

# The Dickensian Naples in Vladimiro Bottone's historical novel

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the literary prose of the Neapolitan writer Vladimiro Bottone through his five historical novels, all of which are set in Naples. With this study, I would like to highlight how much care and attention the author in question puts into his descriptions and dialogues, through which he provides an accurate overview of the historical and social facts of Naples in the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, before the unification of Italy. The author adheres to Scotian teachings and the general lines of Lukacsian criticism in the historical process, skilfully mixing real and ideal characters, the latter fitting perfectly to the society and historical period of reference. Vladimiro Bottone, with his novels, takes us by hand into a Naples that is not the Naples of postcards, not the Naples of pizza and mandolins, but the Naples of lazzari, of blackmail, of corruption, of dark and unhealthy alleys that attract, that fascinate and that eventually crush in their coils whoever dares give in to their lure and fall into their trap; he reveals to us, therefore, the other face of Naples.

**Keywords:** mystery, death, alleys, corrupt childhood, deception, history.

## Introduction

«The historical novel is a novel that has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity (which is in some cases only apparent fidelity) to historical fact» (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia)

The historical novel can be considered as the logical result of the awareness of historicism that developed among intellectuals after the French Revolution; therefore, it cannot be considered as a genre in its own right that seeks to detach man from the society that surrounds him. Hence the historical writings prior to this

period are such because of the setting, or the topic they deal with, but they do not take absolutely into account the psychology of the characters and the surrounding society (Lukacs, 1970). As a matter of fact, the artistic representation seems to give way to History. This is the moment in which the involvement of the society of the period being treated takes over, because, being the backbone of a nation, it thus becomes the result of historical evolution. Undoubtedly, this narrative genre develops mostly in the 19th century, both because the historical facts of this century are strongly determinant and because in this period there is a powerful renaissance of historical and historiographical studies; consequently, the historical novel presents itself as the highest expression of that very society that participated in the evolution of History (Calvino, 1988).

### **Methodology**

In the first part of the twentieth century, the historical novel loses much of its edge, the documented narration begins to represent a burden more than a diorama for the events of the characters and it is missing what Sergio Romagnoli calls 'patriotic sparks' (Romagnoli, 1968), what Elena Parrini finds in the incipit and in the explicit of *Promessi Sposi (The Betrothed)*: the power of Historia and Story, where the former represents the facts that really happened and the latter the vicissitudes of the characters created by the author (Parrini, 1996). In the second half of the previous century, the historical novel made a comeback, with great Italian names, such as Elsa Morante, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Umberto Eco, and foreigners, such as Marguerite Yourcenar, Ken Follet, and Ildefonso Falcones, but it was a new type of historical novel, where history merges with noir or fantasy, with thriller or horror, with adventure or love, where documented fact becomes the canvas on which to move real characters and mix them with invented ones, the so-called 'ideal' characters (Lukacs, 1970) in a vortex where it becomes difficult, if not sometimes impossible, to detach history from story.

In Italy, towards the end of the last century of the previous millennium, a young Neapolitan writer, Vladimiro Bottone, tiptoed his way into the milieu of the historical novel. Probably, because of his clearly Slavic name that reminds us the great Russian novelists, or much more probably because of his humanistic studies (he has a degree in Sociology with a thesis in "Cultural Anthropology and the History of Religions"), Bottone, from his very beginnings, shows a particular predisposition, as well as a marked dedication to historical narration.

In his books, he commits himself to the reader neither to ignore nor to betray historical reality, but to comply with the facts, to enrich them with details and particulars that are always true and documentable, to unleash his imagination and fantasy only with regard to certain characters that are skilfully inserted into the reality of the described period and mixed with figures that really existed (Eco, 2000).

