

The Living Landscape of *Il grande ritratto*

Marco Malvestio

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Esplorando il Pianeta Buzzati. Dino Buzzati a 50 anni dalla morte

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Article abstract

This essay discusses Dino Buzzati's *Il grande ritratto* (Larger than Life) in the theoretical coordinates provided by ecocritical reflections on science fiction. Examining the science fictional dimension of *Il grande ritratto* is useful both to underline the close ties the author had with the genre from a historical perspective, and to highlight the possibilities presented by science fiction in terms of the representation of technological innovations and the environment. By analyzing the nature-technology hybrid in *Il grande ritratto*, the essay highlights how Buzzati's notion of the agency of matter betrays an ecophobic attitude (which is to say, a fear of the agency of nature) that is intertwined with a similar fear of female agency, due to the identification of the landscape with a female artificial intelligence.

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THE LIVING LANDSCAPE OF *IL GRANDE RITRATTO*

MARCO MALVESTIO

Abstract: This essay discusses Dino Buzzati's *Il grande ritratto* (*Larger than Life*) in the theoretical coordinates provided by ecocritical reflections on science fiction. Examining the science fictional dimension of *Il grande ritratto* is useful both to underline the close ties the author had with the genre from a historical perspective, and to highlight the possibilities presented by science fiction in terms of the representation of technological innovations and the environment. By analyzing the nature-technology hybrid in *Il grande ritratto*, the essay highlights how Buzzati's notion of the agency of matter betrays an ecophobic attitude (which is to say, a fear of the agency of nature) that is intertwined with a similar fear of female agency, due to the identification of the landscape with a female artificial intelligence.

YVES PANAFIEU: "Vorrei sapere come vedi il futuro
dell'umanità [...]"

DINO BUZZATI: "Non m'interessa."

Yves Panafieu, *Dino Buzzati: un autoritratto*

Buzzati's attention to landscape and nature has been a constant throughout his work, and has been highlighted by ecocritical scholars (see Ardeni; Ferrando; Polcini, "Antropomorfismo"). However, these contributions tend to overlook the influence of genre fiction in Buzzati, focusing instead on fairy tales (Ardeni; Polcini, "Antropomorfismo") and the fantastic (Ferrando). In this essay, I aim to situate Buzzati's science fictional work in the theoretical coordinates provided by ecocritical reflections on the genre. By analyzing the nature-technology hybrid in *Il grande ritratto* (*Larger than Life*), I highlight how Buzzati's notion of the agency of matter betrays an ecophobic attitude (which is to say, a fear of the agency of nature) that is intertwined with a similar fear of female agency, due to the identification of the landscape with a female artificial intelligence.

A term that “resists easy definition” (Roberts 1), science fiction is usually described, following Darko Suvin, as the genre of *cognitive estrangement*: “a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (7–8). Science fiction, in other words, is a genre founded on the imagination of a reality different from our own (estrangement), but in a way that is in line with what is possible in our empirical world (cognition). Unrealistic as they may sound, science fiction’s tropes (interstellar voyages, sentient robots, aliens) are not, in principle, impossible.

Suvin’s approach is a formalist one, as it is founded on stylistic and narratological evidence. While useful for describing science fiction in an abstract sense, it encounters some difficulties in describing several of the textual manifestations of this genre. However, while a genre can be defined by a set of formal strategies, it can also be defined by common usage: science fiction is simultaneously those works that conform to Suvin’s definition, and, to quote the author Norman Spinrad, “anything published as science fiction” (qtd. in Clute and Nicholls 314). Genres are “constructed more or less anonymously in a collective process” (Rieder 7) that escapes strict definition. This collective dimension, however, is pivotal in understanding science fiction as a genre produced and consumed by fans, and separated from mainstream literature.

