

Italian Translations of Dickens

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For a long time the Italian publishing world has been marked by the regular, almost yearly, appearance on the bookshop shelves of new translations, with new editing and introductions, of novels or stories by Dickens. Sometimes these editions have been reprints of excellent and still unequalled old translations.

To start from recent years, in 1990, new translations of *Hard Times*¹, and *Pickwick Papers*² were published. In 1991 a new translation of *Great Expectations*³ appeared and in 1993, together with a new rendering of the *Christmas Books*⁴, the Italian reader had the pleasant surprise of finding in bookshops the reprint of *David Copperfield*, splendidly translated and introduced by Cesare Pavese more than forty years earlier⁵.

Another translation of *Great Expectations*⁶ was published in 1994. In the same year *Dombey and Son*⁷ was brought out by Rizzoli, in a prestigious collection, elegantly bound in blue cloth and cased. In 1995 it was the turn of *Bleak House*⁸ to be newly translated. A new translation of these two novels had been due for a long time since the previous ones, which were unfortunately not very good, dated back to more than thirty years. In the same year a young poet presented his readers with a free translation of *A Christmas Carol*⁹ which in 1996 appeared again, brilliantly decorating Christmas bookshop windows, in the form of *A Christmas Carol & Advent Calendar*, from a much abridged American version¹⁰.

As for the *Christmas Stories*, only a few of them have appeared in anthologies. Perhaps it is worth mentioning 'A Christmas Tree', which was translated into Italian for the first time only in 1981. The occasion of its publication was singular. In fact, from the Dickensian text a distinguished Italian engraver, Mirando Haz (pseudonym of Amedeo Pieragostini), drew his inspiration for twelve etchings in his 'Dickens-Christmas' portfolio. The volume included some essays both on Haz's 'acqueforti' – a very rare example of illustrations by an Italian artist for Dickensian texts – and the peculiar Dickensian tree as a sort of complex device to go back to 'what we do all remember best upon the branches of the Christmas tree of our young Christmas days, by which we climbed to real life'. Unfortunately the book turned out more a catalogue of the engraver's portfolio than a translation of Dickens's story; it was, however, a great success among those few readers who were lucky enough to get one of the two hundred copies printed¹¹.

Soon after publication the Italian translations of Dickens were always widely reviewed in the main Italian dailies and periodicals. On the whole they were favourably received and sold very well. Writing about *Dombey and Son*, for example, to quote from some of the most authoritative

Italian literary columnists, one¹² underlined Dickens's creative skill not only in giving the reader such a vivid fresco of the Victorian world from many points of view, but also, as far as language is concerned, in inventing a 'thick wood of metaphors', that is to say, a myriad of interwoven linguistic networks whose labyrinthine structures widen the boundaries of the fictional Dickensian world.

Another, however, began his reviews, surprisingly, by lamenting the fact that Italians 'ignore Dickens', and concluded by stating that those who do not love Dickens commit a 'capital sin' and consequently, as a punishment, are condemned to being unable to appreciate any novel, let alone the masterpieces of nineteenth-century fiction all over the world¹³.

As a matter of fact the story of Dickens's not being liked and appreciated by Italian readers is indeed an old story; a sort of obsolete 'battle of the books' between Modernist novel addicts on one side, and fans of the Victorian novel on the other.

Anyway, there is no doubt that, in the first half of the century up to recent years, many critics and influential scholars have either ignored or slated not only Dickens's works but most Victorian novelists as well. Dickens's novels were taken into consideration simply as interesting historical or social documents and he was reputed, at his best, to have been an extremely good reporter and caricaturist of middle-class and Biedermeier society; in short, the ideal writer of novels with no passions and no heroes. Professor Mario Praz's *The Death of the Hero in the Victorian Novel* (1952) is one of the most eloquent examples. Such a critical attitude, with the help of some influential modern criticism from Britain as well (undergraduates who attended F.R. Leavis's lectures in Italian universities in the early Sixties still remember today his opinion on Dickens and the Victorians), undoubtedly discouraged, or even prevented, the study and the appreciation of Victorian fiction and of Dickens's works in particular.