## Discussion

Gyorgy Lukacs, in his essay *Il romanzo storico (The Historical Novel)*, considers Sir Walter Scott to be the first historical novelist because he is the first to keep intact not only the historical reconstruction, but above all the psychology of the historical period in question (Lukacs, 1970); this is exactly what our author does since his first novel *L'ospite della vita (The Guest of Life)* in 1999 (Bottone, 1999), where Giacomo Leopardi, in the last part of his life, wanders in a Naples crushed by cholera and poverty, a poverty that generates despair and the passage from despair to human abjection is not only fast, but above all inevitable. The guest of life is Leopardi himself, who cannot be the protagonist of his life, but lives it by looking at its reflection in a mirror. His unstable health does not allow him to enjoy life, as he would gladly do, but forces him just to intoxicate with the tales of his friend Antonio Ranieri, gorging on sweets and Neapolitan ice creams. Leopardi's Neapolitan journey transforms from a hope for a rehabilitation of his precarious health into a total failure, where Naples, instead of supporting him with its mild climate, like Homeric sirens with the promise of amazing experiences traps him, luring him into its unhealthy alleys and swallows him up, chew him up and digest him (Marcuse, 1974). In one of his feverish deliriums, the poet from Recanati, host of his own life, "exiled" to his bed by his illness in an «esilio (che) è un asilo, che ti salva dal mondo»<sup>1</sup> (Bottone), does not want to be cured because by being cured as a guest he would become 'an ordinary citizen', with an ordinary life. On the contrary the 'mother' illness has given him birth again, now he is shown in another light, he almost appreciates his condition and almost redeems the 'stepmotherly nature' of *The ginestra* (Barthes, 1977).

The story develops around the legend of an untraceable book, written by Virgil and lost in a shipwreck; this mysterious book, however, may be hidden in the well-stocked library of a Neapolitan nobleman, whom he either really does not know he possesses or shamelessly pretends to, and Leopardi, obsessed by this text, desperately tries to come up with a solution to the mystery, even venturing into Neapolitan bad areas and neighbourhoods to obtain information about (Croce, 1999). In the novel we find scattered references to Dante's work, not only because of the presence of Virgil, even though aleatory, but above all for the descriptions of alleyways and characters very close to the hells ones.

In his second novel, *Rebis*, published in 2002 and reprinted in 2022, we find a Vladimiro Bottone who, through the interweaving of events, makes an in-depth study of the historical and ideal characters, outlines their psychological traits, and finally draws an overall picture of the social environment of the period to represent the evolution in a fictional universe involving the space-time correlation of the

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<sup>1</sup> [exile (which) is an asylum, which saves you from the world.]

Bachtinian chronotope (Bachtin, 1997). Like Verga, our author also feels a sense of pity towards the so-called vanquished, but whereas Verga's characters are humble individuals overwhelmed by invincible fate that leaves no way out (Asor Rosa, 2009), in *Rebis*, the humble and the beaten are indeed crushed and defeated not by an adverse fate, but by their fellows who are more powerful, richer, more cunning, by their own will to prove the truth, not to accept being puppets in the hands of those who dominate them. The very title puts the reader on alert, *Rebis*, res+bis, the double thing, the male and the female, the statue of the Veiled Christ itself is ambiguous: «Eppure se la sfioro, questa membrana traslucida, continuo ad avvertire sotto i polpastrelli un riverbero gelido. È marmo e tessuto. Né marmo né tessuto. Non più marmo non ancora tessuto»<sup>1</sup> (Bottone, 2022). The novel revolves around the statue of the Veiled Christ found in the Pietatella, better known as the Sansevero Chapel, Raimondo di Sangro, Prince of Sansevero, Antonio Corradini, sculptor, Giuseppe Sanmartino, sculptor and author of the statue at issue (so far all historical characters) and Jacopo Fucito, secretary to the prince (an ideal character); together with them move a whole series of other characters who could be both historical and ideal. The novel tells of Antonio Corradini's death as a murder, probably on commission, and of the prince's young secretary who tries to shed light on the incident, both out of affection for the elderly sculptor and out of a feeling of abnegation towards his young and beautiful wife.

