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Truglio, Maria

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Dino Buzzati's *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia* and the Possibilities of Children's Literature

Maria Truglio

Dino Buzzati's 1945 picturebook, *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia*, ends with an account of the act of storytelling.² Buzzati concludes his animal fantasy by bringing the reader back to the beginning:

A ricordare gli orsi tra noi restò soltanto il monumento incompiuto, con la testa costruita a metà, a dominare i tetti della capitale. Ma le tempeste, il vento, i secoli, a poco a poco hanno consumato anche quello. L'anno scorso non ne restavano che poche pietre, corrose e irriconoscibili, ammassate nell'angolo di un giardino. 'Che cosa sono questi strani sassi?' abbiamo chiesto a un vecchio patriarca che passava di là. 'Ma come?' disse lui gentilmente. 'Non lo sa, signore? Sono i resti di una antica statua. Vede? Nel tempo dei tempi....' E cominciò a raccontare. FINE (2000, 113-14)³

In memory of the bears there remains only the uncompleted monument, its head half finished, dominating the roofs of the capital. But tempests, gales and the centuries have little by little destroyed even this. Last year only a few stones remained, crumbling and unrecognizable, piled up in the corner of a garden. 'What are those strange boulders?' we asked an aged inhabitant who was passing by. 'Why, don't you know sir?' he said pleasantly. 'They are the remains of an antique statue. Do you see? Once upon a time...' And he began to tell the story. THE END.⁴

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² Dino Buzzati (1906-1972) wrote for Milan's *Corriere della sera* from 1928 until 1972, becoming an editor in 1933 and serving as a correspondent in Addis Ababa in 1939. He is best known for his novel *Il deserto dei Tartari* (1940) and for his many short stories. He was awarded the Strega prize in 1958. See Cirillo (2000, 181-91).

³ See Fracassa (2002) for a detailed account of the Italian publication history. In 1947 Pantheon published an English translation by Frances Lobb.

⁴ This and all future translations of the text, unless otherwise noted, are from Buzzati 2005. Translations from texts other than *La famosa invasione* throughout are my own.

In creating his tale of the bears that conquer a human city only to be corrupted by its decadence, Buzzati deploys a wide range of both verbal and visual semiotic modes. Color images, black-and-white images, framed illustrations, and unframed figures, as well as captions, prose narration, poems, and a prefatory cast of characters enter into conversations with each other and, often directly, with the reader. Through deploying this variety of semiotic modes and through evoking multiple genres (fable, tragedy, poetry, and others) the text frequently recasts the same content in different forms.⁵ Small details from a large color plate re-appear adorning the prose captions, but as monochrome images; the captions summarize the images they label, but at times also ask questions of the reader; and short poems put into verse the longer prose passages that either precede or follow them. The conclusion of this multi-valenced text, cited above, highlights the process of narration and its crucial yet problematic relationship to memory and history. Stories (“nel tempo dei tempi...”) must be constructed when time has left only the unreadable, crumbled remnants of an unfinished memorial.

In spite of the book’s initial positive reviews and recent popularity, fueled by Dan Handler’s promotion of it as a source for his own anti-conventional books, it has received very little scholarly attention.⁶ Prompted by Buzzati’s gesture of ending his complex animal fantasy with the fictionalized scene of its genesis, I will investigate how this picturebook makes story-telling itself a persistent and problematic theme. Through a close analysis of the composite (verbal and visual) text in light of major trends in Italian children’s books from Edmondo De Amicis’ canonical *Cuore* (1886) through the fascist period, I will suggest that Buzzati puts into question some of the fundamental premises and practices of children’s literature. Jacqueline Rose, in her ground-breaking study *The Case of Peter Pan: Or, The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, has articulated these foundations. Tracing the roots of children’s literature to the philosophical writings of Locke and Rousseau, Rose argues that “Children’s fiction emerges, therefore, out of a conception of both the child and the world as knowable in a direct and unmediated way, a conception which places the innocence of the child and a primary state of language and /or culture in a close and mutually dependent relation” (1984, 9). Children’s fiction is “impossible” insofar as it has been grounded in adult fantasies about children and about language. Rose suggests that “the history of children’s literature should be written, not in terms of its themes or the contents of its stories, but in terms of the relationship to language which different children’s writers establish for the child” (ibid., 78). I propose here to take up that call, arguing that Buzzati’s picturebook represents a rupture in the trajectory of Italian children’s literature by inviting its readers to engage in an active and complex relationship with language. Specifically, the narrative redeploys but ultimately

⁵ David Lewis asserts that “whatever else it is, the picturebook is not a genre.... Rather than confining itself to exploring the byways of any one particular type of text, verbal or pictorial, it exploits genres”—an apt description of Buzzati’s work (2001, 65).

⁶ Shortly after its publication, the Italian text was praised by the influential children’s writer Giuseppe Fanciulli (as I will discuss in more detail below). The English translation received favorable reviews in *The New York Times*, *Horn Books*, and several other high-profile periodicals upon its publication (James and Brown 1948, 131-32). In 2003, *The New York Review of Books* reissued the English version in their Children’s Collection, and in 2005 Harper Collins published the English with an introduction and “Reader’s Companion” by Lemony Snicket (pen name of Daniel Handler). Handler has stated that Buzzati’s picturebook influenced his own best-selling series of thirteen children’s books, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (Brown 2006).

subverts three major strategies that are typical of children's literature generally and Italian children's literature in particular: the home/away binary, the heroic protagonist, and the didactic fable.

First, Buzzati questions the common strategy of dramatizing a seductive "away" only to validate the superiority of "home." As in many of his most successful works for adults, Buzzati overlays other binaries onto the home/away pair: closed and open spaces, urban and mountain landscapes, adulthood and childhood. His exploration of these pairs dismantles the domesticating agenda of traditional children's books. Second, by debunking the authority of the narrator and of the paternal protagonist, Buzzati's work challenges the tradition of heroic role-model stories recommended for Italian youth during, and prior to, the *ventennio* (the years of Mussolini's fascist regime). Third, by staging a scene of fable-reading, and by incorporating fable elements (such as anthropomorphized animal characters), the picturebook nostalgically conjures the fable tradition but ultimately critiques the didactic uses to which this and related children's genres were often put.

More broadly, and operative in all three of these categories, the multi-valenced semiotic strategies of *The Bears* militate against reading practices that seek to capture singular, prescriptive meanings. Barbara Wall's investigation into the history of narrative voice in English children's literature provides a useful vocabulary with which to articulate some of Buzzati's strategies. She proposes three modes of narrative address: single address, in which the narrator is speaking "seriously" to the child narratee only (which she identifies as a twentieth-century development); double address, in which the narrator speaks in a different voice to child and adult, and which was most typical of Victorian texts; and dual address, a rare stance in which the narrator addresses adult and child narratees simultaneously and "genuinely in the same voice" (1991, 34). Through the deployment of dual address, Buzzati's anti-conventional animal fantasy prompts the child-reader to adopt a playful and inquisitive (rather than submissive) attitude toward the book, while relentlessly debunking the adult-readers' fantasies about the transparency of language. By making language itself problematic, Buzzati departs from and calls into question one of the foundational premises of children's literature: that of the knowing adult author communicating a lesson to a receptive child reader.

Because my study will analyze how Buzzati's picturebook subverts the tradition of Italian children's literature, I focus primarily on its position in this diachronic trajectory. However, the picturebook's synchronic context informs the stakes of this subversion. Buzzati published his animal fantasy in installments in Milan's *Corriere dei piccoli* between January 7 and April 29 of 1945, and later that year, with changes, as a volume with Rizzoli.⁷ Coincidentally, then, the final installment of the first version appeared in the Milan paper on the same day that the bodies of Benito Mussolini and Claretta Petacci were strung up in Milan's piazzale Loreto, after they had been murdered, with other fascist leaders, the previous day by Communist partisans. More broadly, Buzzati reported to Yves Panafieu in his published interview that he had written part of the picturebook during the war and created the final images immediately after.⁸ The picturebook took

⁷ Fracassa examines in detail the differences between the installment series and the volume, including the addition of the phrase "in Sicilia" to the title, and the expansion of the story's chronology from five to thirteen years (2002, 50-51).

⁸ In responding to a question about the circumstances in which this tale was born, Buzzati remarked, "in

shape, then, as northern Italy was suffering from the savagery of the civil war that followed the Grand Council's ousting of Mussolini in July 1943 and the establishment of the German puppet regime. The violence did not end with the death of Mussolini: between April and June of 1945, 3,000 fascist officials were murdered in Milan by the "purge commission" (Clark 1984, 317). As Silvana Cirillo writes, Buzzati in this period "assisteva al disfacimento degli eserciti, ai disordini civili e statali, ai partigiani che occupavano Milano, e alla seppur temporanea cessazione delle pubblicazioni del 'Corriere della sera'" (2000, 187; witnessed the disbanding of the armed forces, state and civil disorder, the partisan occupation of Milan, and the temporary suspension of the *Corriere della sera's* publication).