It would be futile to waste time on this old dispute even if a few sparks of the old fire can still be seen flying among scholars and university professors. It is well known that Dickens did not have 'the solemn advantages of academic learning' and did not care much about academic criticism. Introducing *Our Mutual Friend*, for example, Chesterton wrote, very rightly indeed, that 'no university professor would have written the title; no university professor could have written that book'. However, things have changed also in academic circles and by now in Italian universities students, scholars, and professors have produced a significant quantity of serious criticism on aspects or single works of Dickens's literary production¹⁴. Moreover, the first Dickens Symposium organised by the University of Milan at Gargnano, on the lake of Garda, took place from 6-9 September 1998. Together with European and American academics, the old and new generations of Italian scholars and admirers of Dickens convened at Gargnano to offer a series of variegated and stimulating contributions.

On the other hand one must not forget that not only Dickens's novels, short stories¹⁵ and ghost stories in particular¹⁶, but also his letters¹⁷ from

Italy, and works such as *Pictures from Italy*¹⁸ and *American Notes*¹⁹ in Italian are in print and can easily be found in bookshops. In fact Dickens's works have always proved best-sellers and a great number of readers have liked and enjoyed and still do like and enjoy them both in Italian and in English. This indeed would have been immensely appreciated by Dickens.

However, one must admit that in Italy not all of Dickens's works are currently available in a modern, correct, and satisfactory edition and translation, not to mention the innumerable abridgements for children and for schools, some of which outrageously tamper with the text. No Italian publisher, up to now, has succeeded in publishing the complete set of Dickens's novels²⁰. Einaudi started as far back as 1939 with the already mentioned *David Copperfield*. Much later in the Seventies and the Eighties, *Great Expectations*²¹, and *Our Mutual Friend*²² appeared in a new excellent translation by M. L. Giartosio De Courten and Luca Lamberti respectively.



Mirando Haz: 'A Pen and Ink-ubus'
(etched illustration to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 1984).

For Einaudi, Lamberti also translated *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* which was published, and sold out as a Christmas book, in Winter 1989. The volume included a sort of thriller by two Italian writers: C. Fruttero and F. Lucentini²³. The idea looked brilliant: the chapters of *The Mystery of*

Edwin Drood were interwoven with the reports of the proceedings at a rather peculiar Congress where the most famous detectives of the best literary tradition (Dupin, Holmes, Father Brown, Maigret, Poirot, and Marlowe just to name a few) met in order to solve the mystery of the murder of E. Drood. The conclusion, however, was not very satisfactory for Italian readers who, instead of learning, at last, the name of Drood's murderer, had to be content with finding out who killed Charles Dickens. Nevertheless Italians do like detective novels and so *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* can be found in two well known collections, published by Guida²⁴, and Rusconi²⁵.

A pair of other titles complete the list of the Dickensian works competently edited and translated into Italian: *Oliver Twist*²⁶ and, again, *Great Expectations*²⁷. A new translation of *A Tale of Two Cities* is going to appear soon²⁸, but surely other titles, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, would now be welcome on the shelves of Italian bookshops.

That Dickens is well known and widely read in Italy is demonstrated not only by more than one hundred titles from his works available in bookshops, but also by references to the Victorian novelist every time episodes of violence to children or social problems in poverty-stricken districts all over the world permeate the crime news in popular newspapers and weeklies. Even during the campaigns for General Elections (1995 and 1996) an anthology of essays about modern democracy, included, among works by de Tocqueville and Gramsci, for example, the story of the Eatanswill elections from *Pickwick*. And 'In these times of ours', to quote from the very *incipit* of Dickens's last complete novel, and to conclude this short note on his Italian translations, when successful authors of thrillers or contemporary poets still go back to Dickens the novelist and storyteller to draw inspiration from his works, one perhaps might go so far as to say that in Italy Dickens is not only popular, but that he has become also a permanent feature of the Italian cultural background.