The narrative begins with a description of the feast of Saint Anthony Abbot, which falls on 17<sup>th</sup> January. It is 1753, and the bonfires made in honour of the saint begin to burn across the city, giving it the appearance of a circle from Dante's *Inferno*: «Un barcone montato sopra un carro (...) sopra un traino di buoi (...) solca maestosamente le strade, fendendo la marea di teste (...) innalza questa statua (...). Ai suoi piedi grufola una nidiata di maialini (...) a lui oggi sacrificate in un'ecatombe di strida inumane»<sup>2</sup> (Bottone, 2022); the whole novel is littered with devilish figures, who try to steal the souls of naive characters with excessive flattery. There are many more references to Dante, and apart from the various descriptions of the environments of decay and despair, we find the symbolism of the number 'three' several times, such as the three phases of alchemy: nigredo, rubedo and albedo (Bottone, 2022); the three chambers of Corradini's secret study; the three rules to follow: «Silenzio. Occhi aperti e bocca chiusa.»<sup>3</sup>(Bottone 2022).

His ability to interweave historical reality with fantasy does not disappoint even in his third novel, published in 2003, *Mozart in viaggio per Napoli* (*Mozart travelling*

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<sup>1</sup> [Yet if I brush against it, this translucent membrane, I still feel an icy glow under my fingertips. It is marble and fabric. Neither marble nor fabric. No longer marble not yet fabric.]

<sup>2</sup> [A barge mounted on a chariot (...) over a tow of oxen (...) ploughs majestically through the streets, cleaving through the tide of heads (...) raises this statue (...). At his feet roars a brood of piglets (...) sacrificed to him today in a carnage of inhuman screeching.]

<sup>3</sup> [Silence. Open eyes and closed mouth.]

*through Naples*); characters from the most disparate social classes meet, clash, relate, laying bare their souls through meticulous and detailed descriptions, as Gamiani, a character between the shady and the confidential, between the charlatan and the enlightened, an ambiguous character who can be both historical and ideal, brings us back to the concept of 'necessary anachronism' as the eternal dilemma of respecting and altering historical reality (Lukacs, 1979). Certainly, at the basis of his work there is an in-depth study of the socio-historical reality of the period in question, but also a not at all superficial knowledge of the geography of the areas covered in this odeporic narrative. Gamiani, after an initial introductory chapter, where he encounters a frightened Mozart, stripped of the bravado that cloaked his aura, especially his boyish one, easily influenced and deceived, becomes the author's alter ego narrator (Bachtin, 2024). He becomes an analytical observer, capturing the most historically authentic aspects of the society of the period and the most intrinsically explanatory psychology, but he always acts this through the filter of an objectivity that may be considered almost journalistic, maintaining the necessary detachment to give an external, super partes view, almost like a god who watches first in admiration, then in doubt, and finally in disappointment, what he has created. The story, through a sort of flashback, tells of Mozart's journey with his father to Naples and their stay in the city, where the young musician meets some of his peers including a young girl he falls in love with. Here as well we find descriptions of malodorous alleys and crumbling houses with jungle-like gardens, mellifluous individuals reminiscent of Uriah Heep, beggars, prostitutes and scugnizzi like Jack Dawkins and, at the centre, a mysterious bottle of rosolio.

We also find an objective representation of environments that may have remained unchanged over time, through vocabulary specifically related to the historical period in question, as is the case in *Rebis* and in *Mozart in viaggio per Napoli* with the word 'criado' (Bottone, 2022,2003), a term of Spanish origin to define someone from a humble family who was reared, brought up, educated by a nobleman and who almost always ended up as a secretary and trusted man of the benefactor.

We want to focus our attention on the last two historical novels written in the second decade of this century. For our writer, the linguistic problem is the core of each of his works, all his historical novels are set in Naples. We always find an adaptation, not at all forced, of the dialogues to the social environment in question, so we find logical, in *Vicaria*, the fourth historical novel, the words of the commander of the poor man's hospice, Michele Fiorino, a shady individual: «Vi dovete fottere d'a paura» [...]«Secondo voi è talmente impossibile? Basta che uno attacca alla cassa 'e muorto il biglietto sbagliato. Quella è gente che non sa leggere manco il nome suo. Voi che vi pensate: che sono tanti pennaruli?»<sup>1</sup> (Bottone 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> ] [You have to fuck with fear"[...]"You think it's so impossible? It's enough that someone sticks the wrong ticket on the coffin. Those are people who can't even read their own name. What do you think: that many of them are good at writing?]

