

Arthur Rackham, 'The Fir-Tree and the Bramble' in *Aesop's Fables* (William Heinemann, 1912).



# Dino Buzzati's 'Cypresses': A Rackham-inspired Story

Valentina Polcini

L'albero è come una persona  
(A tree is like a person)

Dino Buzzati

## Introduction

**D**ino Buzzati (1906-72) was an Italian writer whose fantastic imagery was declaredly influenced by the art of the English illustrator Arthur Rackham (1867-1939), which he discovered as a teenager in an article by art critic Vittorio Pica.<sup>1</sup> Buzzati himself defined his juvenile interest in Rackham's illustrations as an obsession, which led to him saving up his pocket money to buy some of the expensive editions of Rackham-illustrated books, as well as filling the pages of his diary and letters with descriptions and sketches of Rackham's drawings.

In his youth Buzzati shared a passion for history, literature and art with his best friend Arturo Brambilla. They used to spend long afternoons rummaging through their home libraries looking for books they liked, and that was how they stumbled across the above-mentioned art publication by Pica. Buzzati later recalled his first impression on seeing Rackham's images.

It was precisely one of these [art books owned by Arturo's father] that revealed Arthur Rackham to us, the English illustrator of Rip van Winkle, Peter Pan, Alice in Wonderland and many other books of fairy tales. His ability to represent mysterious atmospheres, the spirits of the mountains and the woods, old enchanted houses, the clouds, the fog and the magic of Christmas: it was love at first sight for us both. It was the supreme fulfilment of our most secret fantasies.<sup>2</sup>

This is just one of several references to Rackham that can be found in Buzzati's non-fiction writing as well as in the correspondence between Buzzati and Brambilla; the letters exchanged in the years 1921 and 1922 are remarkable because the man they called 'the divine Rackham' was the main topic.

If the casual encounter with Rackham's art was so captivating for the two boys at that time, it left an imprint on Buzzati's imagination that became a source of inspiration for his future writing career. Buzzati acknowledged his artistic debt to Rackham in the book-length interview titled *Un autoritratto (A Self-Portrait)*, where he admits that as a child he had a profound and obsessive interest in the settings and protagonists of the North European and American classics so exquisitely illustrated by Rackham. In particular, to the interviewer's question "And what do you think you owed to Rackham afterwards?", he answered:

**I think I owe it above all to the great illustrator that was Rackham. He made marvellous trees on which, when a branch was cut down and some kind of stump was left halfway on the trunk, he drew faces thus personalising the tree or shrub so much. . . .<sup>3</sup>**

The aspect of Rackham's work that caught Buzzati's attention was what he called 'fantasia nordica' (northern fantasy), an expression by which he meant the fascinating landscapes, architecture and legends of northern Europe, but also the North as a symbolic space representing coldness, remoteness and mystery.

As well as being a unique example of Rackham's reception by Italian literature, the short story 'Cipressi',<sup>4</sup> here translated into English for the first time, can be considered an interesting case of intermedia translation, since Buzzati reworked a visual source into his narrative fiction. Rackham's illustrations depicting anthropomorphised trees are numerous, and Buzzati undoubtedly had them in mind when he wrote about the strange phenomenon occurring in the park of the ancient Italian villa owned by the story's narrator-protagonist. The cypresses along the park's two pathways get 'monstrified', each one taking on bizarre animal shapes and even bearing human resemblances in which the narrator recognises the faces and figures of his dead friends. Not only did Buzzati transform Rackham's visual device of personifying trees into a narrative device; more interestingly, he adapted it to the melancholy atmosphere of his story to convey his recurring themes of the loss of friends and the protagonist's consequent anxiety for approaching death.