While Cirillo suggests that the composition of *The Bears* provided Buzzati with an escape from this "climate of disorder and anarchy," I would argue that Buzzati's picturebook responds critically and creatively to the traumatic events contemporary to the book's composition and publication. Cirillo's point that, with the picturebook, Buzzati could "evadere da quella grigia realtà proiettandosi in quella senz'altro più colorato e attraente del mondo...dei disegni e delle illustrazioni" (2000, 187; evades that gray reality by throwing himself into the more colorful and attractive world of his drawing and illustrations) does not take into account the fact that some of this "color" includes images like the bright red blood streaming from the bodies of cuddly bears. Indeed such images brought at least one American reviewer to warn librarians that the book may be too violent for children (James and Brown 1948, 131).

Ugo Fracassa rightly delineates several "mechanical" analogies between the picturebook and its context: between the rustic bears and the American GI's of the 1943 Allied landing in Sicily, between the sniveling Grand Duke's dictatorship and the Nazi occupation, and even between the inflatable flying war-boats and the feared World War II "secret weapon" (2002, 45). These specific associations, invited by Buzzati's decision to add "Sicily" to the title of the Rizzoli volume, must be seen as starting points of analysis—rather than its end. Direct historical links like these suggest possible lines of inquiry into the broader cultural critique that Buzzati develops. For example, the thirteen years that separate the end of chapter seven (which culminates with the celebration of Tonio's rescue and the conquest of the city) and the beginning of chapter eight pass by in peace: "Re Leonzio regna ancora indisturbato in Sicilia perchè nessuno ha avuto mai il coraggio di sfidarlo. Uomini e orsi vanno perfettamente d'accordo e i giorni passano placidi" (2000, 75; [King Leontes]⁹ is still reigning undisturbed in Sicily because no one has ever had the courage to challenge him. Men and bears live in perfect harmony and the days go quietly by). However, we learn that this peace is being sustained by a general inebriation in creature comforts. Leonzio's observation that his once-strong bears are now sleeping late, smoking, and putting on weight can be read as Buzzati's diagnosis of the complacency that marked the late 20s and early 30s. His allegory suggests that a certain level of material well-being managed to sustain a sedate *consenso*. The depiction of the bears' gradual acculturation to their new urban dwelling may also comment critically on

quei tempi le figlie di mio cognato venivano a casa nostra a pranzo il mercoledì; dopo pranzo, un giorno ho cominciato a fare dei disegni. E l'opera è nata dopo, dai disegni. Non è nato direttamente il testo. Questo è stato scritto solo dopo. Era durante la guerra. E gli ultimi disegni, li ho fatti subito dopo la guerra" (Panafieu 1973, 160).

⁹ Lobb translates Leonzio as Leander which obscures the leonine association of the original.

the fascist regime's imperial ambitions. After years of co-habitation with their conquered and colonized humans, the primitive bears are corrupted to the point of wearing fur coats. The manner in which the bears adopt the vanities of their human subjects turns the imperial anxiety of "going native" on its head, as the primitives "go civilized" to their detriment. Indeed Leonzio's last truly heroic act is to relinquish the conquered land and direct the bears back to the mountains. Finally, the grieving Tonio's lament at his father's demise, "Chi adesso comanderà il nostro popolo?" (109; Who will command our people now?) echoes loudly as an open and urgent question in 1945 Italy.

To argue, then, that this animal fantasy courts but moves beyond an allegorical reading, and that it highlights its own fictionality, does not imply that it rejects historical engagement. Indeed, the scene in the Grand Duke's theater (to be discussed below), much like the 1948 story "Paura alla Scala" ("Fear at La Scala"), critiques precisely aesthetic escapism. Rather, I argue that the picturebook prompts its readers to rethink the relationship between a text and what it purports to represent. The concluding scene, cited above, in which the older generation must find a way to narrate history when confronted with the remnants of a crumbled monument dramatizes this urgent problem at a moment in which Italians had to make sense of their past, literally and figuratively, from the rubble. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat has shown, contributors to *La Ruota* and to *Cinema* in the early 40s strove to theorize an approach to realism that would "restor[e] art's functions as a force for social liberation" and sought an "oppositional aesthetic" that would be neither escapist nor supportive of the status quo (2001, 195). Buzzati's picturebook offers a non-realist response to this challenge. My section below entitled "Correspondent to the Truth" not only quotes a line from *The Bears*, but also evokes Buzzati's long career as a correspondent for the *Corriere della sera*, and thus underscores how the text redefines its role as "reporter." Situating Buzzati's text among neorealist and other post-war explorations of representation could, of course, constitute a separate study. This brief contextualization highlights the contemporary stakes of Buzzati's project of subverting dominant currents in Italian children's literature. Put plainly, in 1945, Buzzati perceived the urgent need to break with a tradition that promoted conformity.

Before elaborating each of the three major strategies enumerated above, I want to explicate in more detail what I mean by "multi-valenced semiotic modes," because this process operates throughout the composite text. The color plate depicting the construction of the bear monument [**supplemental content 1, p. 97**] with its caption and attendant prose narrative generates to particularly strong effect the kind of interanimation that defines this picturebook.¹⁰ Buzzati's color plate positions the nearly-complete stone monument of a regal bear as the largest, most central image. On the bottom left, Chamberlain Salnitro, the only clothed bear in the illustration, calls King Leonzio's attention to the plan for the completed work. As we look at Buzzati's image we see the king looking at presumably the same image, his gaze directed by Salnitro. Indeed, in apparent obedience to Salnitro's prominent pointer, the king turns his back on the actual

¹⁰ In using the term "interanimation" to describe the manner in which images and words generate meaning, I draw on the work of David Lewis. Even the most seemingly straightforward of picturebooks, in which the verbal text and the visual text apparently duplicate each other, he argues, are never so simple. Rather, "a picturebook's 'story' is never to be found in the words alone, nor in the pictures, but emerges out of their mutual interanimation" (2001, 36). Lewis posits an "ecological" meta-language to discuss picturebooks, in order to stress the complex, symbiotic relationship among its elements.

stone construction in progress (the “unfinished monument” referenced in the last sentences of the book), because he is diverted by the paper representation of the monument.

The caption tells us “Per placare l’amarezza del suo re, il ciambellano Salnitro fa edificare un gigantesco monument in suo onore” (To pacify his King’s wrath, Saltpetre the Chamberlain causes a gigantic monument to be erected in his honour). Tellingly, the caption leaves ambiguous the antecedent of “suo.” We, like the king, assume that the monument will honor Leonzio. However, the caption is as misleading as Salnitro: we later learn that the monument has been designed to honor the duplicitous Chamberlain all along. Furthermore, the color image depicts two faintly drawn, monochromatic and barely visible figures entering the frame in the far distance from the right edge. The caption, however, urges us to focus on what the image leaves almost imperceptible: “Laggiù a destra compaiono di corsa alcuni pescatori spaventati che certo portano una brutta notizia” (2000, 97; Down there on the right, various terrified fishermen are coming running, and they are certainly bringing bad news). Note that the indexical language in the caption points to the composition (down there on the right) rather than to the geography of the represented world (we do not read “from the south” or “the east,” for example). In other words, while the image’s codes of size and position demand that we look at the enormous statue, the caption directs us to examine a peripheral detail.¹¹ The caption, too, gives more information than the painting—the painted figures are far too small to be visually identified as fishermen. Finally, the caption teases the reader with a hint of impending disaster: the content of the “bad news” will not be revealed for two more pages, until page ninety-nine, in the prose narration.

The use of this effect here and throughout the book prompts the reader to read in multiple directions—from an image, down to its caption, and back up to the image; from right to left; or from one page back to a previously turned page. These repetitions do not merely reinforce or illustrate each other; rather, the multiple semiotic modes create reverberations, the variants at times contradicting, at times amplifying each other. In sum we are looking at a character (Leonzio) who is looking at an image (the blueprint) that represents an image (the statue) that should represent that character, while other representational modes indicate that a dangerous misreading is unfolding. The composite text must be actively constructed by the reader who is constantly reminded that he or she is engaged in the act of reading.¹²

¹¹ See Moebius (1986) for a discussion of “graphic codes” in picturebooks. “Graphic codes,” Moebius posits, “do not depend on the relation of objects to each other in a world outside the text.” Rather, “to read a graphic code we must consider the disposition of objects on the page, the handling of line and colour.” He examines how the codes of position, size, perspective, frame, line, color, and others enable picturebooks to “portray the intangible and invisible” (148, 146).

