—France in the lead, followed by Spain and Germany—have shown a great interest in the author, which has resulted in the publication of translations and critical contributions alike.

With regard to the translations, all of Buzzati's works are now available in French (including the poems and plays) and the majority of them have been translated into Spanish too.<sup>5</sup> Translations of at least one of his books have appeared in several other languages, such as Czech, Danish, Dutch, Hungarian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, to name but a few.<sup>6</sup> We must say that, within the panorama of worldwide translations of

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<sup>5</sup> For up-to-date reviews of French and Spanish translations see: Delphine Bahuet Gachet, "Presenza di Buzzati in Francia, all'alba del nuovo millennio", in *Un gigante trascurato? 1988-2008: Vent'anni di promozione di studi dell'Associazione Internazionale Dino Buzzati*, ed. Patrizia Dalla Rosa and Bianca Maria Da Rif (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2010), 33-40; and Elisa Martínez Garrido, "Dino Buzzati e la sua recente fortuna nella cultura spagnola", in Dalla Rosa and Da Rif, *Un gigante trascurato?*, 97-104.

<sup>6</sup> The *Associazione Internazionale Dino Buzzati* and the *Centro Studi Buzzati* of Feltre have always been attentive to the translation and critical reception of the author

Buzzati, the English language is not well represented. If we think of the potential number of readers in English, the number of works translated is quite low (cf. SDC, 234-35). In addition, of all Buzzati's short stories, only three collections of selected stories have been published; and the fact that no entire collections are available in English is even stranger for an author who is now undeniably recognised as a master of short fiction.

As far as the quality of the English translations is concerned, it must be admitted that they have become quite old and outdated.<sup>7</sup> The most striking case is that of *Il deserto dei Tartari*, whose 1952 translation *The Tartar Steppe* by Stuart C. Hood has been passed on to several publishers and continues to be reprinted today.<sup>8</sup> The other two novels translated, *Larger than Life* (*Il grande ritratto*) and *A Love Affair* (*Un amore*) date back to 1962 and 1964, respectively. As to the collections of short stories: *Catastrophe: The Strange Stories of Dino Buzzati* first appeared in 1965, *Restless Nights: Selected Stories of Dino Buzzati* in 1983, and *The Siren: A Selection from Dino Buzzati* in 1984. After this, there was a huge gap until 2009, when *Poem Strip*, the English version of *Poema a fumetti*, was published. *The Bears' Famous Invasion of Sicily* (*La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia*) was actually the first work to be translated into English in 1947.

Likewise, on the front of critical reception, the studies on Buzzati in English are very few. Judy Rawson dedicated some articles to Buzzati, as well as a seminal chapter introducing the author to the English-speaking public for the first time in 1984.<sup>9</sup> Coming to more recent times, Kathryn St. Ours's article on religiosity in Buzzati's short fiction<sup>10</sup> and Felix Siddell's

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worldwide, as shown in their publications. Here it is worth mentioning a volume of conference proceedings especially dedicated to this topic: Nella Giannetto, ed., *Dino Buzzati—La lingua le lingue: Atti del convegno internazionale, Feltre e Belluno, 26-29 settembre 1991* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1994), as well as the several contributions by Buzzati translators and about the reception of Buzzati in various countries, which have been included in the journal *Studi buzzatiani* over the years.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed bibliography of Buzzati's works available in English translation see the Appendix "Buzzati in English" in this book.

<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s Giannetto pointed out that, whereas more than one translation of *Deserto* circulated in Spain and Germany, there was only one English translation, and that it had appeared quite late compared to other countries (cf. SDC, 226-27). See also: Mario B. Mignone, "Il deserto dei Tartari: lettura del traduttore, lettura della traduzione", in Giannetto, *La lingua le lingue*, 151-63; and Cristiana Pugliese, "An Evaluation of the English Translations of *Il deserto dei Tartari* and *Un amore*", *Studi buzzatiani* 10 (2005): 55-88.

<sup>9</sup> Rawson, "Dino Buzzati", 191-210.

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn St. Ours, "Religion and Religiosity in the Short Fiction of Dino Buzzati", *Forum Italicum* 36, no. 2 (2002): 297-315.



book-length study on the role of place in Buzzati and Elsa Morante are worth mentioning.<sup>11</sup> Due to such a substantial lack of attention by English-speaking critics, to date there is no monographic study in English entirely dedicated to Buzzati. And this seems so unreasonable, given the artistic connections with British and American authors that are found in Buzzati's works. This is indeed a deficiency for which my study seeks to compensate.

The book is divided into five chapters. While Chapter One introduces Buzzati's themes and the issue of intertextuality in his oeuvre, the rest of the monograph looks at the topic from two complementary perspectives: Buzzati's dialogue with individual authors (the illustrator Arthur Rackham and the novelist Joseph Conrad, in Chapter Two and Three respectively) and his re-use of generic *topoi* with special reference to British and American literature (the traditions of the sea and ghost story in Chapter Four, the Christmas story in Chapter Five).