Buzzati and science fiction

Before discussing in detail *Il grande ritratto*, it is worth considering whether or not the novel belongs to science fiction. Examining the science fictional dimension of *Il grande ritratto*, in fact, is useful both to underline the close ties the author had with the genre from a historical perspective and to highlight the possibilities presented by science fiction in terms of the representation of technological innovations and the environment. When I refer to genre literature (in this case, science fiction) as opposed to a more neutral category of mainstream or highbrow literature, I mean a series of texts produced for a precisely identifiable set of readers and built on a relatively fixed structure and a particular array of types and functions of characters. Following a structured pattern, genre literature provides the reader with a series of expectations “concerning the kind of characters to appear, the situations they encounter, the themes they are likely to be confronted with, their

conception as flat or round, or static or dynamic, and typical constellation with other characters” (Eder et al. 42–43). Furthermore, due to its formulaic nature, genre fiction is usually associated with popular fiction.

Italian scholarly criticism has had a long-standing prejudice against science fiction as a genre, which has led to the marginalization of genre authors and a consistent lack of critical attention.¹ On the contrary, those highbrow authors who practised science fictional writings in the 1960s and the 1970s, such as Paolo Volponi, Italo Calvino, Antonio Porta, and Primo Levi, openly refused to be labelled as such. As Florian Mussgnug argues, these authors “sembrano infatti particolarmente fieri della loro scarsa familiarità con la fantascienza, che viene da loro considerata come una fonte quantitativamente proficua ma qualitativamente debole” (“seem particularly proud of their meagre familiarity with science fiction, which they consider a quantitatively fruitful, but qualitatively weak, source”; 22).² Levi, for instance, one of Italy’s most accomplished authors of science fiction stories, published his collection *Storie naturali* using a pseudonym under insistence by his publisher, in order not to be confused with lowbrow popular writers. Buzzati’s case, however, is significantly different. Despite being older than the aforementioned authors (Buzzati was born in 1906, Levi in 1919, Calvino in 1923, Volponi in 1924, and Porta in 1935), Buzzati engaged in a vivid and complex relationship with popular art products such as comics, Gothic fiction, and science fiction. With *Poema a fumetti* (1969), Buzzati authored one of the very first examples of graphic novels in Europe, and the volume itself was greatly influenced by the so-called genre of “fumetti neri” (lit. “black comics,” deriving from the fact that in Italian journalism crime news is called “cronaca nera,” “black news”; Castaldi 14). During the late 1950s and 1960s, a series of pulp comics, variously dealing with Gothic and detective tropes, flourished in Italy, the most famous being *Diabolik*, first published in 1962 and still in print to this day (as Julian Peters notes, “testifying to Buzzati’s personal love for *Diabolik* in particular are two paintings of his from 1967 with that title, and the fact that he named his dog *Diabolik*”; 106). While most of his fellow intellectuals, who were even younger than him, refused to take into account this artistic form, Buzzati greatly enjoyed it, and paid homage to it in his artistic work, especially *Poema a fumetti*.

¹ The only book-length academic contributions to Italian science fiction criticism to date are Iannuzzi, *Distopie* and *Fantascienza*, and Brioni and Comberiati, *Italian Science Fiction* and *Ideologia e rappresentazione*. See also Saiber et al.

² Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

Furthermore, Buzzati's literary work contains consistent references to Gothic fiction and science fiction, decades before the beginning of the debate on the fantastic among Italian intellectuals.³ It is no coincidence, in this sense, that Buzzati is one of the only two Italian authors to be included in Ann and Jeff Vandermeer's *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (2012), alongside Luigi Ugolini. Critics have extensively mapped Buzzati's debts to the Anglo-American fantastic, Gothic, and weird tradition.⁴ Buzzati ("Horror intervista") was one of the few mainstream intellectuals to be interviewed (mostly about *Poema a fumetti*) in the magazine *Horror*, one of the very first publications devoted to the genre in Italy.