Buzzati's adaptation also consists of blending cultural elements: first, he transferred Rackham-styled trees, usually linked to fairy-tale contexts, to a northern Italian setting with gothic traits; second, he chose to Rackhamise the Mediterranean cypress, a plant that in Italy is commonly associated with mourning and grown in cemeteries; third, in describing the geometrical perspective of the park, he juxtaposed the Rackham-derived element of 'monstrified' trees with an allusion to Giacomo Leopardi's poem 'L'infinito', in which the hedgerow obstructing the view of the horizon pushes the poet's mind beyond

the material obstacle towards the thought of endless space and eternity, thus symbolising the ultimate frontier between the limitedness of the human condition and the possibility of reaching the universal infinite with one's own imagination.

The representation of these Rackham-inspired anthropomorphic cypresses is also in line with another feature of Buzzati's fantastic, that is, the sense of being poised between reality and dream. The reference to a real place, the town Negrar, in the province of Verona, an area scattered with beautiful Palladian villas, is gradually blurred into fantasy first by the gardener's fleeting hint to the 'monstrified' trees, then by the narrator's doubt about his vision being caused by optical illusion or autosuggestion. As is typical of Buzzati's style, the definitive passage into the realm of the irrational is sealed by a short adversative sentence: 'But my agitation persisted', meaning that the protagonist is still convinced that in their afterlife his friends are embodied in the cypresses of his park.

The last section of the story is characterised by the protagonist's change of attitude from fear to calm resignation, which casts light on the function of Buzzati's Rackhamised cypresses. They are seen as caring, guarding presences that ease the protagonist's process of coming to terms with the notion that he is getting old and will soon die, just like his friends. They play therefore a consolatory role as the character feels protected as long as he lives and is comforted by the hope that when his last hour comes he will be reunited with his friends awaiting him in the park.

To conclude, in this melancholy reworking Buzzati turns his much-admired Rackham's anthropomorphic trees into monsters. Indeed, it appears clear in the story's ending that they are good monsters. As etymology suggests, the Latin word *monstrum* derives from the verb *monere*, to warn, and originally designated a portent or prodigy. Buzzati's narrator in fact sees his friend-cypresses as extraordinary creatures: they herald death but at the same time make the idea of his imminent passing less hard to accept.

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## **Valentina Polcini**

## Notes

1. Pica's article originally appeared in 1907 with 29 illustrations and was aimed at introducing Rackham, who had been awarded a gold medal at the 1906 Milan International Exhibition, to the Italian public, as well as heralding the publication of the upcoming Italian editions of the Rackham-illustrated *Rip Van Winkle* and *Alice in Wonderland*, both published by the Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche of Bergamo. See Vittorio Pica, 'Un nuovo illustratore inglese: Arthur Rackham' ('A New English Illustrator: Arthur Rackham'), *Emporium. Rivista mensile illustrata d'arte, letteratura, scienze e varietà*, vol. 26, n. 155 (November 1907), 324-40; then reprinted with another title in the third volume of the art series *Attraverso gli albi e le cartelle: sensazioni d'arte*, edited by Pica and published by the Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche of Bergamo. It is in the latter volume that Buzzati first saw Rackham's illustrations. Pica's article can be read online at <http://www.artivisive.sns.it/fototeca/scheda.php?id=17460#> (last accessed 23 July 2018). For further reading see: Valentina Polcini, 'Vittorio Pica and the Early Reception of Arthur Rackham in Italy', *The Journal of the Arthur Rackham Society*, 53 (April 2015), 9-20.
2. Dino Buzzati, 'Testimonianza di due amici', Introduction to Arturo Brambilla, *Diario* (Milan: Mondadori, 1967), 23.
3. Yves Panafieu, *Dino Buzzati: un autoritratto. Dialoghi con Yves Panafieu: luglio-settembre 1971* (Milan: Mondadori, 1973), 27. *Il segreto del Bosco Vecchio* (*The Secret of the Old Wood*) (1935) is Buzzati's second novel, where the characters called 'geni degli alberi' (genii of the trees), each living inside a tree trunk and often coming out in human or animal shape, can arguably be regarded as one of Buzzati's personal reworkings in his fiction of Rackham's anthropomorphic trees. For further reading see: Valentina Polcini, *Dino Buzzati and Anglo-American Culture. The Re-Use of Visual and Narrative Texts in His Fantastic Fiction*, Chapter Two: 'Echoes of Arthur Rackham's Pictorial Imagery in Buzzati's Fiction' (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 40-72.
4. 'Cipressi' is the third of a four-part story titled 'Cambiamenti' (Changes), which originally appeared in the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* on 4 August 1970 and then collected in *Le notti difficili* (Milan: Mondadori, 1971).