Chapter Two presents a remarkable case of pictorial memory and inter-medial translation, that is, the re-use in Buzzati's fiction of images by the English illustrator Arthur Rackham. My aim is to trace Rackham's visual legacy in two sets of works by Buzzati: on the one hand, his early novels, *Bàrnabo delle montagne* and *Il segreto del Bosco Vecchio*, whose settings, characters and themes resound more consistently with the North European fantastic tradition embodied in Rackham's art; on the other hand, Buzzati's mature works, *Il deserto dei Tartari* and the short story "I reziarii", in which echoes of Rackham's illustrations are also prominent. In all cases, such interartistic recovering consists in an interplay of parallelisms and inversions which cast light on a pivotal aspect of Buzzati's fiction: the counterpoint between the writer's nostalgia for an enchanted dimension that modern society has lost and his attempt to re-create the atmospheres of the North European fantasy.

Chapter Three has a threefold aim. First, using biographical and autobiographical evidence it singles out the Conradian sources Buzzati re-works. Second, it examines how (intertextual techniques, degree of intentionality, originality of the outcome) Buzzati incorporates these sources into his own fiction. Third, it seeks to ascertain the reasons why Conrad constitutes such a shaping force for Buzzati. Starting with the analysis of some allusions to Conrad scattered throughout Buzzati's fictional and journalistic texts, I conduct a comparative reading of Conrad's works (*Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, "The Secret Sharer") and Buzzati's fiction (*Il deserto dei Tartari*,

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<sup>11</sup> Siddell briefly touches on Rackham's influence on *Il segreto del Bosco Vecchio* and Buzzati's illustrations for *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia*; Felix Siddell, *Death or Deception: Sense of Place in Buzzati and Morante* (Leicester: Troubador, 2006), 50-51.

*Bàrnabo delle montagne* and some short stories). Through the dynamic of identification and detachment from the model, Buzzati re-interprets Conradian motifs, such as colonialism, heroism, failure of one's initiation into manhood and redemption, creating a type of (anti-)hero that originally locates itself in the coming-of-age fiction genre.

Chapter Four is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the good monsters Buzzati creates by reversing traditional *topoi*. The *colombre*, a legendary sea creature invented by Buzzati, is considered in relation to the hypotext of Melville's *Moby-Dick* and the Anglo-American tradition of literary sea monsters. At the same time, other fantastic creatures of the Italian and European culture, the *babau* and the dragon, are examined as being allegories of imagination. In the second part, Buzzati's kindly ghosts are compared to other non-spooky representatives. Modelling his spooks on foreign examples of humorous ghost stories, Buzzati uses irony to reflect on the genre itself. Significantly, intertextual analysis reveals that, while in his monster and ghost stories Buzzati nostalgically deprecates the disregard for imagination dominating modern technological societies, his reversal of generic *topoi* conveys a positive aspect: the claim that there can still be place for fantasy, if only people let themselves be carried away by it.

Chapter Five looks at Buzzati's prolific production of Christmas stories situating them between the Italian and the English tradition. I start by illustrating the main aspects of Italian Christmas fiction, together with the reception of foreign models by Italian authors and their readers. This allows me to identify the cultural context to which Buzzati's Christmas writings belong, as well as to appreciate the extent to which he takes distance from this background to embrace the Dickensian model. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to the examination of some innovative elements in Buzzati's Christmas stories. While expressing his disappointment at the loss of the festive imagery *à la* Dickens, Buzzati re-invents the Christmas spirit in an original way through the inversion of certain generic stereotypes, the use of irony and fantastic devices, and the introduction of fantasy in his moralizing parables. My analysis leads to the conclusion that Buzzati's Christmas fiction constitutes a unique site of convergence between the Italian tradition in which he is rooted and the Dickensian tradition which inspired him.

## CHAPTER ONE

# BUZZATI'S FICTION BETWEEN EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY AND FAITH IN IMAGINATION

A review of Buzzati's major themes—the wearying-out effects of time, life as a senseless waiting, the missed opportunity, age transitions and the generational gap, hostility towards progress—would encourage a definition of the author as a writer of anxiety, as many critics have underlined.<sup>1</sup> Another, perhaps more covert, but nonetheless significant aspect of Buzzati's fiction is the faith in the redeeming power of imagination. This positive side counterbalances the gloomy vein which seems to dominate his works, and therefore it deserves more critical attention than it has hitherto received. The paramount role fantasy plays in life is a concern that Buzzati stages in his fantastic fiction and that comes to the fore especially through the study of intertextuality. In other words, the exploration of the relationship between Buzzati's texts and those of the authors he took as models will lead to a more exhaustive presentation of his fiction. Alongside a conspicuous pessimistic slant, an equally substantial playful counterpart is conveyed through the creation of metaphors for life, allegorical creatures and metafictional stories, which bring forward his creative *jouissance* and make the reader reflect on the importance of fantasy.

