

Dino Buzzati's 50th death anniversary: an appraisal of medicine and infectivology's influence on his literary production

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Abstract. *Background and aim:* This paper, in the 50th anniversary of the author's death, examines the overall impact and influence of medicine, in particular of infectious diseases, on the literary production of Italian writer and novelist Dino Buzzati (1906-1972). *Methods:* Analysis of literary sources and historical study. *Results and conclusions:* Buzzati's literary world is great fun for the reader, being both intriguing and anxiety forming at the same time. One finishes reading his books only to discover the one truth which overturns everything that seemed to be true. In particular, in his short stories, which stem mostly from episodes taken from everyday life, the plot suddenly comes to life. The atmosphere becomes surreal, and in a moment the incredible happens. Behind the apparent lightness of the fairytale narrative there lies hidden the important issues addressed by the author. He uses the hospital as a metaphor for a categorised life, in which we are at risk of no longer being masters of ourselves, in which we suffer a continuous steady drip that makes us head downwards day after day, floor after floor. We will come back up, but not today, tomorrow perhaps, or at the latest, the day after tomorrow. Corte on the second floor hopes, and screams to give strength to his hope, that he will soon return to the top, towards the seventh floor. (www.actabiomedica.it)

Key words: Dino Buzzati, literature; medical humanities, infectious diseases, Italy, history of medicine

Introduction

The history of medicine investigates the evolution of the medical and surgical practice (*ars medica*) throughout the centuries, often allowing for inter-sections with palaeopathology and allied disciplines, which, either by means of literary, artistic, or numismatic sources, have made possible for scientists to reconstruct the antiquity, presentation, and evolution of pathological conditions (1,2). The study of medicine and diseases in the past has also permitted researchers to highlight the evolving role of medical doctors during pandemics over time (3,4).

In this communication, by celebrating writer Dino Buzzati's 50th death anniversary, we aim to

further explore the power of medical humanities by examining an instance of the influence that the world of medicine had on this renowned author's literary production.

Dino Buzzati Traverso (1906-1972) is remembered as a writer, journalist, painter, playwright, librettist, set designer, costume designer, and poet. He was the author of a large number of surreal and fantasy novels, as well as short stories. He is considered one of the greatest fantasy genre writers of the Italian 20th century. His best-known book is the 1940 novel *Il deserto dei Tartari* (The Tartar Steppe) (5). With a fairytale narrative tone, Buzzati addressed themes and feelings such as anguish, fear of death, magic and mystery, the search for the absolute and the transcendent,

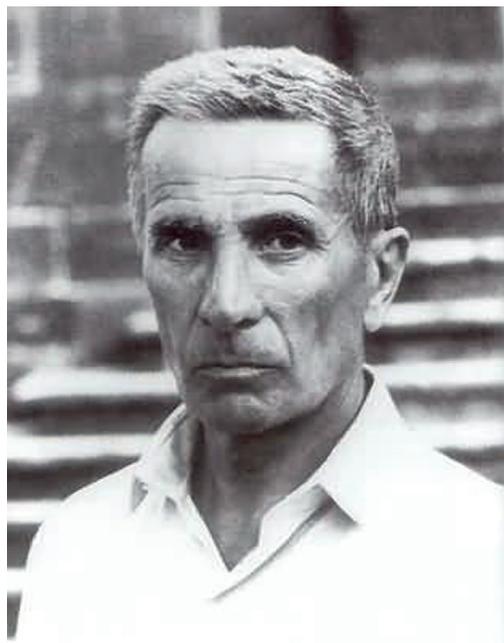


Figure 1. Photograph of Dino Buzzati Traverso (1906–1972). Image in the public domain from Wikimedia Commons: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dino_Buzzati#/media/File:Buzzati2.jpg.

and the desperate waiting for an opportunity to redeem a mediocre existence. The great protagonist of Buzzati's work is destiny, omnipotent and inscrutable, often mocking mankind. Even love affairs are presented from such a perspective of inscrutability. As stated above, Buzzati's literature belongs to the fantastic genre with multiple ideas, sometimes being close in proximity to surrealism, horror, and science fiction.

Buzzati's stories

Some stories focus on the theme of disease, such as the flu that affects only political dissidents in *L'epidemia* (The Epidemic), or leprosy in *Una cosa che comincia per elle* (One thing that begins with el), from 1939. *The Epidemic* describes the spread of a 'state influenza, contracted only by people who don't step in line with the government' (6). In the other book, illness and the silence with which it is treated are the dominant themes of the story (7). The enigmatic title sounds like a funny riddle, even if in reality the rich merchant Cristoforo Schroder, who fell ill with leprosy,

has all his possessions stolen and is only entrusted with a 'festive' bell to ring as a warning of his new condition as a beggar for life. The stories *Solitudini* (Solitudes), *Icaro* (Icarus), and *Invenzioni* (Inventions) concern sick people and clinics, just as in *Nessuno crederà* (No one will believe), where an old friend of the journalist, in contact with aliens, actually lives in a mental health centre (8). The theme of the disease returns in *La peste motoria* (The Motor Plague), when the plague affecting cars spreads in a garage. The contagion occurs through exhaust gases and there is no shortage of spies to report the machines that have contracted the disease, but have not been destroyed by their loyal owners (7).

Again, the disease occurs in *Invidia* (Envy), *Il libro su...* (The book on...), *Impressionabile* (Impressionable), *Scandalo a corte* (Scandal at the court), and *Le vacanze del luminare* (The holidays of the luminary) (9). Dino Buzzati often identifies the malaise of the contemporary world in an epidemic, or in a contagion (10).