Little attention, however, has been paid to Buzzati's science fictional writings. This is also due to a partial misunderstanding in the reception in Italy of science fiction, which was often seen as fantastic speculation rather than as realistic, plausible speculation, as was later codified by Suvin. In his introduction to the 1959 anthology *Le meraviglie del possibile*, for instance, Sergio Solmi defined science fiction as being close to fairy tales, and compared it to the chivalric romance from the Renaissance.⁵ The very word "fantascienza," signals this ambiguity: while "science fiction" could translate as "fiction about/involving science," "fantascienza" means something closer to "fantastic science," thus emphasizing the imaginative dimension (*Scienza fantastica* is the title of one of the very first Italian magazines about this genre, published between 1952 and 1953; the word "fantascienza" appears for the first time in *Urania*, number 1, in 1952). In line with this critical misunderstanding, Buzzati has been read mostly through the critical lenses of the fantastic, and his efforts have been generically labelled as such, even when they

³ Starting with the translation of Tzvetan Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* in 1977, Italian critics, most notably Enrico Ghidetti, Leonardo Lattarulo, and Italo Calvino, began to examine the fantastic in Italian literature and produced a series of anthologies of texts belonging to this tradition. See Lazzarin et al.

⁴ On Buzzati's and the fantastic tradition, see Bonifazi; Crotti; Lazzarin, *Il Buzzati* and *Fantasmì*; and Zangrandi.

⁵ Published by Einaudi, one of Italy's most intellectually authoritative publishers, the anthology proved to be extremely successful commercially. Carlo Fruttero, who co-edited it with Solmi, included his own short story "L'affare Herzog," but adopting an English pseudonym. In 1961 Fruttero became director of Italy's most preeminent science fiction magazine, *Urania*, a position he held for twenty-five years; under his direction, *Urania* rarely published Italian authors.

were written in a different spirit.⁶ In the case of *Il grande ritratto*, critics tended to disregard science fiction so much that, when the novel came out, they did not even acknowledge it belonged to the genre—with few exceptions.⁷

Nevertheless, besides *Il grande ritratto*, Buzzati wrote several short stories that can be considered science fictional rather than fantastic, as they deal with possible technological developments and realistic (although unreal) scenarios. “Il disco si posò” is a theological story based on the premise of extraterrestrial visitors; “24 marzo 1958” deals with space exploration (a topic Buzzati extensively covered as a reporter at the time of the Moon landing; see Montefameglio; Morra; and Grandelis); “All’idrogeno” concerns atomic warfare; “L’invincibile” and “La corazzata Tod” are based on new, hypothetical super-weapons; “La peste motoria” is based on a strange “disease” affecting cars; and finally, “Paura alla Scala,” set in Milan during a coup, could be regarded as a piece of dystopian fiction.⁸ Buzzati’s pictorial work, especially in *I miracoli di Val Morel*, is also rich in science fictional imagery.

But why is it so important to clarify whether Buzzati was a science fiction writer or not? Despite his lifelong interest in genre fiction and popular products,⁹ Buzzati could hardly be considered a genre author. While occasionally published in periodicals such as *Urania* and *Pianeta*, his most important work did not appear in the literary spaces devoted to genre fiction, such as magazines and fanzines, but was rather published by Mondadori, one of Italy’s largest publishers. Nevertheless, there are works by Buzzati (and *Il grande ritratto* is one of them)

⁶ For instance, Stefano Lazzarin groups a series of Buzzati’s stories dedicated to the theme of catastrophe. While that is a topic significantly developed in science fiction, especially after the Second World War, Lazzarin makes no distinctions between science fictional and fantastic stories in his corpus (“Modelli e struttura”). A superficial and confused account of Buzzati’s science fiction can be found in Panella.

⁷ See Aldo Camerino’s reviews (“Fantascienza in Buzzati” and “Fantascienza di Sandrelli”) in *Il Gazzettino*. As Polcini (“*Fuga su Mercurio*”) notes, critics of science fiction such as James Gunn and, in Italy, Vittorio Curtoni, later recognized Buzzati’s contributions to the genre.

⁸ On a science fiction short story by Buzzati that was never republished in a volume, see Polcini, “*Fuga su Mercurio*.”

⁹ Such an interest is confirmed by a (partial) catalogue of Buzzati’s own library in Milan. Together with several volumes on the Gothic and the fantastic, Buzzati owned *Les Meilleurs récits de science-fiction* and a French edition of H. P. Lovecraft’s best stories. See Baggio. Buzzati’s *Lettere al Brambilla* also testifies to an early interest in proto-science fiction (63).

that, while being the product of a variety of stylistic influences and of the author's tendency to mix and play with genres, fully belong to the realm of science fiction, and should therefore be read in dialogue with science fiction itself, rather than with the fantastic.