¹ *Tempi difficili*. Ed. P. Ruffilli. Trans. B. Tasso. I classici della BUR. Milano: Rizzoli, 1990.

² *Il Circolo Pickwick*. Ed. P. Bellocchio. Trans. G. Lonza. I grandi libri. Milano: Garzanti, 1990.

³ *Grandi speranze*. Intr. A. Monti. Trans. C. Mazzola. Oscar Classici. Milano: Mondadori, 1991.

⁴ *Racconto di Natale*. Intr. M. Sestito. Trans. E. Grazi. Tascabili economici. Roma: Newton Compton, 1993.

⁵ *La storia e le personali esperienze di David Copperfield*. Intr. and Trans. C. Pavese. I grandi libri. Torino: Einaudi, 1939. Rprt. I tascabili. 1993.

⁶ *Grandi speranze*. Trans. M. Sestito. I grandi libri. Milano: Garzanti, 1994.

⁷ *Dombey e figlio*. Intr. S. Marcus. Trans. C. Angiolillo Zannino. I classici. Milano: Rizzoli, 1994.

⁸ *Casa desolata*. Intr. V. Nabokov. Trans. A. Negro. Einaudi tascabili. Torino: Einaudi, 1995.

⁹ *Racconto di Natale*. Trans. R. Mussapi. Fenice contemporanea. Parma: Guanda, 1995.

¹⁰ *Racconto di Natale*. Trans. A. M. Sommariva. Milano: Mursia, 1996.

¹¹ C. Dickens, M. Haz. *Un albero di Natale*. Trans. V. Poggi Chigi. Milano: All'insegna del pesce d'oro, 1981. The volume includes also an intr. by A. Nisbet, a note

essay by M. Haz and critical essays by G. Almansi, V. Amoruso, M. Bulgheroni, A. Castoldi and V. Poggi Chigi.

¹² G. Montefoschi: 'Ben tornato Mr Dickens'. *Corriere della sera* 22 Novembre 1994.

¹³ P. Citati. 'Dickens creatore del mondo'. *La Repubblica* 22 Novembre 1994.

¹⁴ C. Bo (Un. Urbino): 'La lezione di Dickens' 1968. R. Bonadei (Un. Bergamo): '*Mugby Junction*: sui treni vittoriani, incontro al moderno' 1988: 'L'ultima città' di Dickens: frammenti di idillio metropolitano' 1988; *Paesaggio con figure. Intorno all'Inghilterra di C. Dickens*. 1996. F. M. Casotti (Un. Pisa): 'Dickens e Rousseau' 1970; *Il ventaglio di Lady Tippins* 1984; 'Il labirinto urbano e *Our Mutual Friend*' 1995. M.T. Chialant (Un. Salerno): 'La tensione fra il reale e l'immaginario in due romanzi di C. Dickens' 1981; '*The Mystery of Edwin Drood* ovvero l'assassinio come una delle belle arti' 1984; 'C.D. e le ossessioni dell'immaginario. A proposito delle recenti traduzioni dickensiane in Italia' 1984; 'Il gioco e le sue metafore in *The Old Curiosity Shop*' 1988; *Ciminiere e cavalli alati. Strategie cantrastive nella narrativa di C. Dickens*' 1988. M. Curreli (Un. Pisa): 'Grand Tour e viaggi sentimentali: Dickens e Gissing in Italia' 1993. C. De Stasio (Un. Milano): 'A View in Indian Ink: lo scenario di desolazione in *Bleak House*' 1988. V. Gentili (Un. Roma): '*Hard Times* per questi tempi' 1972. C. Izzo (Un. Bologna): *Autobiografismo di C. Dickens* 1954; 'Dickens in Italy' 1974. S. Manferlotti (Un. Napoli): 'Generi e parodia dei generi in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*' 1986; 'Uno strano gentiluomo: Dickens autore di teatro' 1988. C. Pagetti (Un. Milano): '*Little Dorrit*: Dickens e il labirinto del linguaggio' 1975; '*Hard Times*' e '*Great Expectations*': problemi di critica dickensiana 1979; Ed. and Intr. *La città e il teatro: Dickens e l'immaginario vittoriano* 1988; 'Addin, Estella crudele. Pip a teatro' 1988; Ed. and Intr. *La città senza confini* 1995. E. Pellegrini (Un. Firenze): 'Charles Dickens'. *Necropoli immaginarie* 1996. V. Poggi Chigi (Un. Bologna): 'Christmas Ghosts and Deprived Bachelors. An Aspect of the Fantastic in Dickens' 1980; 'Il tono di *The Uncommercial Traveller*' 1988. R. Runcini. *Illusione e paura nel mondo borghese da Dickens a Orwell* 1968; 'Dal resoconto al racconto: le origini giornalistiche della scrittura dickensiana'. 1988. S. Sabbadini (Un. Bari) 'La regina Mab e la macchina a vapore' 1979.

