

Essays in Victorian Literature and Culture

in Honour of Toni Cerutti



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A NEGATIVE READING OF THE CAROL:
ITALIAN DICKENSIANS
MEET DINO BUZZATI AND MIRANDO HAZ

This paper traces what I consider an interesting instance of “history of ideas” or of fecund exchange between the academia and the creative genius of Italy in relation to Dickens criticism. Creative writing, visual arts and academic writing come together shedding light and casting shadows on one of the most beloved and, in Italy, less studied of Dickens’s works, *Christmas Carol* – lights on the somewhat obscure gothic background of the text, and shadows on the polished WaltDisneyan readings of the story.

The reception of Dickens in Italy since the nineteenth century has gone through at least three different phases. The earliest one is characterized by adaptive translations and descriptive reviews. At the end of the nineteenth century Dickens was particularly appreciated as a sketch writer. During the second phase, early to mid-twentieth century, Dickens is recognized as a major English classic; in this period Italians seem to favour his early production together with the Christmas stories and *David Copperfield*. Besides, since many of his novels present children as protagonists and possibly also because of his moral engagement, Dickens is often marketed as a children’s classic. Dickens was felt akin to De Amicis because of his emotional overtones and his happy endings.

Dickens remained a children’s classic throughout the Fascist years and it is only after the Second World War that original criticism in Italian started being produced. After twenty long years of Fascist “autarchy”, when modern foreign literatures (with some limited allowance for the Germanic friends) were virtually proscribed, intellectuals of the post-war period began looking at the literary traditions of former enemies, English and American, as a source of inspiration, eager to discover what had long been denied to them. Inevitably this process of discovery took place

thanks to Italian educated intellectuals with a distinctive Italian outlook on English authors. Such is the case of Pavese, Vittorini, Calvino, Tomasi di Lampedusa, Praz. They would write about Dickens from a postwar Italian standpoint, mostly ignoring the broader picture of the Victorian era.

The following generation of Dickensian critics, and even more so the present ones, are more versed in English than Italian criticism and most of them are more cognizant of the critical debate in the Anglophone world than in their own land. They have produced excellent criticism focusing especially on Dickens's late production, pinpointing how Dickens's sentimentalism is by no means his major feature and how his gloomy mood in, say, *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend* is particularly suited to an Italian postmodern readership.

There is no denying the popularity of *The Christmas Carol* in Italy; the book has gone through the press in a variety of forms and editions, and every year professionals and amateurs stage pantomimes and readings of the text. *Christmas Carol* is also one of the few translated e-texts that can be found on the internet. Yet Italian critics have always shunned it; definitely there are introductions, prefaces and forewords written in Italy, but I have not been able to trace any academic article entirely devoted to the *Carol*. This is even stranger when one thinks that Italians have produced, for instance, a book-length study of *Our Mutual Friend* and at least three articles on *The Signalman*.

There is certainly a gap between the *Carol*'s editorial success and the silence of Italian critics. To explain why something does *not* happen may be idle and certainly means to venture upon slippery ground, yet one can hardly back away from offering an explanation, tentative as it may be. Possibly this has to do with Dickens being considered a children's author and being particularly appreciated for his melodramatic qualities. Even those Italian critics – like Bonadei, Casotti, Chialant or Pagetti to mention but a few – who pointed out the limits of this view must have first read Dickens under this light and only later discovered the “adult side” of the writer. Hence came an urge to warn the Italian literary scene against this fallacy. In order to challenge the stereotypes by which Dickens was read, Italian scholars would naturally tend to concentrate their work on those novels where the “modernity” of Dickens is more easily traced. In other words, Dickens had to be got rid of that label of childish sentimentality

which on the one hand had helped him through the Fascist years, but on the other had prevented him from being understood as a major classic. Moreover, in some deep sense, I suspect that Italian critics shared the view that the *Carol* is a rather tricky case: it is undeniably a most exquisite story, well written and immensely enjoyable, but it is impossible not to fall prey to its pathetic fallacy, and this is something they would not easily cope with.