### 1.1. Pessimistic Themes and Metaphors for Life

As is clear in both his fictional and autobiographical writings, Buzzati's idea of humankind is ambivalent. At the beginning of his interview with Yves Panafieu, Buzzati expresses this twofold opinion by stating that “[l'uomo è] una creatura sbagliata. Semplicemente. È una creatura straordinaria, tanto straordinaria, ed un essere sbagliato perché infelice per definizione...” (DBA, 5). His admiration for human beings is counterpoised by sympathy for their persistent unhappiness. Consequently, being based on this view, the typically Buzzatian character is depicted as unfit

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the thesis of Mignone's study is that abnormality and anxiety are the central paradigms of Buzzati's fiction; cf. Mario B. Mignone, *Anormalità e angoscia nella narrativa di Dino Buzzati* (Ravenna: Longo, 1981).

for life. While trying to eschew any commitment and responsibility, this (anti-)hero is nevertheless doomed to a steady, but often unsuccessful, confrontation with his own restlessness. Buzzati defines such an inveterate discontent with the human condition as “angoscia esistenziale”, which represents “la base stessa della vita dell’uomo” (DBA, 74). The condition of an existential malaise affecting Buzzati’s characters is triggered by their glimpsing the mysterious and irrational behind ordinary life. And this is basically the reason why they live in a state of perpetual disquiet and detachment from the rest of the world.

A case in point is the protagonist of the short story “Lo scarafaggio”, who goes back home at night and crushes a cockroach on the floor. Once in bed, he cannot fall asleep and realizes that all the living creatures and things around him have been seized by a strange drowsy agitation. Such turmoil is caused by the presence of death lingering on the dying insect:

Per due ore e mezzo della notte—mi venne un brivido—l’immondo insetto appiccicato alla piastrella dalle sue stesse mucillagini viscerali, per due ore e mezzo aveva continuato a morire, e non era ancora finita. Meravigliosamente continuava a morire, trasmettendo con l’ultima zampina un suo messaggio. Ma chi lo poteva raccogliere alle tre di notte nel buio del corridoio di una pensione sconosciuta? (QPM, 26)

Only the nameless narrator seems to be able to grasp the meaning of the cockroach’s message, whose content remains to some extent ambiguous.<sup>2</sup> However, its metaphorical significance is easy to infer. Like a dying cockroach—a repulsive and mean creature—human beings clumsily finds their way through life under the constant menace of approaching death. Interestingly enough, Buzzati points out that this story recounts something about “la verità della vita” (DBA, 157). Thus, it is not misleading to read “Lo scarafaggio” as a metaphor for life, since it has various metaphorical implications. The first is the image of the dying cockroach symbolizing the human condition; the second is linked to the act of writing and describes the cockroach as a nondescript “macchia d’inchiostro lasciata dalla morte” (QPM, 26); the third alludes to the ominous shadow of death presiding over people’s life: “Però un’ombra giace allora su di noi” (ibid., 26-27).

The metafictional reference to writing is indicative of Buzzati’s concern with his role as a writer and the importance of literature. If, on the one hand, his fiction is permeated by such a gloomy view of life, on the

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<sup>2</sup> In the quoted passage ambiguity is conveyed by the adverb “meravigliosamente”, which is associated with the protagonist’s observation of the death scene. It is impossible to ascertain whether he enjoys the view or is shocked.

other hand, this pessimism is counteracted by his faith in art and creativity. More precisely, it may be argued that Buzzati's fiction is characterized by an effort to create existential metaphors that, however pessimistic in content, are nonetheless enlivened by the conviction that imagination has the power to unveil the hidden significance of things. It goes without saying that Buzzati does not naively mean that art can change reality or people's minds; rather, his aim is to tell stories which open up a clearer perspective on the most controversial and irrational aspects of life. Hence, it is not by chance that, when asked to give a definition of a poet and art in general, Buzzati evokes the creation of metaphorical images.<sup>3</sup> He also mentions "il mistero della poesia", understanding the term "poesia" in its etymological meaning of artistic creation:

Il vero poeta, però, riesce a tirar fuori da un'immagine, da una situazione, da un sentimento, questo stacco che arriva a qualcosa di assolutamente imprevedibile per il lettore. Ma è uno stacco perfetto in quanto il lettore poi si accorge che alla prima idea la seconda era legata strettamente: ecco la cosa tipica del poeta. (DBA, 190)