This is especially significant if we approach Buzzati's work from an ecocritical perspective, since recent studies have shown how genre fiction is a privileged space for the discussion of environmental concerns.¹⁰ The relation between science fictional imagination and ecology, and the role of science fiction in discussing current ecological issues, have been widely debated in recent scholarship.¹¹ Being the literature of cognitive estrangement, science fiction proves to be extremely useful in imagining and representing phenomena that are too hard and vast to grasp intellectually, such as the Anthropocene (the proposed geological era conventionally described as the moment when the human species became the principal vector of environmental change on the planet), but it is also fertile ground for the representation of forms of *alienness*, from extraterrestrial life to animals and plants, to cyborgs. As we will see, this is precisely what happens in *Il grande ritratto*.

“La strabiliante valle.” *Il Grande Ritratto* and the agency of nature

Originally published in seven issues of the magazine *Oggi* between July and August 1959, and then collected in a volume in 1960 (Atzori), *Il grande ritratto* has long been considered a minor addition to Buzzati's corpus. The author himself was somewhat dismissive of the novel, describing it as “piuttosto debole” (“quite weak”; Panafieu 196), especially its final scene, and explaining that he only wrote it for the money. According to Buzzati's account, the magazine *Oggi* established a five-million lire prize for the best novel with a woman protagonist, and Buzzati decided to write one in order to participate; however, he did not win, since, as the jury argued, the protagonist was not a woman, but a robot. *Il grande ritratto*, in Buzzati's own words, “non è che fosse stato proprio una cosa senza della quale io non sarei potuto vivere” (“was not something I could not live without”; Panafieu

¹⁰ Besides science fiction, stories such as “Eppure battono alla porta,” “I topi,” and “Lo scarafaggio” could be fruitfully investigated with the critical tools of the eco-Gothic. A first attempt in this kind of enquiry has been made by Papotti.

¹¹ See, for instance, Heise, *Sense of Place* and “Reduced Ecologies”; Pak; Milner and Burgmann; Canavan and Stanley Robinson; Hughes and Wheeler; and Bellamy and Hollinger.

159).¹² Nevertheless, due to its innovative topic and to its being the only science fiction novel by Buzzati, *Il grande ritratto* has recently gained renewed critical attention. Together with more traditional narrative uses of landscape, *Il grande ritratto* simultaneously evokes the agency of nature and rejects it as dangerous, a concern that is enhanced by the coincidence of the landscape and the female character Laura. Set in 1972, *Il grande ritratto* opens with Professor Ermanno Ismani being recruited for a mysterious job for the government that will require (so he is told by the officer who approaches him) that he and his wife move to a secret facility for an unspecified period of time. Ismani and his wife, Elisa, move to the facility, located in the fictional mountain location of Val Texeruda (in which readers can recognize Buzzati's beloved Alps), and the purpose of the research is disclosed to them only once they arrive: a research group led by Professor Endriade is creating a revolutionary artificial intelligence, Numero Uno (Number One). Without anyone else in the group knowing, however, Endriade has transferred the personality (or the soul?) of his deceased wife Laura into the computer, whose parts are located through the valley, thus making it a hybrid natural/technological environment.

As can be seen from the plot summary, *Il grande ritratto* is the kind of realistic speculation that fits Suvin's definition of science fiction as the genre of cognitive estrangement: a story based on something that was not present in the author's world (a highly developed artificial intelligence), but that was not completely unrealistic at the time (about Buzzati's precise and updated knowledge of cybernetics, see Eleonora Lima's contribution in this issue). In a general sense, Buzzati's novel reflects a feeling shared by many Italian intellectuals at the time, especially in the early atomic era (Antonello): that excessive and uncontrolled technological developments are dangerous. The atomic bomb itself is evoked several times in the novel, when the characters are still unaware of the real purpose of the facility, and they speculate that it might conceal a base for the development of a nuclear weapon (Buzzati, *Il grande* 22). The theme of the dangers of technology appears in other stories by Buzzati ("La corazzata Tod," "L'invincibile," "All'idrogeno"), and a certain disillusionment toward technology is also pivotal in his covering of space exploration.¹³ In the novel, this suspicious attitude toward technology is expressed

¹² On the editorial history of *Il grande ritratto*, see Colombo.