¹² Buzzati’s complex interanimation contrasts markedly with the children’s fiction of his contemporaries such as Pina Ballario’s *Fiabe e leggende delle Dolomiti* (published by Bemporad in 1936, with a fourth edition, by Marzocco, in 1946). Ballario (1899-1971), a popular children’s author during the *ventennio*, offers lively tales that explain the origins of various landscape formations in the Dolomites, and at the same time warn against the vices of vanity, dishonesty, greed, and excess curiosity. In these tales, all narrative elements harmonize in a way that forecloses the active engagement of the reader. Ballario’s narrator addresses the reader in a voice that gently guides and directs, often eliciting accord through phrases like “non è vero?”, “capirete,” “manco a dire,” and “naturalmente.” Her characters’ names transparently reveal their bearers’ qualities, such as King “Senzacuore” and Knight “Senzapaura,” and nature itself is enlisted to proclaim the fittingness of the justice dispensed, as when the Sun tells the self-sacrificing Ombretta “La tua

No Place Like Home

The complex richness generated by Buzzati's composite text enables a productive destabilization in the structure of the narrative. The plot of Buzzati's picturebook deploys and critiques the home-away-home itinerary common to many works of children's literature. Perry Nodelman has argued persuasively that "home and away" are basic binaries in children's literature and that generally speaking books for children depict places away from home that allow "you to get what you childishly want and, by getting it, learn not to want it so much anymore" (2000, 11). Structurally, Buzzati's plot parallels that of works ranging from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (first performed in 1904) and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) to Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963).¹³ In Italy, this structure gave birth to a wide range of articulations. In *Ciondolino* (1895) by the prolific Vamba (Luigi Bertelli), the child protagonist who longs to escape the drudgery of his homework has his wish fulfilled by being turned into an ant, only to learn that the life of such seemingly "free" creatures is far more arduous, and dangerous, than that of a bourgeois boy. Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* experiences a similar disillusion in the "paese dei balocchi" (toyland), and several writers reiterate this theme in their texts. Eugenio Cherubini's *Pinocchio in Affrica* (1903) depicts the wooden puppet swimming to Africa, where he is made Emperor, in order to flee from his school work, ultimately to return home eagerly when he discovers a plot against him. Another Collodi spin-off, Tomaso Catani's *Pinocchio nella luna* (1911), also deploys this binary. The bored, bourgeois child-protagonists of Massimo Bontempelli's *La scacchiera davanti allo specchio* (1922) and Annie Vivanti's *Sua Altezza!* (1923) leave their restrictive homes by climbing through a looking glass and a wall painting, respectively, to enter limitless magical worlds that become dystopias. These books dramatize a child-protagonist's temporary romp in a fantasy land followed by a recognition that home, initially rejected, is in fact the best place to be. Furthermore, such plots typically represent "home" as the quotidian reality of adult life, while the playfulness of the "away" experience symbolizes the freedoms of childhood which the subject must ultimately renounce.

In his essay "The Other," Nodelman takes this binary further. He systematically compares the premises set forth by Said in his *Orientalism* with discursive techniques common in children's literature and in texts on childhood psychology. He points out that

generosità ti ha salvato," or the Moon remarks on the bickering townspeople "questi cattivi e sciocchi pastori avranno il castigo che si meritano" (1999, 49, 64). Indeed, as the rewarded good and punished bad characters transform into mountains, lakes, and crags, the morals of the tales are written permanently into the landscape. In short, Ballario's stories are naturalized where Buzzati's points to its own fabrication.

¹³ Nodelman, in his contribution to the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* issue devoted to Rose's study, has discussed his own indebtedness to *The Case of Peter Pan*. He quotes a sentence from Rose that has informed his own work: "If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one that does not come so easily within its grasp" (2010, 231, quoting from Rose 1984, 2). He then asserts, "In a very real sense, even though much of it extensively refers to other theoretical texts by writers like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, the important theoretical work done in the last few decades on children's literature as a form of colonization stems from this key idea of Rose's" (231).

texts “considered to be good books” tend to celebrate “what is often identified as the wonder or spontaneity or creativity of childhood” while simultaneously “their themes or messages are almost always about becoming less egocentric, more rational, etc.” (1993, 33). This “contradiction,” grounded in the founding binary adult/child, lies at the heart of the genre of children’s literature. Like the animal-characters that populate so many texts written for them, children are envisioned as both primitively innocent and at the same time dangerously bestial and in need of the taming power of books. He argues that these texts seek to colonize children, ultimately for the benefit of adults. I follow Nodelman in reading the “home-away” binary as a chronotope for “adulthood-childhood” in many works of children’s literature and as a strategy often deployed for the colonization of children.¹⁴

Buzzati turns this structure inside-out. In his picturebook, “*home*”—the space in which the narrative originates and to which it ultimately returns—acts as the spatial representative of “childhood” and its attendant romanticized qualities (innocence, naiveté, and so forth). Buzzati forges the association of the bears’ mountain home with the concept of childhood through a range of visual and textual cues. The bears, who begin and end the story in the mountains, display qualities marking them as figures for youth, innocence, and primitive simplicity. Allusions to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and references to Biblical narratives help establish the bear/child relationship for adult readers.

The verbal description of the landscape forcefully recalls Ovid’s narration of the Ages of Man in the opening pages of the *Metamorphoses*. Initially, the bears’ simple diet of mushrooms and nuts align them with Ovid’s men of the golden age, who “content with food which came from no one’s seeking, gathered the arbuté fruit, strawberries from the mountain-sides...and acorns fallen from the spreading tree of Jove” (2004, 9).¹⁵ But then the bears move toward the “fabulous capital” which is “surrounded by very high walls and fortified strongholds” (Buzzati 2005, 17). The building of walls and fortifications echoes Ovid’s account of the boundaries and demarcations that marked the declining ages: “And the ground, which had hitherto been a common possession like the sunlight and the air, the careful surveyor now marked out with long-drawn boundary-line” (2004, 11-13).¹⁶ Ultimately, the bears enter the corrupt Age of Iron, epitomized by the Theater Excelsior in the heart of the Grand Duke’s City. In addition to the Ovidian echoes which cast the bears in their mountains as primitives in a golden age, Biblical allusions reinforce the association of bears with innocence. They are edenicly naked, and when the Duke hears the prophecy of the bears’ imminent attack, he orders a slaughter of all living things in the mountains: a moment which links the bears to the infant Innocents of the Biblical slaughters ordered by Pharaoh and Herod.¹⁷ In Buzzati’s rendering, then, childhood is not a demarcated, bounded-off space to be visited and left behind, but rather the vast, wide open space of the ancient and grand mountains with which the story begins and ends: a time-space the bears regret having left. The deeply nostalgic rhetorical question posed by

¹⁴ Bakhtin describes the “chronotope” (“time-space”) in literature as a process whereby “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (1994, 84).

¹⁵ “Contentique cibis nullo cogente creates fetus montanaque fraga legebant / cornaque et in duris haerentia mora rubetis/ et quae deciderant patula Iovis arbore glandes” (I: 103-106, 8).

¹⁶ “Communemque prius ceu lumina solis et auras / cautus humum longo signavit limite mensor” (I: 135-36, 10-12).

¹⁷ The massacre also points to the fictional opera performed in Buzzati’s “Paura alla Scala.”

the narrator early in the tale, “Non torneremo mai più alle nostre vecchie montagne?” (2000, 13; Shall we ever return to our ancient mountains?) establishes the tenor of longing that will suffuse the entire picturebook.

Similarly, the narrative “away” where the adventure takes place does not represent the nostalgic pull of childhood freedom, as do “Treasure Island, where the wild things are, [and] Mr. MacGregor’s garden” (Nodelman 2000, 11). Rather, the provisional romp takes place in the rigidly and aggressively walled, urban, adult city, epitomized by the fortress, the bank, the theatre, and the gambling house. The city’s buildings, while ostensibly created for the benefit of the citizens, ultimately facilitate violence and exploitation. In fact, the striking visual representations of these urban structures point not only to an adult world, but also to Buzzati’s own adult fiction. The formidable fortress guards the city from the far-off primitive invaders, and recalls Fort Bastiani of Buzzati’s critically acclaimed 1940 novel *Il deserto dei Tartari*.¹⁸ The Grand-Duke’s luxurious theatre [supplemental content 2, p. 61] recalls the opera house of “Paura alla Scala,” in which Milan’s political and cultural elite lock themselves overnight for fear of the (imagined) revolutionary uprising in the city. The extraordinarily detailed cut-away view of the gambling house [supplemental 3, p. 95], with its three floors of degeneracy culminating in the torture chamber, evokes the progressively dark sanatorium of the author’s 1937 short story “I sette piani” (Seven Floors).¹⁹ In this dark tale, the protagonist-patient enters this medical facility on the airy and open top floor, with window views of the outside world, but as his illness progresses, he is helplessly transferred by hospital staff to the sixth floor, then fifth, and so forth until meeting his death in the dreaded tomb-like and windowless ground floor. Like their counterpart structures in Buzzati’s adult fiction, these urban structures, built for the protection and pleasure of their inhabitants, become self-made prisons (to recall Ellen Nerenberg’s analysis of *Il deserto dei Tartari*)²⁰ in which the once primitive and happy bears condemn themselves to lives of deceit, debauchery, and ultimately death.