Obviously, as the publishing market required introductions for *A Christmas Carol*, critics kept writing them, but they would always walk the beaten tracks of either historical background or English ghost story tradition. Thus the first entirely Italian and novel interpretation of the *Carol* fell upon Dino Buzzati, himself, like Dickens, a novelist and a journalist.

Buzzati stated in an interview that he was very fond of Dickens, and particularly of the *Carol*, which he called a “favoletta di una perfezione meravigliosa” (a fairy tale of a most wonderful perfection). Though a popular writer himself, his praise of Dickens in the early Seventies was by no means granted: Buzzati was a Kafkaesque, surrealist, and secular writer, and it comes as a surprise to read that he mentioned the *Carol* as one of his favourite tales¹. In 1973, when this interview on his favourite writers took place, Buzzati was 67 and could well indulge in speaking with the utmost naivety of those works by Dickens that were the most popular in his youth. The novelist mentions Dickens *en passant*, like any reader of his age would. Yet Buzzati is a very special reader in that he had already authored half a dozen Christmas stories himself and as many Christmas newspaper articles. Among these stories, one is overtly inspired by Dickens’s *Carol*, *Lo strano Natale di Mr Scrooge* (*Mr Scrooge’s strange Christmas*, first published in 1965)². Buzzati’s Mr Scrooge is a contemporary New York-based supermarket tycoon, who loathes what the narrator calls “Christmas spirit”. And rightly so, as this spirit weakens the callous protagonist of the story, and every year softens poor Mr

¹ The whole bit on Dickens reads: “Di Dickens ho amato *il Circolo Picknick*, un capolavoro. Di lui ho pure amato *il Racconto di Natale*, sai quella favoletta di una perfezione meravigliosa [...] è bellissimo”. L. VIGANÒ ed., *Album Buzzati*, Milano, Mondadori, 2006, p.72.

² In D. BUZZATI, *Lo strano Natale di Mr Scrooge e altre storie*, Milano, Mondadori, 1990.

Scrooge into loving his neighbours – a most expensive affair. Thus every Christmas eve the protagonist tries in vain to elude the spirit. On this particular Christmas, Mr Scrooge decides to sail onboard an Italian liner in order to dodge the ghost. The story recalls that of the soldier who saw Death in Baghdad and flew to Samarkand to save his life: predictably Death was waiting for him there, as designed by fate. Likewise Mr Scrooge is eventually caught up by the ghost, disguised as a waiter, who will take him through the years to see the Christmas past and future etc.

Buzzati's reworking of the *Christmas Carol* is rather Kafkaesque. And indeed Kafka and Hoffmann are, together with Poe, the most cited models for his short stories³. Thus one could say that Buzzati has written a totally different tale, using Dickens's characters and Kafka's palette, so to speak. In fact this is only partially true: Buzzati's secularism, after all, is not so different from Dickens's, once we allow for the different milieu⁴. In his secularism, Buzzati wrote a number of articles stressing the need for a change of heart at least at Christmas time, and deplored the commodification of Christmas that had begun in the post-war years. By writing a sequel to Scrooge's story, Buzzati did not intend to criticize Dickens's attitude towards Christmas, on the contrary, he worked on two different levels, along "Dickensian" lines. On the one hand he denounces how consumerism has appropriated Christmas, on the other he proposes an original reading of the *Carol*. If taken as an act of criticism, Buzzati's simple tale may be said to highlight the sad reality that Dickens leaves untold, i.e. that greed and cynicism do and will always exist, and Scrooge-like people will hardly suffer a change of heart to be permanent. The very fact that Scrooge's conversion happens magically, undermines the real(istic) possibility for a change. Dickens, Buzzati seems to point out, knows all too well that the stories told by his ghosts are more realistic than the one told by his narrator, and Scrooge will not buy any turkey on Boxing Day. After all, we may add, the same poetics underlies many of Dickens's works; in *Oliver Twist*, for instance, it is only a quite unrealistic

³ G. GRAMIGNA, *Prefazione e cronologia*, in D. BUZZATI, *Buzzati: Romanzi e Racconti*, G. GRAMIGNA Ed., Milano, Mondadori, 1975.