By pure chance, a careful and honest policeman discovers that the disappearance of a child from a poorhouse, the “Ospizio dei Poveri” that Neapolitan people also call “Serraglio” or “Recluserio”, is nothing other else than a murder. He begins to investigate, setting off a whirlwind of events that revolve around a scene, that shows us a Naples in its mixture of extreme poverty and exaggerated wealth. The poverty is that of the poorhouse in the Vicaria district, a hospice that had started out with the best of intentions, but had become a sort of prison that gathered together orphans abandoned to the famous 'wheel', women who had practised the oldest profession in the world and old men abandoned to themselves, all run by people totally lacking in scruples. The wealth is that of the Neapolitan bourgeoisie, a bourgeoisie sometimes with its hands stained with innocent blood. Unlike the two previous novels, set in the second half of the 18th century, *Vicaria* is set about a century later, twenty years before the unification of Italy.

The scene often moves to the most disparate places, from prison cells to splendid gardens, from dilapidated 'basses' to aristocratic palaces, from theatres to morgues, all seasoned with historically accurate as well as witty language, constructing the chapters in such a way as to keep the reader tied to the book (Bachtin, 2014). It reminds the same structure used by Dickens in the weekly publishing of the chapters of his novels. In *Vicaria* we find a more mature Vladimiro Bottone, less corrosive and 'polemical', who recounts with greater skill and mastery the society and its behaviour relative to the historical period of the setting, and we notice this above all through the dialogues that are skilfully used to highlight the salient moments. Literature and History have walked together for centuries, even though it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to define where history ends and literature begins and vice versa. Both have the purpose of narrating events, whether or not they are contaminated by fantasy, by the imaginary, but great historians such as George Duby or Carlo Ginzburg have the merit of having dealt with the analysis of History through lenses that were only the prerogative of novelists (Duby, 1986; Ginzburg, 2000). The author that is the subject of this study, in his novels, is the narrator and he willingly adapts himself to the thinking of the historical period, the social environment, the psychology of the society in which he places his stories. He always acts in a harshly polite manner, not an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, but a demonstration of his skill as a narrator even in the most despicable and abject situations, while maintaining a graceful tone, as we see «I riveriti primari che si litigavano i cadaveri con i medici esterni, vale a dire altri esimi professori bisognosi di corpi da sezionare durante le loro lezioni private di anatomia patologica. Per accaparrarsele, queste spoglie non reclamate da nessuno, era stato addirittura codificato un tariffario delle mance per inservienti della morgue e becchini. Gli ultimi a mettersi in fila, per i reperti avanzati, erano gli studenti e i tirocinanti di Medicina. Come dei cani si

contendevano ossa, polmoni, braccia, tronchi di cristiani. I più ricercati erano le femmine e i bambini – si trattava di orfani, ovviamente.<sup>1</sup>»(Bottone, 2015).

Or, when describing the intimate emotions of the various characters, he lets the influence of symbolist and decadentist poetics shine through, where the aesthetic ideal overwhelms and upsets through the linguistic laboratory the reader's soul, who stands as if waiting for events to unfold. The quotation below shows how the writer meticulously describes the behaviour of little Antimo, enriching it with details relating to the emotional side «Una piccola ombra le era corsa incontro, buttandosi in ginocchio. Uno scherzo, una monelleria napoletana? Poi quel corpo minuto le aveva acchiappato – no: rubato – le mani, tempestandole di baci e lacrime. Come se lei fosse un'apparizione. Oppure una giovanissima, raggiante madre inventata e adottata lì, sul momento. Sta di fatto che quel bambino, Antimo, le aveva accarezzato l'orlo della gonna, offrendole l'unica cosa di cui era padrone: le proprie lacrime, deposte ai piedi di lei. Come se Emma fosse una delle bellissime, teatrali Madonne che addobbavano le loro chiese tutte buio e oro. Come se lei, la Signorina, fosse la Vergine in persona capace di intercedere per lui. Di rimettere a lui i suoi debiti, l'enorme debito di essere venuto al mondo.<sup>2</sup>» (Bottone, 2015).