Buzzati’s inversion of the home-away-home structure, mapped here onto the mountain-city-mountain itinerary of the bears, implies that the book does not convey a conservative or colonizing message to its target audience. Put bluntly, the picturebook does not suggest that the playful freedoms of childhood are temporary indulgences that must be outgrown and tamed. Neither the narrative itinerary, in which the bears leave behind the restrictive spaces of adulthood, nor the imagery, in which tightly squared-in visual fields become arenas for violence, urges the walling in of youth.

¹⁸ Set on the border between home (Italy) and away (the Tartar Steppe), this novel narrates how the entire adult life of Giovanni Drogo slips away almost unperceived as he passes his monotonous days within the enormous, impenetrable Fortress, awaiting battle with an enemy that never arrives. As Venuti succinctly and accurately remarks, “Buzzati’s characters are frequently caught in these strange situations: they seek meaning in an absurd world and as a result they unknowingly condemn themselves to an endless, obsessive wait” (1983, xi).

¹⁹ Parry suggests, “Possibly the best of the pictures is the inner view of four stories of a gambling den, cut in half like a doll house. It repays lengthy perusal” (1977, 241). I have not located any criticism that submits Buzzati’s images in *The Bears* to close analysis.

²⁰ Nerenberg analyzes “Buzzati’s interest in the way spatial organization subtends social and power relations,” and examines specifically how his depiction of Fort Bastiani functions as a “critique of Fascism’s fetishization of masculinity” (2001, 31, 33).

This refusal to promote the domestication of youthful freedoms does not, however, result in an easy utopian solution. The picturebook, I submit, goes beyond a mere nostalgia for the idealized time-space of a primitive, youthful golden age, just as it goes beyond (and critiques) the formal nostalgia for allegory.²¹ Buzzati instills his verbal and visual images of open, limitless spaces with danger, scarcity, and death. The very first image that the reader encounters shows the mountains not as pastoral rolling hills but as sharp towering crags cutting almost violently into the skyline and with no bottom in sight.²² Tonio, his vulnerability emphasized by his size relative to the two humans and by his spread-eagle position, hangs precariously from his kidnappers' ropes over an abyss. In fact, Tonio's predicament here (page 7), as he is suspended by thin wires in the wide-open, unprotected mountain-scape, is echoed precisely in the later image that shows him balancing on the tight-rope at the circus performance commanded by the Duke inside his decadent theater [cf. **supplemental content 2, p.61**]. Indeed the image itself is open and unprotected, appearing as an unframed oval. This is the only image depicted in an oval rather than a rectangle, and the only image that lacks a clear dividing line to demarcate the color image from the white page: here instead, the open frame enables the color and the white page to bleed into each other. The oval shape and the lack of a clean boundary line suggest a sense of openness and airiness, while the central focus emphasizes danger: note that Tonio is at the apex of an inverted triangle formed by the two wires and the (undrawn) horizontal axis of the framing oval. Doonan points out that inverted triangles (in picturebook images) generate a sense of instability and motion (1993, 27). The natural security of mountains, imagined and desired by the urban-dwelling bears as the space of "origin and thus eschaton," as Stewart writes, is rendered even more suspect by the complete absence of any mention of Tonio's mother. The missing mother—a particularly loud silence in this children's book—seems to empty out the myth of wholeness with which the bears remember their mountain home.

Several critics have examined the recurrent use of mountain-scapes as well as the open-closed dynamic in Buzzati's works. In her structuralist analysis of the boundless kingdom depicted in Buzzati's short story, "I sette messaggeri" (The Seven Messengers), Elaine Cancalon remarks that "Total aperture is depicted here as a threat comparable to that of total enclosure" (1977, 43), an observation equally applicable to the *The Bears*.²³ Fracassa, in his assessment of Buzzati's denial of initiation into adulthood, has suggested that throughout Buzzati's opus, the mountains act as a vertical desert, expressing a kind

²¹ Drawing specifically on Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a model, Susan Stewart sees allegory as a "pre-industrial" genre which "transforms" the reader, offering "closure beyond the closure of narrative" (1984, 3). The "complete" and "eschatological vision" of allegory, which promises that each reading will be the same, is predicated upon an understanding of history as circular (4).

²² Moebius argues in his analysis of "codes of line" that "jagged lines and those that run at sharp or odd angles to each other usually accompany troubled emotions or an endangered life" (1986, 150-51).

²³ "I sette messaggeri" recounts the travels of a prince who seeks to find the borders of his father's kingdom, which he will one day inherit. He takes seven messengers with him in order to remain in contact with his family. Years pass, tabulated by the time lag between the relaying messengers. The border is never found. In her elegant study of *Il Deserto dei Tartari* and six short stories (including "Paura alla Scala" and "Sette piani"), Cancalon argues that many of Buzzati's characters choose their immobility in an attempt to give meaning to their lives (41). Her analysis of the "metaphysical direction of Buzzati's thought" demonstrates that "[i]n his search for the ultimate man either accepts already defined limits (the imprisoning enclosures) or attempts to create imaginary barriers which will give form to his life. He finds however that the only discernible frontier is death" (45).

of *horror vacui* and acrophobia grounded in a fundamental lack in the self.²⁴ Finally, in underscoring the importance of drawing and painting for Buzzati, Aldo Finco has proposed that the recurrent tension between mountains and cities throughout Buzzati's work emerges from the author's own life itinerary, from the Dolomites of his childhood to the Milan of his maturity.²⁵ Whether the source of this binary lies in the author's life experiences, in his own fears, in his reflections on existentialist philosophy, or in the creative combination of all three, the effect of the mountain-city tension in *The Bears* denies either space the status of safe sanctuary. The visual oscillation between open, airy spaces and compartmentalized, enclosed spaces generates a motion that precludes the ability to locate a stable, secure resting point. As the end of the book brings the readers back to the beginning, so too do the bears leave behind the urban decadence in which they have spent the past thirteen years to return to their mountain home. However, the composite text stages this return not as a joyful homecoming (in contrast to the happy returns of Baum's Dorothy or Sendak's Max), but as a funeral procession. In short, the text endorses neither a simple escape into the playful freedom of childhood, nor an authoritarian embrace of the secure orderliness of adulthood. Rather, like young Tonio, the young reader must walk a tightrope to navigate the text's conflicting and potentially duplicitous messages.

A King among Men

The desire to find stable meaning in a children's book perhaps drives the plot summary offered by *Life* magazine in its review of the English translation, which erases the first moral dilemma faced by the book's protagonist, King Leonzio. The summary asserts that the book "deals engagingly with an apocryphal tribe of warlike but rather high-principled bears which takes over an ancient capital of Sicily while searching for the kidnapped son of the bear leader" (1948, 66). While the search for Tonio is the King's real underlying motive for the invasion, he hides this personal motive from the tribe. He justifies the descent into the city, which takes place several years after the kidnapping, as a search for food during a particularly harsh winter. The interanimation of word and image, that is, the way in which these different semiotic forms work with and against each other, constructs the King's character. The verbal text proclaims that Leonzio comes from a long line of Kings: "È il Re degli orsi: figlio di un Re il quale a sua volta aveva un re per

²⁴ Fracassa writes, "L'acrofobia, come è delle altre fobie, si sviluppa a difesa dell'io, sovrapponendo ad un pericolo interno uno esterno più facilmente controllabile e evitabile" (2002, 40). Fracassa's excellent chapter on Buzzati is the most extensive analysis of *The Bears* that I have found. He traces echoes among this picturebook and Buzzati's other fiction and reveals allusions to a range of texts from Verdi and Pave to Dante and Virgil. Fracassa argues that Buzzati's fiction in general resists initiation into adulthood. With *The Bears*, Buzzati creates a ludic text aimed at an audience of child-like adults: readers who retain a "youthful approach" to art and its semiotic playfulness.