⁴ See T. CERUTTI, *The Lay World of Dickens*, in F. MARUCCI - E. SDEGNO eds, *Athena's Shuttle: Myth, Religion, Ideology from Romanticism to Modernism*, Milano, Cisalpino, 2000, rptd. in *Carlo Dickens*, <http://users.unimi.it/dickens>

set of coincidences that ensures a happy ending, saving Oliver from becoming a thief and a street boy and end up like Dodger. Surely Dickens was not implying that inheriting a fortune is a viable solution for street boys, nor that every Scrooge can be converted by ghosts. Buzzati does not subvert Dickens's narration nor does he deny Dickens's ultimate wish that Christmas may bring a change of heart and that such a change is highly desirable. The Italian writer is, in a way, faithful to the irony of the original, which he pushes just a tiny bit toward absurdity. The tale swaps the blacks and whites of Dickens's image and presents not another version, but a "negative" rendition of the same story, highlighting those parts that Dickens left in the shadow and vice versa. Yet, though "negative", this story is actually implied in the *Carol*, as criticism is implied in literary writing.

Buzzati is certainly the first Italian who saw a dark side of Dickens; some ten years later, another Italian artist, Mirando Haz, published an original interpretation of Dickens's Christmas in the form of a series of etchings. While Buzzati's criticism is best described as thematic in that he explores and exposes hidden themes implicit in the *Carol*, the etchings by Mirando Haz work within a rather formal, or even archetypal, interpretive framework. Still, both the writer and the etcher share an inclination to highlight the dark side of Dickens's Christmas. Mirando Haz is the *nom de plume* – or should I say drypoint name – of Amedeo Pieragostini, one of the best contemporary Italian artists who has distinguished himself as illustrator of a number of international writers including Stevenson, Andersen, Henry James, Puškin, Proust, and of course, Dickens. Haz's catalogue mentions forty-nine etchings inspired by Dickens, but most of them have never appeared in print. Yet twelve etchings were published under the heading *Dickens-Christmas* [sic] (1979) and *Un albero di Natale*⁵. The first volume is simply a portfolio collection of etchings with an author's note, while *Un albero di Natale* is a most unusual publication. This green-covered volume contains the first (and so far sole) Italian translation of Dickens's *Christmas Tree* (by Valentina Poggi Chigi), the aforementioned etchings devoted to Dickens's Christmas, and a number of short essays inspired by Haz and revolving around

⁵ CH. DICKENS, M. HAZ, *Un albero di Natale*, Milano, All'insegna del pesce d'oro, 1981.

Dickens's Christmas themes, followed by Haz's own commentary upon his work. The book is bilingual and introduced by Ada Nisbet, then Professor Emeritus at UCLA and co-editor of *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. The story of this most peculiar volume is a token of the internationalization of Dickens criticism in Italy and is worth telling, at least as far as it can be recollected now. In the Seventies, and for over a decade, Ada Nisbet had been planning a major work on "International Dickens" to be compiled by no less than twenty-three contributors covering Arabic, Chinese, Finnish, the principal languages of India, Yiddish, along with the most obvious other European languages. For the Italian part of the project, Nisbet had contacted Carlo Izzo, a distinguished intellectual who taught at the University of Bologna. Unfortunately Izzo never completed his essay because he fell ill and left the task to one of his most promising young colleagues, Valentina Poggi Chigi. The latter must have mentioned the project to the one and only outstanding illustrator of Dickens in Italy, Mirando Haz, who had just completed a series of etchings inspired by Dickens. Haz sent a copy of his *Dickens-Christmas* portfolio to Ada Nisbet, possibly in the hope of being appreciated abroad and knowing her as a collector of Dickensian rarities. Ada Nisbet replied with an enthusiastic letter to the artist thanking him for the precious work and expressing the hope to meet him to discuss "both [his] graphic technique and [his] provocative discussion of the themes"⁶ he had dealt with. This meeting never actually took place, but when, later on, Vanni Scheiwiller, the eminent Milanese publisher, planned a volume with Haz's etchings and Dickens's story, Ada Nisbet was invited to preface it. This ensured the first truly international Dickensian publication born in Italy. Critically speaking, the volume was a success and received laudatory reviews in the *Dickensian* and in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, as well as in Italian papers.