In his work entitled *Sessanta racconti* (Sixty short stories), a collection published in 1958, two tales, in particular, are illuminating (7). The story *L'uomo che voleva guarire* (The man who wanted to heal) was published for the first time in the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* in the issue of 20th July 1952. It was subsequently republished in the collection *Il crollo della Baliverna* (The collapse of Baliverna) and *Sessanta racconti* (6). In this unsettling story, a young leper, Mseridon, unable to resign himself to the disease, has recently arrived in the city's leper colony, where many other people of different ages, sexes, and origins have lived for varying periods. Mseridon never stops thinking about his previous life as a noble knight; the beautiful women, the cheerfulness of the city, and all the riches he has had to give up. Eager to go back, he prays every day, never stopping, arriving at the end of the day exhausted, and driven by a strong desire to heal. Unexpectedly for all the inhabitants of the leprosarium, Mseridon begins to get better thanks to prayer. All signs of leprosy vanish, except for a small scab on his little toe. At this point, Mseridon thinks that his method works, and that the problem is just the intensity of its application. He resumes praying for a number of months, until he is totally healed. The doors of the leper colony are opened to him so that he can go home such that the reader is

lulled into thinking that the wait has been rewarded. Buzzati, however, has other plans for Mseridon. He looks out to look at the world he left long ago, but all the beauty has vanished. In its place are dilapidated buildings, poverty, and misery. James, the oldest and wisest of the lepers, explains to him that he no longer sees life with the eyes he used to. From being a gentleman he has now become a saint, and the material goods that so satisfied him before now no longer do so. Therefore he resigns himself to living in the leper colony for the rest of his days. Now he faces a new type of 'ineffective' waiting. He has managed to reach a goal thanks to his patience, but it is only partially realised. Once healed, his worldview does not allow him to live happily in the world known before his illness. All the energies employed are in vain for his desire. The result is therefore personally counterproductive, even though Mseridon becomes actively engaged in investing all of his time in prayer, and so curing the others.

The second tale is *Sette piani* (*Seven plans*). It was originally published in the magazine *La Lettura* on 1st March 1937, then revised and included in the anthology *Sette messaggeri* (*The Seven Messengers*). Later it was included in the collection *Sessanta Racconti*, with a rewriting more faithful to the first version. The work has been transposed into a play and into the film *Il fischio al naso* (*The Nose Whistle*) (7). Giuseppe Corte is a businessman who goes to a nursing home, to recover from a slight fever. The seven floor sanatorium has a particular characteristic; patients are housed on different floors according to their severity, starting with the seventh for mild disease. Mr. Corte recovered on the seventh floor, but since he does not show signs of improving, with an excuse he is transferred to the sixth floor. However he still does not improve. Despite being reassured about his condition, he is again transferred to the floor below. However, since he is defined so healthy that he can be discharged, he starts worrying because he continues to be transferred down the levels towards the ground floor, the place for the dying. Arriving on the ground floor, Giuseppe Corte dies, disheartened by the set of errors that have caused his rapid descent to 'the bottom'. The 'mistake', the 'execrable error', the 'formal error', appears in all its narrative force at the end, but the spring that triggers the beginning of the story starts from his arrival and from

his fatal descent from a train. Together these are a departure that gets him to that 'unreal world, made up of absurd walls', which does not seem possible, but really happens to him. The error falls on the protagonist, Giuseppe Corte, who wants to believe and accept the increasingly improbable circumstances in which he finds himself and abandons himself to fear, falling to the bottom of the 'precipice'. From this he passes through a series of episodes, each a turning point. In the first episode, Corte must experience for the first time the unpleasant sensation of abandoning the 'quasi-healthy' plan for reasons completely unrelated to his health.

In the second, the onset of eczema, causes him to descend almost spontaneously to the fourth floor. Here he has to acknowledge that he is really ill and to predict his own destiny. With skilful expertise, the author preserves the dear soldierly memory of the first novels of the collection *Sessanta Racconti* in the echo of the lexical residue attached to the term 'stationary' which leads back to the tenacious and faithful stay of military camps. That the term 'stationary' has this meaning is confirmed by the epilogue:

"Thus, for that execrable mistake, he arrived at the last station. In the ward for the dying he, who after all, due to the gravity of the disease, in the opinion of even the most severe doctors, had the right to be assigned to the sixth, if not the seventh floor!" (6).

Conclusions

Buzzati's literary world is great fun for the reader, being both intriguing and anxiety forming at the same time. One finishes reading his books only to discover the one truth which overturns everything that seemed to be true. In particular, in his short stories, which stem mostly from episodes taken from everyday life, the plot suddenly comes to life. The atmosphere becomes surreal, and in a moment the incredible happens. Behind the apparent lightness of the fairytale narrative there lies hidden the important issues addressed by the author. He uses the hospital as a metaphor for a categorised life, in which we risk no longer being masters of ourselves, in which we suffer a continuous steady drip that makes us head downwards day after day, floor after floor. We will come back up, but not today, tomorrow

perhaps, at the latest, the day after tomorrow. Corte on the second floor hopes, and screams to give strength to his hope, that he will soon return to the top, towards the seventh floor, yet in accordance with the usual configuration of Buzzati's view that fate was ineluctable.

Conflict of Interest: Each author declares that he or she has no commercial associations (e.g. consultancies, stock ownership, equity interest, patent/licensing arrangement etc.) that might pose a conflict of interest in connection with the submitted article

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