²⁵ Concluding his brief essay on three texts that emphasize the importance of the visual image for Buzzati (*Poema a fumetti*, *I miracoli di Val Morel-Per grazia ricevuta*, and *La famosa invasione*), Finco asserts: "Ed ecco allora, da un lato le Dolomite che appaiono e ritornano costantemente nei suoi scritti e disegni, e dell'altro Milano, stracittà, *orrenda città*, dove si svolge la sua vita d'ogni giorno. Questi due termini offrono lo sfondo di tutta l'opera sua" (1989, 194). Buzzati was born in Belluno, about fifty miles north of Venice.

padre” (he is the King of the Bears, the son of a King who in turn had a King as a father). He is distinguished from the rest of the bears “perchè porta una grande sciabola, tenuta su da una sciarpa a tracolla” (2000, 9; because he carries a great sword suspended from a shoulder scarf).²⁶ Even Leonzio’s name evokes the image of the powerful king of the jungle. The verbal account positions Leonzio within the tradition of patriarchal and martial images of strong leaders offered as role models for children. This use of heroic figures dates to children’s books from the unification period and gained particular currency during the *ventennio*.

In his preface to a collection of short stories for children, published in 1890, Michele Ricciardi asserted that “se ne potrebbe dare facilmente una ricetta: prendi dieci grammi di eroico, due di malinconico e fa’ un libro per fanciulli” (1890, 9; one could easily write up a recipe for such books: take ten grams of heroism, add two grams of melancholy, and make a children’s book). His recipe for children’s books highlights the healthy doses of heroism being doled out to Italian children in the late nineteenth century. The memorable monthly stories that punctuate Edmondo De Amicis’ *Cuore* (1886) epitomize the potent mixture of heroism and sentimentality described by Ricciardi. In these tales from “the book that was best known and most read in schools” (Lollo 2004, 197), child protagonists from Italy’s different regions offer models of courage and self-sacrifice to very powerful effect.²⁷ In an escapist rather than openly didactic mode, Emilio Salgari’s many late-nineteenth-century adventure novels offered extremely popular images of swash-buckling, daring Romantic heroes in exotic locales.²⁸ In *Le tigre di Mopracem* (1884), for example, Sandokan the pirate with a small band of rebel followers takes on the colonial might of the British and Dutch. Recalling the spirit of Sandokan’s bravery, criminologist Lino Ferriani defined heroism in his 1905 tale for children, *Un piccolo eroe*. His earnest protagonist, Pin, repeatedly models heroism—the accomplishment of a “great and magnanimous deed” (1905, 116)—when he suffers a bloody nose while protecting a crippled classmate from a gang of other youths, saves a group of women and children from a rabid dog by beating it to death with a stick, and finally loses his own job by standing up to an exploitative London foreman in defense of a young Italian construction worker. With a similar emphasis on selfless courage, Giuseppe Zucca’s 1918 collection entitled *Vincere, vincere, vincere* gathers stirring poems written during the Great War to foster patriotic fervor.²⁹ Titles like *Umili eroi della patria e dell’umanità* (1903), *Piccoli eroi della grande guerra* (1915), *Un fanciullo alla guerra: avventure di un fanciullo nella campagna del 1848* (1917), and *Il libro degli eroi: letture patriottiche per la gioventù italiana* (1921) attest to the currency that tales of heroic courage held in early-twentieth-century Italian children’s literature.

²⁶ Lobb has “by the fact that he carries a great sword suspended by a tricolor scarf” (11), having translated “tracolla” as “tricolor.”

²⁷ In May, 1904, *Cuore* sold its 301,000th copy, making it, alongside Collodi’s *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, one of the top sellers in the Italian market for children’s books (Manson 2004, 185).

²⁸ Salgari (1862-1911) wrote eighty-three novels and approximately 150 short stories. See Boero and De Luca (2009, 65-72). In her compelling analysis of Salgari’s work, Cristina della Coletta (2006) has demonstrated how Salgari drew on textual representations of Giuseppe Garibaldi in constructing Sandokan.

²⁹ One poem paints the portrait of Giuseppe Lavezzari, a garibaldino who volunteers to fight again in his old age. Rushing into the Austrian line crying “Viva l’Italia,” he reveals his red shirt and dares the enemy to kill him (Zucca 1918, 7-10).

Publishers, educators, and writers capitalized on this tradition and mobilized it for their purposes during the *ventennio*. Children's Literature scholars Pino Boero and Carmine De Luca note particularly the editorial house Carroccio in Milan in their account of the "strettissima collaborazione di editori, autori, illustratori" (very close collaboration of editors, authors, and illustrators) with the regime's efforts to "accaparrarsi il consenso di massa a partire dall'infanzia" (2009, 197-98; to secure mass consensus starting from childhood). Carroccio's directors Gino and Renzo Boschi launched an entire series entitled "Eroi d'Italia" which offered stirring biographies with an eye to eliciting "intense patriotism" (ibid., 378). Like Milan's Carroccio, Florence's important Bemporad Press also participated in this trend. As I noted in my article on Annie Vivanti and children's literature of the period (2004), in 1930 editor Enrico Bemporad hired Ettore Allodoli to "reorganize and update" Vamba's *O patria mia*.³⁰ In Vamba's book, a sculptor from Lucca raising his family in Argentina carves busts of famous Italians, and uses his sculptures to teach Italian history to his young children. After Vamba's death in 1920, the book continued to circulate. The 1923 edition of *O patria mia* included advertisements for Marga's *Ragazzi fascisti*, Momus' *Il libro degli eroi*, and Giannini's *Italia eroica!*. Ettore Allodoli's revisions add Benito Mussolini to Vamba's gallery. The 1933 edition highlights the Duce's accomplishments with an illustration of the signing of the Lateran Accords. Similarly, Volpe's 1932 educational text *I fatti degli italiani e dell'Italia* presents a heroic Mussolini to its young readers as the reincarnated Garibaldi for whom the step from saying to doing is swift and decisive.³¹ In his 1937 reference guide of children's books, Olindo Giacobbe recommended enthusiastically the works of Jack la Bolina (Augusto Vittorio Vecchi) whose books, such as *Giovani eroi del mare*, met with Giacobbe's favor for their depiction of maritime heroism.³²

This summary sketch does not pretend to account fully for the richness and variety of children's books written and circulating in Italy between unification and 1945. Rather, I mean here to articulate one particularly strong and recurring theme—that of the heroic figure—which Buzzati activates in his picturebook. The introductory cast of characters positions King Leonzio not only within the patriarchal lineage of his own royal family, but also within this textual tradition of martial heroism.

³⁰ Letter from Bemporad to Allodoli: "rimane inteso che Ella compierà il riordinamento e aggiornamento dell'opera di Vamba in 3 volumi, intitolata 'O patria mia' seguendo le direttive di commune accordo fissata. Le sarà pagata L. 2.500" (Vamba 1930, June 4). Tranfaglia and Vittoria describe Bemporad as "uno degli editori più vicini al regime fascista," although he would become a victim of the 1938 racial laws (2000, 270, 272). See also Truglio (2004, 133).

³¹ This survey of Italy's history, written for Italian children abroad, culminates with an account of Mussolini's many accomplishments that is almost hagiographic in its rhetoric. "Sapete che Mussolini amava molto Garibaldi? Appena andò al governo, fece una visita a Caprera. E lì disse: 'Le camicie nere continuano e perfezionano l'opera delle camicie rosse'" (Volpe 1932, 334). Praising Mussolini's ability to heal the long-standing rift between Church and State with the Lateran Accords, Volpe, playing on a popular adage, notes: "dal dire al fare, per lui, non c'era di mezzo quel gran mare che c'è per quasi tutti gli altri uomini" (ibid., 355).

³² Through his detailed narratives, the author "tende in fondo a coltivare nell'animo giovanile quelle tendenze ad una vita eroica e robusta che già nei tempi lontani costituì la gloria e la grandezza della nostra nazione" (1937, 119; aims after all to cultivate in the young soul those inclinations toward a robust and heroic life that even in the distant past constituted the glory and grandeur of our nation). Giacobbe also writes approvingly of Zucca's collection of war poems (276-77). Giacobbe published *Note della letteratura infantile* in 1923, various editions of *La letteratura infantile*, and *Manuale di letteratura infantile* in 1947. See Fava (2004, 296-302).