In these two passages, the reflections of the I-narrator open up to a twofold interpretation, depending on the point of view: the first leads us to a static narration, that of someone who looks at things from the outside, without any emotional involvement; the second, on the other hand, proves to be dynamic and manifests an emotional implication of the narrator, who tries to read the stream of consciousness of the characters and tell their story, entering into them in such an extreme way to become an integral part of them.

Antimo is an Oliver Twist who didn't succeed, his Fagin, Catapano, 'sold' him as a traitor to the hospice commandant Don Florino, and his Nancy, the music teacher Emma, failed to save him from human evilness. The dialogical expression of the characters is not only deep, but also rich in nuances designed to portray and

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<sup>1</sup> [The revered head doctors quarreled over corpses with outside doctors, that is, other exalted professors in need of bodies to dissect during their private lessons in pathological anatomy. In order to grab them, these unclaimed corpses, there was even a codified schedule of tips for morgue attendants and undertakers. The last to line up, for the leftover remains, were the medical students and trainees. Like dogs, they competed for bones, lungs, arms, Christian trunks. Most wanted were the females and children - orphans, of course.]

<sup>2</sup> [A small shadow had run towards her, throwing himself on his knees. A joke, a Neapolitan prank? Then that tiny body had grabbed - no: stolen - her hands, showering them with kisses and tears. As if she were an apparition. Or a very young, radiant mother invented and adopted there, on the spot. As a matter of fact, that child, Antimo, had caressed the hem of her skirt, offering her the only thing he owned: his own tears, laid at her feet. As if Emma were one of the beautiful, theatrical Madonnas who adorned their churches all dark and gold. As if she, the Miss, were the Virgin herself, able to intercede for him. To forgive him his debts, the enormous debt of having come into the world.]

enhance their psychology. Always constructed in such a way as to be clear and comprehensible as well as responsive to the historical period of reference, always respecting the limits of necessary anachronism and maintaining the historical authenticity of the actions of the protagonists, their vocabulary and their psychology (Bachtin, 1997).

*Vicaria*, however, does not have a conclusion, it leaves us with an open ending to which *Il giardino degli inglesi* (*The garden of the Englishmen*) follows, which once again sees the commissioner Gioacchino Fiorilli investigating the suspicious movements of the poor people's hospice. Obsessed by the suspicious deaths of the poor and the noble, of Neapolitans and foreigners, the commissioner continues his crusade against evil, fought in the darkness of the alleys, but also in the false light of wealthy mansions and clubs, where evil takes root, sometimes more than elsewhere. In these last two novels, Bottone describes a Naples that is even darker, gloomier, where the sunlight rarely arrives and is often indirect or only touches the walls and windows, neglecting the people; we find a city that is different from the sunny city sung by poets and musicians, we find instead a rainy, humid city, covered by black clouds, a city that grips and hides dark secrets, and the two incipits are already harbingers of terrible stories. *Vicaria* begins like this: «Un lampo giallastro, uno schianto. Il fulmine ha spaccato in due il crepuscolo su Napoli. Questa fenditura ha aperto le cateratte. Per i vetturini, i carrettieri neanche il tempo di lanciare i cavalli al trotto e si è scatenato il diluvio. Un cielo fangoso sopra, la terra fangosa sotto. Questo gorgoglio limaccioso dalle colline che incombono sulla città. In un quarto d'ora il nubifragio ha già trasformato i pendii di Capodimonte in un ribollire di acque piovane. Dalla sommità dei Camaldoli iniziano a gonfiarsi, senza più argini, torrenti di pioggia e melma. Da Materdei, da Santa Teresa, dal Cavone queste masse alluvionali precipitano a valle, verso la loro fossa biologica, il loro ricettacolo naturale: Napoli.»<sup>1</sup> (Bottone, 2015).