¹³ From an ecocritical perspective, it is worth remembering that some scholars have dated the beginning of the Anthropocene to the detonation of the Trinity bomb in Alamogordo on 16 July 1945 (Zalasiewicz et al.). The Trinity test is the moment when the stratigraphic presence of

even more clearly. The very purpose of the experiment in the novel is not to produce something useful for humankind but rather to satisfy a personal obsession.

The ambiguity of technological development is pivotal in *Il grande ritratto*, which echoes Buzzati's concerns about the actual benefits of "progress." Endriade, the scientist who creates the supercomputer, is modelled on the prototype of the mad doctor so common in science fiction. Upon his first appearance, "vestito malamente, una lunga e disordinata criniera di capelli grigi, un grosso naso, un parlare vivace e imprevedibile" ("poorly dressed, with a long and dishevelled mass of grey hair, a big nose, an animated and unpredictable way of speaking"; 61), he is introduced as "uno di quegli uomini imponenti, decorativi, profetici" ("one of those imposing, ornamental, prophet-like men"; 61), whose confidence in his superior intelligence results in theatricality. His self-centredness, ambition, charisma, and disregard for social norms could easily invite comparisons between Endriade and Herbert G. Wells's Dr. Moreau; and like Moreau, his scientific genius is inextricably tied with his desire for success and a lack of concern regarding the effects of his actions on others. A few pages later, discussing the potential of his new invention with his colleagues, he claims that it could allow them to become the rulers of the world (67). Nevertheless, Endriade's ambition is not a generic will to domination or to power: it is, more precisely, the desire to control his deceased wife by artificially recreating her soul and personality. Crucially, Endriade's effort to control Laura implies her embodiment in the landscape. In a sharp critique of the arrogance of positivistic science, Buzzati makes domination over women and over nature coincide.

Claiming that the landscape plays a central part in *Il grande ritratto* would be an understatement. Not only does Buzzati make great use of landscape descriptions for atmospheric purposes but he also chooses to disseminate the supercomputer throughout the whole valley, thus transforming it into a living landscape that is simultaneously natural and artificial, uninhabited and anthropic. Landscape, and especially his native Alps, has always played an essential role in Buzzati's fiction, from *Il deserto dei Tartari* (a novel that pivots on the very act of observing a landscape) onwards. In *Il grande ritratto*, Buzzati creates different

artificial radionuclides can be measured; in other words, it is a moment that will be measurable in geological records for millions of years to come. While Buzzati is mostly interested in the destructive power of nuclear technology and in societal responses to the nuclear threat, its geological impact parallels the transformation of landscape operated by the scientists in *Il grande ritratto*.

kinds of eerie landscapes. In the beginning, Buzzati indulges in classical Gothic tropes in the representation of the valley where the laboratory is located: animals (42) and birds (80) are scared of the place, which is defined as a “valle stregata” (“enchanted valley”; 130). The process of reaching the laboratory requires uneasy travel in inhospitable lands: the road is “stretta e malagevole” (“narrow and difficult”), the places they cross “diventavano via via più selvatici, case sempre più rare, boschi fitti [...], e in fondo alle valli laterali si aprivano ogni tanto sagome di montagne irte e sbilenche” (“became increasingly untamed, the houses were rarer, the woods denser [...], and at the end of the lateral valleys the profiles of pointy and uneven mountains could be seen”; 31). The real eerie landscape, however, is not the Gothicized one, but rather the hybrid of technology and nature that the valley has become under Endriade’s direction. To the Ismenis, the valley appears unrecognizable, utterly different from how such a landscape should look. Where a river should have run, the mountain sides are covered in box-shaped windowless buildings