However, Buzzati's composite text undercuts this apparent virile heroism. On the one hand, the narrator seeks the reader's understanding for the King's failure to search immediately for his son, asking "Ma come fare da solo? Un orso in mezzo agli uomini?" (2000, 18; But what could he do by himself, a bear among men?). This rhetorical question, however, has been answered by the image that precedes it: the image of little Tonio hanging helplessly in the air, his tiny body dwarfed by the immense crags. The visual image of the abandoned cub, which opens the book, undercuts the verbal assertions of the Leonzio's paternal authority and kingly prowess: not only did this father fail to protect his son from the human kidnappers, but he then lied to his men claiming that his son was dead in order to save face. Indeed, all the bears' victories are due to the skill or sacrifices of characters other than Leonzio: Babbone's strength and size allows the bears to win the first battle, Ambrosiis's magic rescues the bears in the second conflict, Smeriglio's noble self-sacrifice saves them all from the Giant Cat Mammone, Frangipane's inventions allow the bears to breach the fortress, and Gelsomino's acute perception ultimately brings down the conspirator. This acknowledgement of the various contributions of different members of the community, rather than the singular heroism of the leader, casts the introductory lines into some doubt, or, rather, forces us to read them quite literally: perhaps his shoulder scarf and sword are *all* that distinguish him from the other bears.

In short, certain textual cues invite us to see this strong, paternal Sicilian invader as yet another incarnation of Garibaldi, while other cues point to his duplicity, weakness, and dependence on others. While Leonzio's flaws depart significantly from the heroic tradition I outlined, the manner in which these flaws are narrated represents a more profound shift. The composite text constructs Leonzio in a way that activates the critical judgment of the reader, both child and adult. This strategy moves away from the tradition that offered heroic figures as models to be admired and imitated and as avenues for the direct transmission of values from author to reader. In this regard, Lino Ferriani's address to his readers, just as much as his depiction of the unerringly courageous Pin, illustrates this tradition. In a prefatory address to his readers, Ferriani tells his "cari piccoli amici" (dear little friends) that he offers this book to them "con cuore paterno" (with a fatherly heart) in the hopes that it will educate them about the lives of children who suffer neglect and abuse. The narrator intervenes throughout the book to pose rhetorical questions meant to elicit the reader's agreement, ending his queries, like Ballario, in "non è vero?" (see note 11). Given its wide circulation and canonical status, De Amicis' *Cuore* dramatizes to greater effect how heroic role models were disseminated among Italy's children. In *Cuore*, we learn that the stirring monthly stories (mentioned above) were transcribed into Enrico's diary after having been dictated to the class by the kindly, Christ-like Signor Perboni. In short, the utopian world of De Amicis' Torinese classroom stages the ideal scene of reading as a scene of dictation: as their hands reproduce the teacher's words, the students are meant to incorporate the values communicated therein.

Indeed, it is Leonzio's failure as a reader that ultimately precipitates his downfall. After years of living in the human city, the king is unable to locate the true sources of corruption and the plot to overthrow him, in spite of a letter that arrives from a faithful bear attempting to warn him. Nor is he able to recognize that the enormous sculpture being constructed in the city does not in fact celebrate him, but rather his usurper, Salnitro (see above). While Leonzio's own duplicity invites readers to question leaders'

authority, the king's inability to see the signs of duplicity around him underscores the importance of reading.

Correspondent to The Truth

The process of reading and the question of codes move into the foreground and become the message throughout the picturebook, as when the narrator suggests that the reader look more carefully at a given image. A particularly illustrative moment unfolds in the first chapter. The narrative voice in one of the poems directs the reader to observe the battle in the colored plate: "La battaglia va osservata / nella tavola colorata" (2000, 20; [The battle should be observed in the color plate]). The overt reference to the image jolts the reader out of the narrated world and back into the materiality of the book in a manner that would seem to break the spell of the fantasy. In the battle image that "must be observed" (va osservata) we see not only the first military conflict between the invading bears and the defending humans but also the Grand Duke, in the bottom left corner, observing the battle through his telescope. As we see the Duke seeing the battle from his safe vantage point on the periphery, we share his perspective: that is, we, too, are outside the event looking in. His telescope, however, tells a different story. The poem reveals that the Duke's courtiers have manipulated the lens by painting dead bears directly on the glass, tricking the Duke into thinking that he sees victory for his men everywhere he casts his gaze. In other words, the duke's lens is not transparent, although he is as unaware of this duplicity as we would be, were we to depend solely on the *tavola colorata*.³³ Since we, the readers, share the Duke's vantage point, the composite text implies that we, too, should look *at* our lens, and not merely *through* it.³⁴

The reader's lens is the voice of the narrator, who makes his voice extremely conspicuous through a variety of techniques.³⁵ Like Leonzio's heroism, the narrator's omniscience is left open to question by the text. Barbara Wall's analysis of the strategies of double address, introduced above, reveals how the implied child reader can be used by the narrator to ingratiate adults. Wall observes how "the narrator exploits the ignorance of the implied child reader and attempts to entertain an implied adult reader by making jokes that are funny primarily because the child will not understand them" (1991, 35). In *The Bears*, I would suggest that the narrator engages both emergent and more sophisticated

³³ Just as, in the colored plate on page 97, we look at the king looking at the plans for the monument: plans that do not correspond to the reality they purport to represent.

³⁴ As Stewart notes, "with the advent of film, interpretation has been replaced by watching, by an eye that suffers under an illusion of nakedness, an illusion shared with the camera's 'naked' eye." Such texts, she argues, "erase the labor of their authors" (1984, 11). Buzzati shatters this illusion of the naked lens by calling the readers' attention to his process of making. While the naked bears function as signifiers of innocence, the Grand Duke's strategically painted lens underscores that the bears are, precisely, strategically placed signifiers. Buzzati deploys nakedness as a signifier for innocence in the image I discussed above. All thirty-one worker bears building the statue are completely naked, while Salnitro, the duplicitous Chamberlain, sports a dapper ensemble of light blue slacks, a red shirt, and a black-and-white checkered jacket. This strategy of course reinforces the "prevailing motif of nostalgia," which "is the erasure of the gap between nature and culture" (23).

³⁵ In her 2005 essay on *The Bears*, Russell recollects her childhood experience of her father reading the book to her and her siblings. This experience imprinted the narrator, rather than any of the characters, most powerfully in her memory.

readers rather than talking “over” the implied child reader, and does so even when he “breaks the illusion he pretends to be creating,” as Wall describes J. M. Barrie’s form of double address (*ibid.*, 25). Buzzati’s humor derives from the narrator’s ineptitude, or at least questionable authority, rather than from the implied child reader’s assumed ignorance. For example, the narrative voice offers verses that overtly fail either in rhyme, such as the awkward “Quel triste tipo è il prof. De Ambrosiis / ma non c’è rima che finisca in osiis” (25; that sad guy is Professor Ambrose / but there is nothing that rhymes with brose), or in meter, as in the clumsy “Ma chi mai può voler bene al Gran- / duca crudelissimo tiran?” (19; But who could possibly love the Grand- / Duke, that terrible tyrant?).³⁶ The comic effect undermines the much more serious and weighty authorial stance more common in Italian children’s books. For the adult reader, the *lack* of a rhyme to go with “Ambrosiis” and the *severing* of “Granduca” to fit the verse create holes and rips in the textual fabric of the story, gaps which reveal narrative labor. In a gesture that departs notably from the prescriptive voices of Italy’s didactic, heroic, and sentimental tradition, character assessments are left open to the reader: “Buono? Cattivo? Lo giudicherete voi” (10; Is he a good man? Is he a bad man? That you must judge for yourselves). The narrator seems eager to cut a good figure and at least appear well-informed, as when he includes the werewolf in the prefatory cast of characters, just in case it should make an appearance in the story (it does not).³⁷ These humorous gestures break the spell of the narrated world and turn the readers’ attention to the lens itself, pointing, as it were, to its own scratches and smears, to its own potential distortions.

The long-awaited reunion scene of Leonzio and Tonio, at the mid-point of the picturebook, conflates code and message in particularly effective ways. The image [**supplemental content 2, p. 61**] seems far more concerned with the staging itself than with the climactic moment of narration: in fact, little Tonio, who should be the center of attention, appears far off to the left of the frame, and it is not by chance that the reunion takes place in the theatre. The scene as generated by the composite text of prose, poetry, caption, and image, conjures a range of genres and emphasizes the artifice of framing and staging. The Grand Duke has decided to enjoy the spectacle of a circus performance in spite of the fact that a battle is raging just outside. His hubris and decadence, however, lead to his downfall when the bears break into even this urban sanctuary.³⁸ The circus is replaced by the drama—indeed the nineteenth-century Romantic melodrama—of the King’s reunion with Tonio (shot and almost killed by the furious Grand Duke). But as the spectators turn their attention from the music, dance, and tightrope act to the reunion

³⁶ Translation mine. Lobb’s translations read: “This was Professor Ambrose / Behind where the Duke’s oriflamb rose” (31) and “When our tale begins, the Grand / Duke was ruler of the land. / Ugly, thin, conceited, grim, / We shall hear some more of him” (25), respectively.