A poet or writer for Buzzati is someone who is able to describe things by referring to something else: in brief, a creator of metaphors. Other explicit hints of Buzzati's poetics are also interspersed in *Autoritratto*, especially in the passages where Buzzati talks about the various manifestations of art. He explains what he calls the "supersignificato" of art by means of a metaphor, illustrating how the fictional account of a trip to the countryside could symbolize a whole life (cf. DBA, 200). Still, what is of interest to us is the principle at the core of Buzzati's fantastic creation: his experimentation with ideas often results in paradoxes or, as he says, in "un concetto dilatato o compresso al massimo per cavarne fuori il significato massimo" (DBA, 233). The paradoxical and hyperbolic quality of Buzzati's fiction confirms our definition of Buzzati as creator of existential metaphors; moreover, it leads towards a better understanding of the Buzzatian fantastic by way of putting together his ideological pessimism and formal inventiveness. In other words, Buzzati's disillusioned imagination

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<sup>3</sup> The highly metaphorical quality of Buzzati's fiction might explain why his characters resemble stylized types and his atmospheres are so dreamlike or timeless. In this regard, Savelli illustrates how some of the main stylistic elements in Buzzati, such as "la modesta caratterizzazione del protagonista; il baricentro della storia posto verso la fine; il tema dell'attesa" play a key part in shaping the narrative functions at the base of the motif of destiny; cf. Giulio Savelli, "Una struttura del destino in Buzzati", *MLN* 108, no. 1 (January 1993): 135.

functions as a sharp-edged blade carving out a blunt and sometimes cynical view of life; and it has to be understood both as a flight from and a disenchanting perspective on reality.

The oxymoronic nature of Buzzati's poetics is mirrored in the very beginning of *In quel preciso momento*, a heterogeneous collection including short stories, autobiographical scraps and personal thoughts. The opening piece is meaningfully entitled "La formula" and functions as a prologue in which the author speaks his mind in front of his readers. Overcoming his fear of the reader's judgement he takes a sincere attitude, because only by being himself may he aspire to be a good writer:

LA FORMULA. Di chi hai paura, imbecille? Della gente che sta a guardare? Dei posteri, per strano caso? Basterebbe una cosa da niente: riuscire a essere te stesso, con tutte le stupidità attinenti, ma autentico, indiscutibile. La sincerità assoluta sarebbe di per se stessa un documento tale! Chi potrebbe muovere obiezioni? Questo è l'uomo, uno dei tanti se volete, ma uno. Per l'eternità gli altri sarebbero costretti a tenerne conto, stupefatti. (QPM, 3)

What is peculiar to Buzzati is that he professes to be an "honest" fantastic writer, that is, he uses imagination to fathom the depth of man's soul and his complex approach to life.

Reading Buzzati's metaphors both as rhetorical devices of the fantastic and ideological patterns may contribute to acquitting him of the charge of stylistic naivety and political non-commitment, made by early critics. These hard-to-die clichés have been partially eradicated over the last thirty years, thereby allowing a reassessment of an author who had been unfairly labelled as minor for not keeping in line with contemporary literary trends. Mignone's argument belongs to this rehabilitating current. He portrays Buzzati as an anticonformist, who deliberately wanted to stand apart and chose the fantastic mode to overtly criticize memorialist and neorealist authors. Mignone also remarks that Buzzati touches on political issues in his journalistic writings, but always in the form of literary parables.<sup>4</sup> Judy Rawson, for her part, argues that Buzzati's use of allegory was meant to be a way to oppose the Fascist regime and to escape the censor by dealing with general themes like cowardice, death and a sense of guilt. She writes that "a writer who was already inclined to use allegory and to explore the hidden fears and anguish which people normally preferred to keep hidden, found that the Fascist world provided congenial subject matter and attitudes".<sup>5</sup> The short story "Paura alla Scala" is usually taken as an example

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mignone, *Anormalità e angoscia*, 11-24.

<sup>5</sup> Rawson, "Dino Buzzati", 195.

of Buzzati's encoded engagement. The so-called Morzi troops, whose arrival worries the upper middle class people, who then barricade themselves in at the Scala theatre, has alternately been interpreted as Buzzati's allegory for Fascism or as a fictional version of the Communist threat in the late 1940s.<sup>6</sup>

Another scholar who has largely contributed to rehabilitating Buzzati's fantastic fiction is Nella Giannetto. She coined the expression "*il coraggio della fantasia*" marking out a threefold valence of the fantastic in Buzzati. Firstly, it was extremely courageous of Buzzati to tread the path of the fantastic at a time when Italian literature was more oriented towards social and political commitment. Secondly, Buzzati audaciously devoted himself to the experimentation with the genre and this resulted in an original work. Thirdly, the exploration of the literary and existential fantastic could have been a risky adventure to which Buzzati fully committed himself after all (SDC, 29-30). In addition, Giannetto lists the metaphors among the figures of speech Buzzati employs, along with hyperbaton, repetition, onomatopoeia and similes (cf. *ibid.*, 208). She identifies three major semantic fields from which Buzzati's metaphors are drawn: the desert, the mountains, and the sea, especially that of war at sea after his personal experience in the world conflict (see *ibid.*, 213); she also underlines how their use contributes to increase polisemy and ambiguity in his fiction (cf. *ibid.*, 219).