## 'Cypresses'

Dino Buzzati, translated by Valentina Polcini

I am fortunate to own a marvellous eighteenth-century park, not large but of a fabulous architecture, similar to that of Negrar, north of Verona. Two of the park's pathways, both ascending so steeply that the last contour of the meadow appears as a supreme frontier, similar to Leopardi's famous hedgerow, are flanked by peculiar cypresses which the gardener, probably on his own initiative, defines as 'monstrified'. Instead of soaring up straight and compact like spindles, at some point they put out strange ramifications that make them assume amazing silhouettes: of human figures, of owls, of griffons, of sea horses, of angels, of dragons, of phantoms. Well, one evening seven years ago, while I was walking along one of the pathways alone, I looked up and felt a shiver on recognising on top of one of the cypresses, illuminated by the dying sun, the looks of a dear friend I had recently lost. Optical illusion? Autosuggestion prompted by who knows what stimulus of the unconscious? To prove my first impression wrong, which was anything but cheerful, I moved a few meters away and looked at the cypress again. But my agitation persisted. Now, of my friend, so to say, I could see the back and nape, from bottom up; and the likeness was absolute.



Am I getting old? With time, more green human simulacra have formed on the cypresses, each taking on the shape, the countenance, even the face of friends one by one disappeared. I have already recognised eight of them. Now I am not afraid anymore, quite the opposite. At night, I have the impression that they watch over my sleep, in the villa nearby, like faithful sentinels. On windy days I look at them at length: they sway, at every gust, in concert, with great resignation; and, bending their heads all together to the same side, they look as if they want to tell me: "Come on, why don't you join us?"

### **Original text**

'Cipressi' by Dino Buzzati, collected in *Le notti difficili* (Milan: Mondadori, 1971).

Ho la fortuna di possedere un meraviglioso parco settecentesco, non grande ma di favolosa architettura, simile a quello di Negrar, sopra Verona. Due viali del parco, entrambi tagliati in rapida ascesa cosicché l'ultimo profilo del prato appaia come una suprema frontiera, simile alla famosa siepe di Leopardi, sono fiancheggiati da singolari cipressi che il giardiniere, probabilmente di testa sua, definisce "mostrificati". Invece di sveltare diritti e compatti come fusi, a un certo punto emettono strane ramificazioni che gli fanno assumere sagome sorprendenti: di figure umane, di civette, di grifi, di cavallucci marini, di angeli, di draghi, di fantasmi. Bene: una sera di sette anni fa, mentre percorrevo da solo uno dei viali, alzai gli occhi ed ebbi un brivido, riconoscendo nella sommità di uno dei cipressi, illuminata dall'ultimo sole, le sembianze di un caro amico perduto di recente. Illusione ottica? Autosuggestione promossa da chissà quale stimolo dell'inconscio? Per smentire la prima impressione, tutt'altro che allegra, mi spostai alcuni metri e riguardai il cipresso. Ma il turbamento permase. Ora, dell'amico, per così dire, vedevo la schiena e la nuca, dal sotto in su; e la somiglianza era assoluta.

Sto diventando vecchio? Col tempo, altri verdi simulacri umani si sono formati in cima ai cipressi, ciascuno assumendo la figura, l'espressione, perfino il volto di amici via via scomparsi. Ne riconosco già otto. Adesso non mi fanno più paura, anzi. Di notte, ho la sensazione che vegliano i miei sonni, nella villa accanto, come sentinelle fedeli. Nei giorni di vento li guardo lungamente: ondeggiano, a ogni raffica, di conserva, con grande rassegnazione; e, piegando il capo insieme tutti dalla stessa parte, sembra che mi vogliano dire: "Su, coraggio, perché non vieni anche tu".