³⁷ “Lupo Mannaro: Terzo mostro. Può darsi che nella storia non compaia, anzi non dovrebbe comparire mai, se siamo bene informati. Ma non si sa mai. Potrebbe capitar dentro da un momento all’altro. E allora che figura ci faremmo senza averlo annunciato?” (2000, 12; The Werewolf: It is possible that he may not appear in our story. In fact, as far as we know he has never appeared anywhere, but one never knows. He might suddenly appear from one moment to the next, and then how foolish we should look for not having mentioned him).

³⁸ On the theater as a *locus amoenus*, ideally separated from the dirty world of politics outside, compare, again, “Paura alla Scala”: “Mentre là, tra la gente conosciuta, in un ambiente estraneo alla politica, con tanti personaggi pieni di autorità, si sentivano quasi protetti, in terra intoccabile, come se la Scala fosse una sede” (Buzzati 1984, 53). Buzzati here is clearly critical of any such elitist withdrawal into a purely aesthetic refuge.

scene, they, too, become part of the show for the reader: each is positioned in a rigid, indeed, highly staged gesture of surprise, and quite emphatically framed within a theater-box that resembles the architectural niches in which statues are displayed. The woman who accompanies the Grand Duke mirrors the ballerinas on stage in her theatrical pose, and the narrator tells us that the dancers themselves were so shocked that they turned into statues. The scene is not without its nod to comedy: in a slap-stick image reminiscent of *commedia dell'arte*, a musician flies head-first into his large tympanum, with feet left kicking up in the air. In short, staging, posing, and framing are so overtly pronounced as to become the message itself.

Buzzati focuses his picturebook on the problem of narration at two particularly provocative moments. When defending his inclusion of the ghost story segment in Chapter Three, the narrator concludes his list of justifications by proclaiming with apparent exasperation, “la storia fu proprio così e non la possiamo cambiare” (2000, 34; that is how the story was and we cannot alter it). In a similar gesture, after describing the “utter disaster” in which the bears fall while attacking the human fortress, the narrator gives voice to his narratees who ask, “E allora perché nel disegno, che certo corrisponde alla verità, si vedono invece gli orsi arrivare al ciglio dei muraglioni...? Perché nel disegno sembra che gli orsi stiano per vincere? Perché dunque questo scherzo?” (53; But if that is so, why is it that in the picture, which certainly corresponds to the truth, we see the bears climbing over the top of the ramparts...? Why does the drawing make it look as if the bears were winning? Why does the artist play this joke on us?). Such moments of narrative intrusion generate humor through the clearly impossible premise that the antics of the ghosts or the bear battle at the fortress were events that actually occurred. The narrator asserts that the reality, or the truth, preceded its narration, and that the story we are reading merely transmits or faithfully re-presents these historically factual incidents. The obvious fictionality of the dancing ghosts and the invading bears comments ironically on these assertions and implies their opposite. The offended voices of the narratees recall a “utopia” which is “prelapsarian,” a world in which “lived and mediated experience are one” (Stewart 1984, 23). Nostalgically eliciting and playfully debunking that utopia, Buzzati offers emergent readers a model of critical engagement (as the readers in the text demand an answer) and points his practiced readers in the direction of a hermeneutic of suspicion.³⁹

This approach to language contrasts sharply with much of the literature available to children at the time, so often written under the premise of the sincere “cuore paterno” articulated by Ferriani. A specific example from Buzzati’s period forcefully illustrates this difference. Giuseppe Reina’s *Meni e Mariutte: avventure di guerra di due fanciulli friulani* was first published in 1920, and saw its fourth edition printed in 1943. The author’s note that follows the story insists that the preceding text corresponds to the truth, and articulates the aim of passing that truth from knowing adult to receptive child: “Gli episodi e gli avvenimenti qui narrate sono rigorosamente veri” (the episodes and events narrated here are rigorously true). Reina clearly states his goal: “mettere i ragazzi che leggeranno il libro, in grado di conoscere, a grande linee, la grande guerra d’Italia” (1943, n.p.; to help the children who read the book come to a broader understanding of Italy’s great war). The author’s detailed descriptions of the physical appearance of characters and scenes and frequent use of precise dates and specific geographic pointers (chapter

³⁹ The term comes from Paul Ricoeur (1970, 30, 32-6).

titles include “Il 2 novembre,” “L’anno 1916,” “La battaglia del Piave”) are deployed to serve this agenda. By contrasting Buzzati’s fanciful story with this historical novel for children, I want to underscore not a difference in content so much as a difference in the basic premise about language upon which the narration is grounded. As Rose writes, “Realism in children’s writing cannot be opposed to what is ‘literary’ or truly ‘aesthetic,’ once it is seen that realism does not refer just to the content of what is described, but to a way of presenting it to the reader.... Realism...is that form of writing which attempts to reduce to an absolute minimum our awareness of the language in which a story is written in order that we will take it for real” (1984, 65). Thus, it is not in writing about ghosts rather than Gorizia that Buzzati challenges the tradition embodied in Reina’s text. Rather, his approach to language undermines the kind of realism at work even in fables.

The End(s) of Fable

Buzzati’s strategies foreground the construction of meaning. Thus, when the text dramatizes nostalgia for untenable utopias, that nostalgia is not only for an idealized notion of childhood but also for “childhood” *genres*, including the fable. Buzzati himself invited readings in this vein. Buzzati’s own comment, reported in the *Life* magazine review, that “The whole point of the book is that conquest finally corrupts” (1948, 66), was aimed to deflect the reductive politically-grounded allegorical interpretations it had generated by pointing readers in the direction of traditional Aesopian fable.⁴⁰ However, like the home-away-home structure, the heroic protagonist, and the paternal narrative voice, so too elements of fable and allegory are deployed only to be subverted.

Buzzati’s text makes clear that the time which passes while the bears fall into corruption is not life-time but rather text-time: “Ahimè cos’è la vita. Noi si immagina / di avere tempo. Se ci si è attardati / non ci si bada. Poi si volta pagina / e già tredici anni son passati!” (2000, 75; Alas, thus is life. We imagine that we have plenty of time. If we have lingered, we don’t notice it. Then the page is turned, and suddenly thirteen years have passed!).⁴¹ This quatrain, which opens chapter eight, reminds readers that they have in fact just turned the page, and the “immagina / pagina” rhyme forcefully links the physicality of the page with the imaginative world generated by it. Re-evoking the melodrama of the “Ahimè,” King Leonzio wonders whether “non erano forse più belli—si domanda in segreto—i tempi passati lassù, nella solenne solitudine delle rupi?” (ibid., 75; ‘Were the days spent up there not happier ones,’ he thinks to himself in secret, ‘among the solemn solitude of the crags?’). The King’s longing for the good old days of simplicity stands as a synecdoche for the way in which the entire book is “suffused with a generalized nostalgia for the generic history” of fable (Stewart 1984, 11).⁴² This generic nostalgia may indeed account for the spell this text seems to have cast on its reviewers,

⁴⁰ *Life* reports, “A good many Italians thought the bears in the story were Sicily’s U.S. invaders” (66).

⁴¹ Translation mine. Lobb’s translation: “Life is like that, alas! When we are growing / We think that we have time enough to spare, / And dawdle. All at once we are aware / That thirteen years have passed without our knowing” (Buzzati 2005, 95). Lobb admirably maintains both meaning and rhyme, but loses the self-referentiality I am emphasizing here.

⁴² Stewart here analyzes how *Star Wars* is suffused with a generalized nostalgia for the generic history of film.

who repeatedly evoke the language of incantation in their summaries of its “enchancing pictures” and the “charm of its presentation” (James and Brown 1948, 131-32). Through its use of animal protagonists, its espousal of a healthy moral warning against excess and luxury, and its tantalizing evocation of nearly contemporary historical events that seem perfectly to “fit” the story’s plot (the range of analogies to the World War II context mentioned above), *The Bears* conjures narrative forms that claim a fullness, wholeness, and adequacy of meaning. Buzzati’s picturebook activates, but ultimately critiques, nostalgia for genres grounded in clear didacticism, transparent language, and reliable correspondences. Its sustained foregrounding of its own fictionality and its systematic questioning of the reliability of representation suggest that what is buried with King Leonzio is the operability of fable and allegory, genres that cast the spell of secure and stable meaning.