Buzzati's repertoire of metaphors for life is varied. I will now present some of the most relevant examples, discussing how these metaphors function on a thematic level. First of all, the image of a rushing train that eschews the passenger's control is recurring and Buzzati uses it to explore two themes that are typical of his fiction, namely the passing of time and missed opportunity. In "*Qualcosa era successo*", the passengers of a train heading south notice from the windows that the people outside are fleeing

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<sup>6</sup> The second interpretation is given by Buzzati himself while talking about the genesis of "*Paura alla Scala*". He was asked by Arrigo Benedetti to write a story about the threatening atmosphere there was in Milan after the Communist party lost the elections in April 1948 and the attempt on Togliatti's life soon afterwards (see DBA, 151-52). In my view, this is only an isolated case in which Buzzati's fiction can be read as a comment on or criticism of contemporary historical facts. Moreover, the atmosphere described in the text is so vague that it could be referred to any unstable political situations in the course of history; it rather appears as a metaphor for class fear. Giannetto offers an illuminating interpretation pointing out that Buzzati was concerned less with the representation of political events per se than with the critical depiction of upper middle class hypocrisy and psychological response to fear. This being Buzzati's main aim, Giannetto does not deny that "*il racconto funziona anche come trasfigurazione surrealistica di una situazione che richiama vicende della nostra storia recente e suggerisca un giudizio morale, se non politico, su una certa classe e sui suoi atteggiamenti più tipici*" (SDC, 35-36).

towards the north in great alarm, as if under the threat of an imminent catastrophe. Fear sets in because nobody inside knows what is happening outside. When the train finally stops, the narrator's attention is caught by a railwayman sneaking away through a door and by a woman's cry of help reverberating in the deserted station. An interpretive key to such a cryptic story is offered by the narrator's remark at the end of this passage:

Senza parole, la signora alzò un poco il frammento [di giornale] affinché tutti lo potessero vedere. Ma tutti avevamo già guardato. E si finse di non farci caso. Crescendo la paura, più forte in ciascuno si faceva quel ritegno. Verso una cosa che finisce in IONE noi correvamo come pazzi, e doveva essere spaventosa se, alla notizia, popolazioni intere si erano date a immediata fuga. Un fatto nuovo e potentissimo aveva rotto la vita del Paese, uomini e donne pensavano solo a salvarsi, abbandonando case, lavoro, affari, tutto, ma il nostro treno no, il maledetto treno marciava con la regolarità di un orologio, al modo del soldato onesto che risale le turbe dell'esercito in disfatta per raggiungere la sua trincea dove il nemico già sta bivaccando. E per decenza, per un rispetto umano miserabile, nessuno di noi aveva il coraggio di reagire. *Oh i treni come assomigliano alla vita!* (SR, 253, my italics)

Trains take passengers towards the final station, just as life takes human beings towards death. The idea of speed refers, of course, to the brevity of existence; passengers on board are aware of the inevitability of their common destiny, so they do not react. Referring to "Qualcosa era successo", St. Ours notes that "[t]he train can be considered a metaphor for life itself, that is, a non-stop journey towards death".<sup>7</sup>

As opposed to that of speeding-up towards death, Buzzati also stages the image of life as waiting.<sup>8</sup> "Partire?", for instance, is another story with a surreal relish. While sitting in a waiting room, some people are informed that the room itself has been hooked up to a huge locomotive, which will pull

<sup>7</sup> St. Ours, "Religion and Religiosity", 304.

<sup>8</sup> Life as waiting is one of the main themes in *Il deserto dei Tartari*, where the metaphorical level is very rich. For example, Fort Bastiani can be regarded as the individual self who is basically isolated from his fellow creatures and shut in his own world of personal expectations and worries; it seems rather strange that in fact no comradeship exists among the soldiers but only military rules that split them apart. The desert can be read as the existential drought that characterizes life and its condition of waiting; man, like a soldier watching for the coming enemy or the break of a great war, always waits for an occasion in life that comes—if it does—when it is too late. And while time erodes their souls away piece after piece, men run after their illusions. In short, the act of waiting reveals the existential code: life is monotonous waiting broken only by death.



it towards an unknown destination. Although they protest because they do not want to leave their present occupations or abandon their future plans, nothing can be done: “tutto il mondo è diventato una stazione” (CFDB, 330), every place on earth is hooked to the locomotive, which will soon depart. In addition, this story depicts life as a waiting room where people stay with the vague notion that sooner or later they will be called for departure:

“Care le mie signore” dice Schiassi “dopo tutto, questa è una sala d’aspetto, e anche voi siete qui per partire, una volta o l’altra, no? Dunque! Un po’ prima un po’ dopo, non fa grande differenza”. (CFDB, 329)