I have stressed the importance of the planetary scale of this publication because this is a sign of the changing times, when Dickens criticism in Italy became directed not only at other Italian intellectuals, but rather at the international community of Dickens students. However, it is unlikely that Haz read any English criticism on Dickens, though he may have discussed it with Italian scholars (apart from Valentina Poggi

⁶ Courtesy of the Ada Nisbet Archive, UCLA.

Chigi, he knew Mario Praz and Agostino Lombardo). On the whole, his interpretation of Dickens's Christmas writings may be regarded as an Italian artist's response to the Victorian writer.

As an etcher, Haz, like Buzzati, must necessarily have a "negative" view of the whole picture and so he made the most of it both literally and, like Buzzati, metaphorically. Centering on the iconology of the mask – which runs throughout his *oeuvre* – Haz exposes the fears and evils that Dickens deftly evokes but leaves in the background. The mask, Wilson contends commenting on *The Christmas Tree*, is the best symbol to express the "rich and varied life of Dickens's novels"⁷. In fact Dickens dreaded it, possibly because it evokes death. Although Haz's etchings do not refer uniquely to *The Christmas Tree*, this piece – I would hardly call it a story – was chosen as the most significant among Dickens's Christmas writings.

Together with masks, the image of the tree – "that German toy" in Dickens's words – appears in every single etching. They are always uprooted trees, or as Ada Nisbet suggests, plastic trees. In many cases the trees stem out of people's heads, (or delve their roots into them), growing out of masks and in every picture they invariably shape the surrounding space. In etching no. 8 a tree seems to spring out of the pierced heart of a wounded body. While the "German" tradition is very much there, there is no sign of Christian iconology in the plates, as there is next to none in Dickens⁸. Indeed, it has been suggested, Haz has always felt "Nordic" influences, especially that of Hieronymus Bosch, and his art is full of nightmarish, gothic figures. Therefore it is only natural that he should be particularly responsive to gothic elements in Dickens's tales.

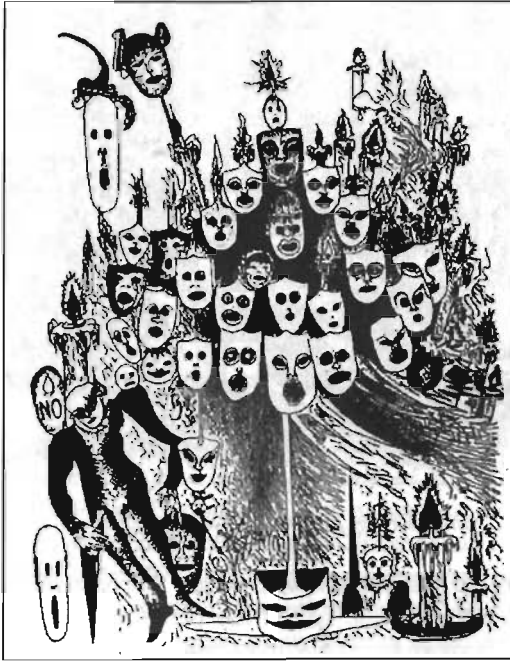
⁷ A. WILSON, *The World of Charles Dickens*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1965, p. 12.

⁸ Cf. T. CERUTTI, *The Lay World of Dickens*.



Mirando Haz, Dickens-Christmas. Etching no. 8.

In the commentary that accompanies the portfolio, Haz focuses on two Dickensian elements that, he writes, have inspired his etchings: the malevolence of the middle-class “exclusive” world and the Proustian theme in *The Christmas Tree*. Christmas, Haz contends, is the time when social differences are all the more poignant, when people select those who belong in their group and say “no” to those who do not – like Madame Verdurin’s circle, Haz suggests. People choose those who will take part in the feast and will receive presents and cruelly exclude others. For this reason, tongues are drawn as knives and people are often armed with swords and daggers (Etchings 8, 5, 3). In etching no. 12 the monosyllable is even written at the bottom of the tree of masks. In no. 1 those who sit at the high table wear a mask, while those who serve them stand around with ghastly faces, some of them facing the wall.