Buzzati’s remarkable self-reflexivity comes to a fore when he inscribes a fable into his animal fantasy in the scene that unfolds in the upper room of the gambling house. The strongly delineated rooms in the image [supplemental content 3, p. 95], aggressively marked by grid-like, thick black lines, participate in the range of images emphasizing compartmentalized, closed-in spaces. In fact, the house almost completely fills the frame, sharing three borders with the frame and leaving only a thin strip of air space above the roof. The interanimation of word and image reveals that the painting employs the technique of continuous narrative. Adopted in antiquity by Roman Sarcophagi sculptors, and used perhaps most famously by Masaccio in his fresco *The Tribute Money* (1424-1428), this strategy enables a single composition to narrate more than one moment of a story. Here, King Leonzio enters the gambling house in search of his son (lower right). One level up, slightly left of center, the King (identifiable by his clothing) grabs Tonio by the scruff of his neck and escorts the humiliated and weeping young bear away from the gambling tables, despite the angry protests of the other players. In short, two different moments from the prose narration appear simultaneously within the same visual image. The re-deployment of continuous narrative, as well as the strategy of identifying otherwise indistinguishable characters by their attributes (as visual imagery identified saints by the instruments of their martyrdoms and not by facial features), hearken back to artistic solutions developed in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. In other words, here, too, Buzzati is activating a kind of formal nostalgia.⁴³

The prose narrative explains that bears caught cheating are punished by being spanked with rods and then forced to memorize “poesie educative come: La cicala e la formica” (2000, 96; educational poetry, like ‘The Grasshopper and the Ant’). The punishment room appears in the upper left hand corner of the house. The bear being reprimanded is the only naked character among the now thoroughly corrupt and thus elegantly clothed bears. The bright pastel colors (pink, purple, light blue, and yellow rooms) and the evocation of dolls connote a femininity that, in the economy of the text, underscores the bears’ emasculation in their urban decadence.⁴⁴ The vulnerably naked

⁴³ The continuous narrative technique appears also in the color plate on page 47 [plate 5]. The enormous orange Cat Mammone leaps across the frame, arching from top right to bottom left, in the moment of attacking the bears. In the bottom right corner, a scroll depicts a black-and-white drawing of the Cat with his belly exploding (a later episode in the narrative).

⁴⁴ See Doonan (1993, 30-31), for a discussion of how the hue, tone, and saturation of colors can be read in picturebooks.

gambler lies face down strapped to a table. Above him burns a single lamp hanging from the ceiling, behind him stands a bear whipping his exposed bottom, and in front of him sits another bear reading from a book: the book, thus, visually parallels the whip. The sparseness of the room—especially in contrast to the luxury that surrounds it—and the vulnerability of the supine, strapped, and stripped animal generate a more sinister aspect than the humorous prose suggests. This brightly colored doll-house nestles a torture chamber in which the teaching of fables is cast as violence.

Buzzati does not question the moral of “The Grasshopper and the Ant,” a story which teaches the value of working hard in the present to prepare for an uncertain future. Rather, he criticizes the didactic ends to which animal fables were put. Such use is illustrated, for example, in the extremely popular children’s book *Memorie di un pulcino* (1875) by Ida Baccini, an elementary school teacher, prolific children’s author, and director of the children’s periodical *Cordelia*.⁴⁵ Wanting to quell in her son the desire to go off to the city and become a “signorino,” the chick’s mamma, using “il linguaggio della sincerità,” tells him the fable of city mouse and country mouse. In this tale, the country mouse realizes that the delicacies of city cuisine come at the expense of constant fear of being killed: “In questa dolcezza si nasconde un veleno amaro” (2000, 87; a bitter poison is hidden within this sweetness). The “sincere” fable, designed to leave no ambiguity as to its moral, is deployed precisely to “secure” the *pulcino* (to use Rose’s word): to keep him safe and to immobilize him. Mamma’s fable shows that “Home is still the best, the safest place to be” (Nodelman 1993, 30). Cherubini’s *Pinocchio in Affrica* (1903, in print until 1922) also stages the use of fables. Cherubini, a writer and teacher from Tuscany, pokes fun at the way in which fables torment the school children forced to study them. In this spin-off of Collodi’s masterpiece, the wooden puppet laments having to read Aesop’s “The Hare and the Hound.” However, as noted above, Cherubini’s book ultimately conveys a conservative message by showing how the puppet suffers for having abandoned his studies.⁴⁶ More broadly, Giuseppe Fanciulli, a highly prolific writer and arbiter of Italian children’s literature in the first half of the twentieth century, makes clear in his *Scrittori e libri per l’infanzia* (1949) that he valued tales which communicated “grand meanings” (like justice and faith) to young readers.⁴⁷ In short, Baccini, Cherubini,

⁴⁵ On Ida Baccini (1850-1911), see Laura Nacci’s excellent preface in *Memorie di un Pulcino* (Baccini 2000, 11-23).

⁴⁶ More generally, Olindo Giacobbe recommended Aesop as “uno scrittore sempre vivo e attraente” (1937, 14; a writer still vibrant and fascinating). In his 1937 *La letteratura infantile*, Giacobbe asserts, “Le sue favole ancora corrono per il mondo e ancora seguitano a mortificare negli uomini i difetti e le debolezze che egli così sapientemente e con tanta arguzia e semplicità sapeva mettere in mostra sotto graziose allegoriche animalesche” (ibid.; his fables still circulate throughout the world, and continue to humble in men the defects and weaknesses that he so wisely and with such wit and simplicity knew how to illustrate through his graceful animal allegories). Since “i difetti che contristavano l’umanità ai tempi di Esopo seguitano ancora a persistere nell’epoca nostra” (ibid., 15; the defects that saddened humanity in Aesop’s time continue to persist in our own period) older students could profit from the originals and younger children benefit from translations and abbreviated editions.

⁴⁷ Fanciulli (1881-1951) not only wrote a vast number of children’s books, but also was editor, and, after Vamba’s death, director of the popular children’s periodical *Giornalino della Domenica*. Fanciulli approvingly described Buzzati’s text as a “racconto fiabesco” in his 1949 critical survey, *Scrittori e libri per l’infanzia* (1949, 264). In the section “Per le Bibliotechini,” his recommendation list also included the fabulist La Fontaine, as well as Andersen, the Grimm Brothers, and Perrault. While fable and fairy tale are distinct genres, Fanciulli’s classification system groups them together, and thus his chapter on Hans Christian Andersen can reveal the qualities that he found admirable in writers of this general constellation

Giacobbe, and Fanciulli (collectively children's writers, teachers, anthologists, journal editors, and critics of the first half of the twentieth century) attest to the view of fable as a useful and unproblematic transmitter of morals.⁴⁸ Turning in on itself (as it ends with its beginning), Buzzati's animal fantasy resists precisely the use of fables to "humble" their readers, to make of them conveyors of socially useful morals.

This picturebook, then, becomes more than a tale that warns against the corrupting potential of excessive luxury, as Buzzati himself claimed, and more than an allegory that would strap the bears down to the role of stand-ins for American soldiers. Buzzati's picturebook represents the rupture of modernity into the trajectory of Italian children's literature by re-staging the child reader's relationship to language. It critiques the instrumentality of that tradition: to domesticate its readers through the home and away binary, to serve up models of heroism and self-sacrifice to be uncritically imitated and consumed, and to illustrate a pacifying moral to be memorized. Most profoundly, it disrupts the one-way street along which a lesson travels from adult author to child reader because it reveals the precarious nature of the very means of transport. As the book concludes, Leonzio's body is solemnly carried back to his mountain home for burial. At this funereal moment, the Bear King seems to embody fundamental components of the tradition leading up to this text: the child-as-animal, the protagonist who longs to return to the safety of home, the Garibaldian hero, the passive reader. In the provocatively entitled *La scrittura della morte*, Pino Boero examines a range of Italian children's books, from *Cuore* forward. He points to the use of emotional blackmail, the rigid prescription of gender roles, the demonization of the cultural other, and even the promotion of anti-labor political values common in these books. Ultimately, Boero argues that television, cartoons, and computers have not killed children's literature, as one often hears. Rather, he claims, Italian children's literature has not been born. In re-staging the child reader's "relationship to language," in burying the bear king and the tradition he embodies, Buzzati's picturebook allows us to glimpse the possibilities of the birth of such a literature.

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of genres. (See Bottigheimer [2004] for succinct definitions and histories of the two genres.) In his chapter on Andersen, Fanciulli emphasizes the "grandi significati" and "gli ideali" professed in the life and work of the fairy-tale writer, specifically "verità, giustizia, carità, amore, fede in Dio, e nel regno dei cieli" (ibid., 231; truth, justice, charity, love, faith in God and in the kingdom of heaven).

⁴⁸ In fact Boero and De Luca attribute the belatedness (vis-à-vis other European endeavors) of Italian interest in philological and sociological folklore studies in part to the "vocazione didattica e moralistica della nostra prima letteratura per l'infanzia" (2009, 36).

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