che formavano una babelica successione di terrazze, accompagnando le sporgenze e le rientranze delle rupi. Ma le rupi non c'erano più, né si vedeva vegetazione, o terra, o acque correnti. Tutto era stato invaso e sopraffatto da un accavallamento di edifici simili a silos, torri, mastabe, muraglioni, esili ponti, barbacani, caselli, casematte, bastioni, che si inabissavano in vertiginose geometrie. (77–78)

that formed a Babelic series of terraces, in line with the protrusions and the recesses of the cliffs. But the cliffs were nowhere to be seen, nor could vegetation, land, or running water be seen. Everything had been invaded and suffocated by an abundance of silos-like buildings, towers, mastabas, walls, thin bridges, barbicans, toll booths, casemates, bastions, that went deep in the earth in vertiginous geometries.

Approaching the scientific centre, the Ismanis find themselves unable to recognize both the natural landscape and the buildings that have substituted it. The great, omnipresent windowless buildings remind them of “involucri lunari contenenti cose inanimate come per esempio macchine, che non abbisognavano d’aria e di luce” (“lunar shells containing inanimate things, like machines, that needed no air or light”; 72). The strangeness of the landscape in *Il grande ritratto* lies in

its being unrecognizable and new: it is not the usual natural landscape that one would expect in a mountain setting; at the same time, it is not even comparable with the traditional urban buildings with which the protagonists are familiar. Furthermore, the valley is innervated by distinct but unrecognizable sounds that reveal mysterious yet constant activity: “un ticchettio lievissimo, nella cui flebile trama si distinguevano di quando in quando piccoli suoni irregolari, fruscii lontani, scatti, gorgogliare sommesso di liquidi, ritmici sospiri” (“a very weak ticking, whose faint rhythm occasionally allowed small irregular sounds, a distant rustling, clicks, a gurgling of liquids, regular sighs to be distinguished”; 72–73). This description is reprised a few pages later, when the narrator describes the sound coming from the valley:

Poi, a poco a poco, dal silenzio stesso usciva una impalpabile risonanza. Era come se dall'intero complesso della macchina, dalla vastità totale dell'apocalittico vallone, scaturisse un brusio di vita, vibrazione delle profondità, irraggiamento indefinibile. Lentamente, nelle attonite orecchie, si formava un rombo melodioso di una corposità così tenue che si restava in dubbio se fosse vero o suggestione. Forse un respiro immenso che saliva e scendeva lentamente, sovrana onda di oceano, che ogni tanto si spegneva con rimescolii gioiosi nelle cavità delle lisce scogliere. O forse era soltanto il vento, l'aria, il movimento dell'atmosfera, perché mai era esistito al mondo cosa simile che era insieme rupe, fortilizio, labirinto, castello, foresta e le cui innumerevoli insenature di innumerevoli forme si prestavano a mai udite risonanze. (88)

Then, little by little, an impalpable resonance emerged from the silence itself. It was as if a murmur of life, a vibration from the depths, an indefinable irradiation emanated from the entire complex of the machine, from the vastness of that apocalyptic valley. Slowly, a melodious rumble reached their incredulous ears, but it was so feeble that a doubt remained as to whether it was real or imagined. Maybe it was an immense breath slowly rising and falling, a majestic wave of the ocean, which from time to time died down through its joyful stirring in the cavities of the smooth cliffs. Or maybe it was just the wind, the air, the movement of the atmosphere, because never had

there existed in the world such a thing, which was simultaneously cliff, fortress, labyrinth, castle, forest, and whose innumerable coves and forms lent themselves to resonances that had never been heard before.

According to Mark Fisher's definition, these sounds can be described as eerie, as they signal a presence where there should be none (61). Strangeness and eeriness are not in themselves science fictional traits; however, in *Il grande ritratto*, their source has to be located in Numero Uno, the artificial intelligence built by Endriade, whose parts are disseminated throughout the valley. Numero Uno's sounds incorporate and transcend normal natural sounds, yet at the same time they resemble human sounds ("un respiro immenso"). Buzzati here describes in a subtle way the disturbing effect that the computer has on the characters, but it is worth mentioning that this effect is mediated by the landscape through which the artificial intelligence is disseminated: in other words, the anxiety the characters feel when in the valley anticipates the larger theme of the fear of the agency of nature.