¹⁵ *La sostanza dell'ombra*. Ed. M. Sestito. Intr. A. Lombardo. Archivio del romanzo. Napoli: Guida, 1986. *I racconti di fantasmi*. Ed. M. Skey. Trans. O. Fatica and D. Marciano. Roma: Theoria, 1993.

¹⁶ *Da leggersi all'imbrunire. Racconti di fantasmi*. Ed. and Trans. M. Skey. Torino: Einaudi, 1997.

¹⁷ *Lettere dall'Italia*. Ed. and Trans. L. Angelini. Milano: Archinto, 1987.

¹⁸ *Visioni d'Italia*. Trans. P. Maffeo. Milano: Ceschina, 1971.

¹⁹ *America*. Intr. M. Slater. Trans. M. Buitoni, G. Corsini, G. Miniati. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1982. Rprt. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1995.

²⁰ In 1966 Mursia, Milan, began publishing 'Tutte le opere narrative'. Only two volumes have appeared up to now. Vol.1. *I documenti del Circolo Pickwick*, Ed. F. Rota. Trans. U. Dettore. Vol. 2 *Le avventure di Oliver Twist* and *La bottega dell'antiquario*. Ed. F. Rota. Trans. G. Mina and A. Valori Piperno. Milano: Mursia, 1966.

²¹ *Grandi speranze*. Ed. and Trans. M. L. Giartosia De Courten. Gli struzzi. Torino: Einaudi, 1975.

²² *Il nostro comune amico*. Intr. A. Kettle. Trans. L. Lamberti. Gli struzzi. Torino: Einaudi, 1982.

²³ C. Dickens. C. Fruttero e F. Lucentini. *La verità sul caso D*. Trans. L. Lamberti. Torino: Einaudi, 1989.

²⁴ *Il mistero di Edwin Drood*. Ed. and Trans. S. Manferlotti. Intr. G. Almansi. Archivio del romanzo. Napoli: Guida, 1983.

²⁵ *Il mistero di Edwin Drood*. Compl. L. Garfield. Intr. E. Blishen. Trans. P.F. Paolini. Milano: Rusconi, 1984.

²⁶ *Le avventure di Oliver Twist*. Ed. A. Brilli. Trans. U. Dettore. I classici della BUR. Milano: Rizzoli, 1981.

²⁷ *Grandi speranze*. Ed. G. Almansi. Trans. B. Maffi. I classici della BUR. Milano: Rizzoli, 1987.

²⁸ *Racconti di due città*. Ed. and Trans. M. Domenichelli. Milano: Frassinelli, 1999.

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