Buzzati develops the train metaphor also in “Direttissimo”, but in this story he associates it to a different theme, that of missed opportunity. The protagonist of “Direttissimo” makes a journey on a train that is gradually delayed by hours, month and even years. At each station the man meets people (a businessman, his fiancée, a celebrating crowd, his own mother) representing the different spheres of his life (work, love, success and family). Being constantly in a hurry and so eager to get back onboard after each stop, he dedicates less and less time to these people, and eventually he can hardly spot them from the window of the rushing train. The image of being carried away may be read as a representation of an existential condition. Carried away by the rapid flow of time, people do not focus on important things, such as love and family ties, and in doing so they miss their opportunities to be happy. When they realize they have wasted their existence that way, it is too late to go back:

Per dove? Quanto è lontana l’ultima stazione? Ci arriveremo mai? Valeva la pena di fuggire con tanta furia dai luoghi e dalle persone amate? Dove, dove ho messo le sigarette? ah, qui nella tasca della giacca. Certo, tornare indietro non si può. (SR, 391)

If in “Direttissimo” Buzzati textualizes life as a train carrying the protagonist away from what really matters, in “Il treno” the train symbolizes a great chance that the female narrating character missed out on, because she was afraid of leaving. It is night and she is watching over her sleeping baby, when she hears the noise of a train passing nearby. Full of regret, she engages in a monologue:

E se quel giorno ti avessi ascoltato? Se mi fossi lasciata portare? Ero bella allora. Forse la pelle sarebbe ancora liscia, non avrei questa faccia gialla, se ti avessi ascoltato. Sarei una signora, forse, e me ne andrei per la città in portantina riverita dai cavalieri.

Tesoro, dove sarebbe la mamma se quel giorno fosse partita? Un signore buono la condurrebbe in carrozza e le accarezzerebbe le mani, tutte coperte di brillanti? Le mani della mamma, pensi?, morbide e profumate come quelle della regina. E forse adesso non avrei la febbre che mi fa questo rombo in testa. Però tu non saresti nato.

Ma io ho avuto paura, gli ho detto di no, gli ho detto, piccolo mio, e lui da quel giorno non si è più fermato. Pensavo: un'altra volta se mai. Ed eccoci qua, piccolo mio, semplicemente non ho avuto fortuna. Siamo qui noi due, ecco tutto, e non c'è la carrozza né il bravo signore, e le mani sono diventate ruvide e grosse, le mani della regina.

Vuol dire che partirai tu, figlio. Una sera ti farai portar via come non ha avuto coraggio la mamma. Lontano, dove l'aria è buona e di notte non vengono zanzare. Bianco e rosso diventerai, le ragazze ti guarderanno, e mi manderai le cartoline. (QPM, 107)

The theme of missed opportunity is also present in Buzzati's novels *Bàrnabo delle montagne* and *Il deserto dei Tartari*, where he seems to suggest that human beings are doomed to run after their illusions, never seizing the great chances that life offers them, either because they are late for it, too cowardly and lacking self-confidence, or because they misunderstand and do not recognize it. The latter is the case of Stefano, the protagonist of "Il colombre". As we will see in Chapter Four, deeming this sea monster wicked, Stefano flees from it all the time. Only at the end of his life does he realize that the *colombre* would have made him rich and happy, if only he had decided to meet it earlier.

Going back to the metaphors for life, there are some more which are centred on means of transportation. In "Congedo dalla nave", human existence is portrayed as a ship sailing adrift and carrying away familiar people and things:

Con una sottile angoscia io penso che la mia nave, gli uomini, le abitudini, la posizione delle scale e delle porte, le comodità e i fastidi, i rumori, gli odori, le facce, le voci del bastimento, tanto a me familiari da costituire lo sfondo della mia esistenza per così lungo tempo, queste cose amate, che un giorno mi parlarono di avventura, spensieratezza, amicizia, andranno dentro di me perdute. (QPM, 6)

While the discharge from the ship mentioned in the title is allusive of death, here Buzzati also explores the theme of fading memory. Moreover, in "I sorpassi" life is compared to a car race during which people overtake one another in turn (cf. CCR, 227-34).

Other images can be listed in addition. The short piece “L’agenda”, for instance, is structured around a metaphor depicting life as a diary whose sorrowful pages are torn one by one to the last:

Dietro un terrore ce n’è un altro, proprio come un foglio sotto a un altro foglio, e si ha un bel strapparli, sempre ne troviamo uno nuovo sotto, e l’ultimo si chiama la morte. (QPM, 19)

“La nuova casa” describes life as a new house that we furnish with every comfort until the day comes when we are evicted from it:

Uno torna a casa dopo aver comperato un magnifico armadio; impaziente, passeggia per l’anticamera aspettando che arrivino i facchini con il mobile; suona il campanello ma non sono i facchini; è un fattorino che porta lo sfratto; entro stasera alle ore 21.