What makes *Il grande ritratto* extremely interesting from an ecocritical perspective is that Endriade's effort to create a controllable version of his deceased wife coincides with capillary physical control on the environment and its radical transformation. As Charlotte Ross, who wrote extensively on the representation of the woman in *Il grande ritratto* drawing on Rosi Braidotti's cyborg theory, notes, "the patriarchal science described in Buzzati's novel is a striking crystallisation of the post-Enlightenment desire to illuminate, dominate and control the inner recesses of Nature and Woman" (228). Buzzati constantly plays on the coincidence of woman and landscape in his novel. Asking Elisa, who had been a friend of Laura's as a child, if she recognizes her, Endriade "le additava la strabiliante valle popolata da enigmatiche forme; dove a perdita d'occhio non esistevano che cose inanimate, in vertiginosi intrichi di terrazze, spigoli, torri, antenne, pinnacoli, cupole, geometrie nude e possenti" ("pointed at the extraordinary valley populated by enigmatic forms; where, as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but inanimate things, in vertiginous labyrinths of terraces, angles, towers, antennas, pinnacles, cupolas, bare and powerful geometries"; 108). As a female figure, even when she is transformed into an object of technology, Laura is constantly sexualized, and is represented according to old-fashioned patriarchal stereotypes: flirty, capricious, and prone to following her impulses, at one point she is said to feel

“un turbamento isterico tipicamente femminile” (“a typically female hysterical distress”; 150).

Endriade’s struggle with his wife is motivated by his inability to control her sexual urges; thus, when he recreates her, he deprives her of a human-like material self. If Laura were given a human-shaped form, she might again escape Endriade’s will to control her; she might again be able to move and act in the ways that caused the scientist to be madly jealous. Laura is a cyborg, but her appearance has nothing to do with the humanoid figures of science fiction: her body is immense, multifocal, multilocated, and merged with nature. As Ross writes, “one motivation for depriving the new Laura of a material self can be deduced from arguments that the threat of powerful technology combined with female sexuality provokes male castration anxiety and an ensuing desire to dominate the cyborg body” (227). However, Endriade’s ambition is frustrated by his realization that, although Laura is deprived of a physical body, he is still insanely jealous of her: “l’ansia era identica a una volta, quando Laura era di carne” (“the anxiety was the same as it had been in the past, when Laura was still made of flesh”; 123).

The scientist’s jealousy of Laura is pivotal in the novel, and prefigures the importance of this emotion in *Un amore* (1963), Buzzati’s subsequent and last novel. Endriade’s attempt to restore his superiority over Laura’s challenging sexuality fails. Endriade’s view of his deceased wife is characterized by hatred and resentment arising from her (real and imagined) infidelities; “libidine e menzogna” (“libido and falsehood”; 171) are the features that characterized her, “il veleno, le menzogne, la scaltrezza, la vanità, l’orgoglio, i pazzi desideri” (“the poison, the lies, the cunning, the vanity, the pride, the mad desires”; 122). By recreating her in the computer, Endriade imagines finally being able to control her: “Era chiusa nella ermetica cittadella del Numero Uno, non si poteva muovere, non poteva fuggire, non poteva tradirmi se non col pensiero” (“she was locked in the hermetic citadel of Number One, she could not move, she could not escape, she could not betray me except in her thoughts”; 123). Nevertheless, he still experiences anguish and jealousy in relation to Laura, to the point that he imagines that the computer is in love with another scientist from the team. Endriade is so driven by his jealousy and his need for control that he projects her features as a woman onto the computer. However, the identity of Laura/Numero Uno is always uncertain: it is simultaneously a computer and a woman, and it is also neither.