Mirando Haz, Dickens-Christmas. Etching no. 12

The Proustian theme is somewhat subtler and has much to do with Dickens's portrayal of infancy and with the grotesque motive. Like the child in *La Côté de chez Swann*, Dickens recalls familiar and recurrent situations in his infancy with mixed feelings, pinpointing moments of sheer terror, which with hindsight may appear unjustified and even comic. In these cases Dickens may exploit comical effects (as he does in *Gone Astray*) or sympathize with the child and implicitly blame the adults (as he does in *Great Expectations*).



Mirando Haz, *Dickens-Christmas*. Etching no. 1

In his study on *Dickens and the Grotesque* Michael Hollington⁹ points out that a basically romantic notion has percolated to Dickens, i.e. that real life is actually more grotesque than imagination. Children, Hollington contends, are particularly sensitive to these grotesque aspects of life that escape grown-ups' notice; adults are more easily deceived by the film of normality that they have laid upon reality. Observing grotesque aspects of the world through children's eyes is, for Dickens, something akin to the poetic device Russian formalists would later call *ostranenie*. Yet the world as seen by children is not only estranged, but often hostile, frightening, terrible, like those pimps that spring out of snuff boxes, which used to scare children to the amusement of adults. Grown-ups laugh at children's fears and deny them their sympathy not for lack of humanity, but in order to hide their own fears and preserve their masks. The merry world of Christmas, as seen by children, is full of anguish and grotesque figures; smiling faces may be just a mask and therefore dreadful

⁹ M. HOLLINGTON, *Dickens and the Grotesque*, Sidney, Croom Helm, 1984.

and uncanny, certainly unreliable. Haz has responded to this particular Dickensian feature with a distinctly post-modern technique, resorting to distorted figures, which however, like Dickens's, recall a Nordic iconology. In other words, Haz recognizes the Hogarthian tradition to which Dickens belongs¹⁰ and takes it to its extreme possibilities using grotesque figures to evoke at the aesthetic – certainly not naturalistic – level those nightmares and subconscious fears that haunt the bourgeois.

The interpretive track inaugurated by Haz has not remained unbeaten in Italy. In the Nineties this alternative, secular, gothic perspective on Dickens's Christmas stories has attracted the attention of two eminent Italian scholars, Toni Cerutti and Clotilde de Stasio. The first authored an essay on *The Lay World of Dickens*¹¹ where she points out how Dickens was an eminently secular writer; the scope of that article is much wider and it encompasses all Dickens's production, but with reference to Christmas, Toni Cerutti underlies that far from being a Christian festivity, it is in fact a fusion of ancient Nordic myths and fairy tale elements. The scholar also points out that hypocrisy is inextricably linked with family reunions in Dickens's novels even prior to the *Carol*. Clotilde de Stasio¹² authored one of the very few Italian essays on Dickens's Christmas writing (excepting the introductions), titled *The Gothic Side of Christmas*. Among her many sources, Clotilde de Stasio cites Haz and one of the etchings also found its way into this academic text. This paper also insists on the relationship between childhood's ghost stories, grotesque motives and Dickens's Christmas stories.

As for Buzzati, I have not been able to trace any acknowledged echo of his story in Italian criticism, yet it is worth underlining how his interpretation matches that of Mirando Haz and precedes most deconstructionist readings of Dickens, a proof, if anyone needed it, that art often sees farther than science, though it is up to science (criticism in this case) to rationalize and bring order into such insights. Haz's insights have matched those of Italian critics and have been systematized in the Nineties.

¹⁰ M. HOLLINGTON, *Dickens and the Grotesque*, p. 16.

¹¹ T. CERUTTI, *The Lay World of Dickens*. See above, n. 4.

¹² T. DE STASIO, *Dickens's Christmas Tree: The Gothic Side of Familiar Things*, at the website *Carlo Dickens* <http://users.unimi.it/dickens>