E allora? E allora ci si dispera, si piange, si maledice, si ricorre alle autorità; le quali non possono farci niente. Come se fosse una novità, come se non lo avessero dovuto sapere. Eppure si illudono tutti quanti. A me forse lo sfratto non viene, non so perché ma qualcosa mi dice che nessuno mi manderà via. Poi suona il campanello e dietro la porta c’è il fattorino con una lettera in mano. (QPM, 84)

“La solitudine” proposes a metaphor in which life is a big square surrounded with houses, each one standing on its own:

Una immensa piazza, dunque, con intorno un’infinità di case, questa è la vita; e, in mezzo, gli uomini che trafficano fra di loro e nessuno mai riesce a conoscere le altre case; soltanto la propria e in genere male anche questa. (QPM, 113)

Finally, the ending of “La botte” presents the image of a barrel pushed by time. Humankind is locked in it. At first they run in order not to fall down, but little by little their strength diminishes and they just roll about:

Siamo in una botte grandissima che il tempo spinge attraverso gli spazi, senza rumore. Noi dentro, per non rotolare, dobbiamo correre, basta fermarsi un attimo per sentirci precipitare. Anch’io correvo ai bei tempi, anch’io non mi accorgevo di nulla. Ora invece siedo in disparte. Perciò rotolo, rotolo; mi è passata la voglia. (QPM, 138)

As the excerpts above have shown, Buzzati’s metaphors for life are linked with the themes of time flowing by, missed opportunity, a sense of impending death, fading memory and uneasiness of the human condition. Since these motifs are recurrent in Buzzati’s works, it can be argued that

metaphorical stratification constitutes the signature of his fiction. For example, the image of time grinding people up recurs in “I due autisti”, whose final sentence reads “Poi la giornata ricomincia a macinarci con le sue aride ruote” (LBM, 235), and in *Il deserto dei Tartari*: “E intanto la pendola di fronte allo scrittoio continuava a macinare la vita” (DT, 99). Interestingly, Biondi interprets Buzzati’s main settings—the mountains, the desert, the house and the city—as metaphors for the limits to which human beings draw so dangerously near in their search for meaning: “[I]e metafore narrative buzzatiane sono una continua domanda sul senso di questa costante tensione umana verso l’avvenire”; they have a “valore di inchiesta esistenziale”.<sup>9</sup>

In order to gain a better understanding of the existential quest characterizing Buzzati’s fiction, I will complete my overview of Buzzati’s pessimistic slant by illustrating other important aspects (the blurring between reality and dream, the intervention of the supernatural into the real, the opposition between fantasy and progress) and themes (the mother-and-son relationship, the monotonous daily routine, wearing-out time, existential passage and generation gaps).

What distinguishes Buzzati’s fiction is a sense of being poised between reality and dream. This is evident in “La frana”, whose protagonist is a journalist commissioned to write a report on an alleged terrible rockfall that has just happened in Sant’Elmo, a god-forsaken spot in the mountains. Once there, however, he finds himself in an inhospitable place where apparently nothing has happened, apart from a legendary fall that occurred some centuries before, according to local rumors. Thinking himself a victim of a cruel twist of fate, Giovanni decides not to enquire any further and leave. But suddenly a thought comes into his mind (“A meno che...”), and while driving away in his car he hears “uno scroscio immenso” behind him. The unfinished sentence can be interpreted as a switch from the level of plausibility to that of irreality,<sup>10</sup> since a groove in Giovanni’s mind is opened up and an overlap between real events and the protagonist’s imagination is created.

Indeed, Buzzati had felt a strong appeal towards the supernatural world since his childhood, which was triggered by his family holidays villa in

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<sup>9</sup> Alvaro Biondi, “Metafora e sogno: la narrativa di Buzzati fra ‘Italia magica’ e ‘surrealismo italiano’”, in *Il pianeta Buzzati: Atti del convegno internazionale, Feltre e Belluno, 12-15 ottobre 1989*, ed. Nella Giannetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), 43.

<sup>10</sup> Mignone lists those syntactical elements through which the shift from realism to the surreal is operated. They can be either temporal, such as “in quel preciso momento”, “in quel mentre”, or adversative conjunctions like “eppure”, “a meno che”, “E se...?” (cf. Mignone, *Anormalità e angoscia*, 25-35).