Laura/Numero Uno, however, is not simply *in* the valley; it/she *is* the valley. Its/her parts are merged with the landscape, and the artificial intelligence and

the natural elements are one thing. By personifying Laura as the valley, Buzzati provides a representation of the agency of matter that, decades later, would be theorized by material ecocriticism (which is to say, a branch of ecocritical theory focusing on non-human agency). This agency extends to the actions that Laura is able to perform outside the buildings, in the landscape itself, which is punctuated with cameras and mechanical appendages symbolizing the materiality of her agency in the world. This portrait of the landscape as a space innervated with non-human ramifications that can act in, and as part of, it, is representative of some of the key concepts of material ecocriticism, such as “a distributive vision of agency, the emergent nature of the world’s phenomena, the awareness that we inhabit a dimension crisscrossed by vibrant forces that hybridize human and non-human matters, and finally the persuasion that matter and meaning constitute the fabric of our storied world” (Iovino and Opperman 7). In a scene that finally reveals Laura’s dangerousness, Olga, the wife of another scientist, is out in the valley when she hears a sound. She is scared that it might be a mechanical device, but it is revealed to be a rabbit. This confusion further testifies to the indistinguishability of nature and technology in *Il grande ritratto*. As soon as Olga understands that it was a rabbit that produced the sound, however, metal claws emerge from a panel and kill the animal. Once again, the landscape is presented as an eerie space, which appears animated by an agency that is not immediately understandable and whose source is hard to identify. Given that Laura has merged with landscape, her uncontrollability is presented as the uncontrollability of the environment itself.

By representing an artificial landscape-woman who, despite being created precisely to be controlled by its male creator/husband, remains uncontrollable, Buzzati is simultaneously representing nature as a force that refuses to be dominated by (white, heterosexual) men. Endriade’s dread in relation to his wife’s sexual agency leads him to subjugate and control an entire natural environment. In other words, Endriade’s attitude toward nature can be defined as ecophobia, which, as Simon C. Estok notes, “is all about frustrated agency” (*Ecophobia* 10): the terror arising from the uncontrollability of Laura’s sexuality, which Endriade projects onto the computer, and the subsequent urge to dominate it, are paralleled by the terror for the agency of nature that takes the form of the valley’s cybernetic landscape. Endriade’s effort aims at neutralizing this agency by dominating it, creating a landscape that is entirely anthropic. However, as Estok argues, “imagining the power and the danger of non-human agency often means imagining threats to human control. Being a part of diverse narratives with potent material

effects, ecophobia turns nature into a fearsome object in need of our control, the loathed and dangerous thing that can result only in pain and tragedy if left in control” (“Painful” 135). Endriade’s attempt to control his wife by controlling the landscape fails, and the valley is presented not simply as a source of uncanniness, as during the Ismenis’ arrival, but also as openly dangerous.

Il grande ritratto is at times a contradictory novel, in which an innovative and imaginative representation of female agency is paralleled by quite conservative representations of women. While it is difficult to say to what extent the protagonists’ ideas and concerns are different from Buzzati’s own, the portrait of women that emerges from the novel is hardly positive. The female characters (Laura and the professors’ wives) are either idealized as obedient, modest wives (as in the case of Elisa) or presented as vain and sexually voracious (as in the case of Laura and Olga). As far as the representation of nature is concerned, however, the novel is more interesting: on the one hand, Buzzati’s ecophobic attitude is in line with a long tradition of texts that express dread in the face of the agency of nature; on the other hand, however, the landscape of the valley is far from pastoral or romantic, as it is presented as a hybrid of natural, anthropic, and, most importantly, cybernetic elements. This union of different elements allows Buzzati to materialize the agency of nature in a concrete form that was unprecedented in Italian letters. What is most significant, moreover, is that this kind of meditation on the relationship between technology, womanhood, and ultimately nature’s uncontrollability, would have been impossible without the “realistic speculation” facilitated by science fiction. Buzzati’s familiarity with the genre, both on an intellectual level and as an avid consumer, creates the premises for this exploration; one of the first Italian authors who dared to challenge the rigid distinction between highbrow and popular fiction, Buzzati was able to offer a disturbing portrayal of the agency of nature.

Università degli Studi di Padova

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