The beginning of *Il giardino degli inglesi* does not deviate much from its predecessor: «Le rampe di Sant'Aniello a Caponapoli nereggiavano in alto, contro il cielo gonfio. I gradoni piatti sembravano intagliati nel fianco di una montagna. Le gocce d'acqua continuavano a picchiettare il viso di Gioacchino Fiorilli, si insinuavano fra il bavero del pastrano e il colletto della sua uniforme. La sua divisa da Commissario di Primo

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<sup>1</sup> ["A yellowish flash, a crash. The lightning split the twilight over Naples into two. This crack opened the floodgates. For the coachmen, the carters not even time to throw their horses into a trot and the deluge came. A muddy sky above, the muddy earth below. This muddy gurgling from the hills looming over the city. Within a quarter of an hour, the cloudburst had already turned the slopes of Capodimonte into a bubbling rainstorm. From the top of the Camaldoli, torrents of rain and slime begin to swell, with no banks left. From Materdei, from Santa Teresa, from Cavone these alluvial masses rush downstream, towards their septic tank, their natural receptacle: Naples."]



rango presso il quartiere napoletano di San Lorenzo. »<sup>1</sup> (Bottone, 2016). The Commissioner Fiorilli, represents the classic 'average hero' (Lukacs, 1970): he is not noble, but neither is he a commoner, he is not an academic, but he is not uncultured either, he is wise enough, he is practical, but basically, he is endowed with great moral dignity and humanity, he does not affirm, but suggests, he does not declare, but deduces, he is a middle-class man, who goes unnoticed, an affectionate father and husband, but silent and introverted. His opposite, the so-called 'miserable individual' (Lukacs, 1969), is not the poor, he is not the man of the lower classes, willing to do the most abject things out of hunger and culture, but an exponent of the upper class, Dr Domenico De Consoli, a man who, according to him, does not fear 'solitude, but rather the multitude' (Bottone, 2017) and unlike the hero, is totally devoid of morals: he is cold, haughty, opinionated, he uses people as he pleases and completely lacks humanity, his behaviour is dictated by the curiosity to see if he is caught, the curiosity to see how far a man can go to satisfy it, the curiosity to bet with destiny and see who wins the challenge.

## Conclusion

Throughout Bottone's production, we can identify similarities in both narrative themes and linguistic resolution. The recurring themes are the juxtaposition of light and dark, good and evil, wealth and poverty, the latter not only economic, but above all of feelings and spirit; reality that hides disturbing secrets in memories and conscience, creating a plot thick with mystery: we recall the suspicious burial of Leopardi, Mozart's bottle of poisoned rosolio, the mystery of the Veiled Christ and the various enigmas of the Sansevero Chapel, the ambiguity of the poor people's hospice. Regarding linguistic resolution, in all the novels we find examples of 'erlebte Rede', so that the voice of the narrator and that of the protagonists merge and mingle in a masterfully contrived dance to give greater emphasis and pathos to the narrative's salient moments. In describing the individual objects that are typical of the historical picture, our author is extremely precise; many are objects that serve to make us better penetrate the psychology of the characters and the various slices of society they represent, but they never completely influence the reader by directing him to feel a particular sympathy for some victims of society, at most they stimulate his curiosity about the truth. The masterfully described 19th-century Naples is a city of gloomy hues, a city that hides dangers around every corner, but for this very reason it is all the more fascinating and has nothing to envy to the London of Charles Dickens.

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<sup>1</sup> ] [The ramps of Sant'Aniello a Caponapoli stood tall against the swollen sky. The flat steps seemed carved into the side of a mountain. The drops of water kept tapping Gioacchino Fiorilli's face, creeping between the lapels of his pastcoat and the collar of his uniform. His uniform was that of a first-rate commissioner in the Neapolitan district of San Lorenzo.]  
[They are all my translations]

Through his novels, Vladimiro Bottone reveals himself to be a skilful writer, capable of seeing and describing History reflected in his characters and in their feelings, recounting the life and thought of the society of the historical period of setting, describing the misery of the 'alleys', but also the meanness of the Neapolitan 'palaces'. His mastery in creating the plots and mixing the different social classes, his sensitivity in entering into the psychology of the various characters make it seem he only approaches historical facts as a background without giving an explanation, while we assimilate and study them without consciously realizing the process.

I intend to proceed my research comparing Bottone's books to his last novel *Non c'ero mai stato* (*I had never been there*) settled in a modern Naples.

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