San Pellegrino, just outside Belluno, where he was born in 1906 and where he used to spend the summer. This ancient house, with its annexed barn and sixteenth-century chapel, is surrounded by the breath-taking landscape of the Dolomites, and it was a place crammed with old legends. It is no surprise, therefore, that Buzzati chose it as setting for the semi-autobiographical story “Lo spirito in granaio”. This story can be regarded as the fictionalization of a thrilling experience Buzzati had when he and his brother-in-law made a night expedition to the old barn, whose rooms were said to be haunted by the ghost of a steward. The two protagonists hear some steps from behind a door, but do not actually see the spectre. The overlap of reality and dream is conveyed by the fact that, even though they cannot see the faintest trace of it in the dark barn, their will to believe in the illusion that the ghost is there in front of them is stronger than anything else: “Lui era ancora là di sicuro, ma era tornato già a rinserrarsi nella sua essenza metafisica, dopo quella passeggiata troppo umana”. Apart from this, another element that deserves closer attention is the depiction of the atmosphere in the barn and of the sense of fear experienced by the characters:

Sedevamo in silenzio e io vedevo sul muro l'ombra del mio parente dondolare su e giù a ogni oscillazione della fiammella. Nell'edificio, col procedere della notte, andava sempre più accumulandosi qualche cosa che non si può definire. Era una emanazione indipendente dalla nostra presenza e dalla nostra fantasia umana. Anche nelle giornate più festose, del resto, avevo sempre notato che la solitudine di quelle stanze risultava eccessiva; i bianchi raggi del sole, risplendenti sul granoturco d'oro, non servivano a nulla contro il sinistro torpore che vi ristagnava. La campagna, i fiori, gli uccelli, le meravigliose nuvole, l'allegria della gente, le automobili, ch'erano pure vicine, a due passi, diventavano cose remotissime e assurde.

Adesso ch'era notte profonda, questa impressione era moltiplicata. Dai muri stanchi, dalla voragine della cantina, dalla campagna stessa addormentata, fluiva dentro alla casa la paura. Non i terrori che popolano i meandri dei castelli, le delittuose autorimesse del Bronx o i fossati delle polveriere. No, era una paura solenne ed antica, e parlava di spiriti sì, ma anche di decrepite querce, di ponti fradici, di viandanti zoppi, di gufi, di valtoni deserti, di cimiteri, di imboscate alla luce della luna. Una paura senza soggetto, estranea alla cattività degli uomini. (MI, 159-60)

Here Buzzati uses the fictional word to offer a fascinating description of the fear of the irrational as such. And, most importantly, he attaches a positive quality to all the thrilling manifestations of the supernatural.

Villa Buzzati was so different a place from the modern industrial environment of Milan, where the Buzzatis lived for the most part of the year.<sup>11</sup> A strong sense of belonging, the feeling that the past and traditions are values to be preserved and kept alive so as not to lose the link with one's own roots: this is what Buzzati inherited from his parents, who were both descendants of aristocratic Venetian families. However, as is apparent in his fiction, he does not accept all this passively. On the one hand, the vestiges of this conservatism can be seen in Buzzati's worry and disregard for the technologized lifestyle brought about by progress. In particular, Buzzati's irony targets the car and the telephone as negative symbols of modern society, as is shown in the short stories "Il problema dei posteggi", "La peste motoria", "La belva a motore", "Autorimessa Erebus", "Sciopero dei telefoni" and "Telefonata".<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, he seems to criticize the eccentricity of the upper classes by making a melancholy portrayal of *signora* Gron in "Eppure battono alla porta". For this stubborn woman, lineage, tradition and property are more important than filial bonds; they are values she stoically defends even while facing death. In a fit of "aristocratico sprezzo", she refuses, in fact, to evacuate her ancient estate when a river flood menaces her life and that of her family.

It cannot be denied that the character of the assertive mother Buzzati sketches in "Eppure battono alla porta" is modelled on the author's real mother. What Buzzati said about her in an interview is revelatory of her attachment to a traditional idea of family: "[...] io ho avuto la fortuna di avere una mamma la quale è riuscita a mantenere, anche come atmosfera, la famiglia tale e quale come quando noi eravamo bambini" (quoted in AB, 307). Buzzati's mother had a very strong personality and managed to keep her sons at home with her until her death. Whereas critics have investigated the father figure in Buzzati,<sup>13</sup> the role of the mother in his

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<sup>11</sup> Along with the general contrast between the city and the mountains, which recurs in his works, Buzzati's representation of Milan as an infernal city appears both in *Poema a fumetti* and "Viaggio agli inferi del secolo", a fictional reportage on the construction of the underground in Milan; see Dino Buzzati, *Poema a fumetti*, ed. Claudio Toscani (Milan: Mondadori, 2007) and "Viaggio agli inferi del secolo", in CCR, 401-63.

<sup>12</sup> Buzzati's dislike of cars reveals a sense of nostalgia for the old-fashioned rural world of his childhood: "Era tutto un mondo che poi è stato cancellato a poco a poco dall'automobile [...] Perché le strade adesso non sono più per uno che va a piedi. Come si fa ad andare su queste strade qua? Una volta c'erano automobili, ma si sentivano arrivare da lontano, una ogni tanto, e passavano in una nube di polvere bianca..." (DBA, 11).

<sup>13</sup> Two interesting articles on the father-figure in Buzzati are: Yves Panafieu, "Les fraternités contraintes et la loi du Père", *Cahiers Dino Buzzati* 8 (1991): 49-70 and