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Didimo and Yorick: Observations
on Foscolo's Translation of Sterne

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Early in our century the Russian formalists, with their emphasis on the form of the work of art as the locus of artistic value rather than the content, pointed out that translating a book from one language into another was in effect to produce an entirely different book. The short stories of O. Henry translated into Russian, no matter how faithfully, were quite different in meaning than the O. Henry read in the United States. The problem was not just a linguistic one--that of finding the correct Russian equivalents of American expressions--but a cultural one as well. The meaning or meanings of a text are to some degree determined by its cultural context. In the words of Victor Shklovsky, one of the more prolific of the Opoyaz faction of the Russian Formalists, "The work of art arises from a background of other works and through association with them. The form of a work of art is defined by its relation to other works of art, to forms existing prior to it."¹ In other words, a story by O. Henry would mean one thing when it is part of a tradition which includes Mark Twain and Edgar Allen Poe and something quite different if perceived in a tradition including Pushkin and Gogol.

Looking at literary tradition from another perspective Hugh Kenner has noted that it is a procedure which allows something to be expressed in a context which would not normally permit it. As an example, he cites Pope's translation of the Iliad; which "moves along in the most decorous rhymed couplets and is full of people disembowelling one another. If you could somehow detach Homer's name and reputation and simply offer it as an 18th-century poem, you'd find it a most extraordinary piece of surrealism: every obvious assumption of 18th-century society is ignored. But his translation is protected by the name of Homer. This is part of the role that translation plays in letters: it provides templates that permit outrageous things to occur. It allows people to break out of a set of assumptions in which they are otherwise likely to be trapped--assumptions implicit in the language, assumptions of the conventions that go with the literature of a language."²

Ugo Foscolo's translation of Laurence Sterne's A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy reflects both these views of translation: on one hand, Viaggio Sentimentale di Yorick Lungo la Francia e l'Italia is a very different text from Sterne's original; on the other hand, he made use of Sterne to introduce something new and different (if not outrageous) into the Italian Literature of his time, and to "break out of a set of assumptions" on which the Italian litterati were trapped.

One senses a kind of embarrassment among Italian critics and literary historians to deal with this translation: and not because it's bad--indeed, those who have written on it usually go out of their way to prove how in lexical and stylistic felicity it is even better than the original--but simply because it is a translation. Why would such an

imposing literary figure as Ugo Foscolo, one of the most original and influential writers of his time, resort to translating? Foscolo sometimes evinced the same kind of embarrassment in his letters to his friends. "Farewell," he writes in one, "I'm getting back to the Sterne. And did you know that often he makes me very angry? No, no, I have not been made by Mother Nature to be a servant ever; and isn't translating a kind of servitude for school girls? Anyway, soon I will have finished and recopied him; and if it doesn't please me I will let him sleep and will dedicate myself to the tragedies."³ Furthermore, Foscolo spent a long time at this slave labor that went against his nature. Although published in 1813, Foscolo had begun to translate it in 1805. By 1807 he had apparently completed a version which did not satisfy him. So, he set about redoing the whole thing, and it was another six years before he was able to bring it to a satisfactory completion.

In other letters Foscolo claimed that with his translation he would give the public something new and original. And by such a claim he seemed to mean first that it would be something different from the original text of the Sentimental Journey, and second, that it would be something very new for the Italian reading public. In other words, Foscolo would have been in agreement with both Shklovsky and Kenner: in transposing Sterne's text from its original literary context to the Italian literary tradition he was altering Sterne; but in introducing such foreign material into an Italian context he was also altering that context, challenging that tradition and the set of assumptions that went with it. Ultimately then, despite Foscolo's complaints that as he was translating he was merely being servile to another text, the translation itself, once it was published, managed to be servile neither to Sterne's original, nor to the assumptions of the Italian literary tradition, assumptions which Foscolo could not have ignored as easily in his "original" works.

However, the translation did not seem to have much of an impact on Italian Literature, possibly because it was too "new". It was not and never has been one of Foscolo's more widely read works. But since Foscolo is a major figure in the history of Italian Literature, scholars have been compelled to be aware of, and show respect to, all his writings, down to the most banal personal or business correspondence. This means that the translation has not been ignored, at least not completely yet. The scholars who have dealt with the translation itself have been very few. Most critics only look at it as an indication that Sterne influenced Foscolo and then move on to consider how that influence affects his other works, those works which can be attributed only to Foscolo. Those few who have studied the translation itself closely, have limited themselves to a stylistic comparison of Foscolo's and Sterne's language. It's not too surprising that at the hands of these Italian critics Foscolo should come out ahead in such comparisons. The findings usually are that his words are more expressive, his syntax more elegant, his rhythm more balanced, and so on. In fact, in the most recent such study, Studi su Laurence Sterne ed Ugo Foscolo,

Vincenzo Tripodi, 1978, the conclusion reached is that by the careful use of diminutives, archaisms, amplification, and punctuation Foscolo manages not only to improve on the original but to express completely different things in his translation.

There is undoubtedly some truth to such claims--not the claims that Foscolo's version is better, but that his stylistic choices do affect the meaning of the text. However, on the whole I find them greatly exaggerated, and unconvincing. In fact, the translation itself, sentence by sentence, is very faithful to the original. I say the "translation itself" because there's more to Foscolo's book than just the translation. And it is this "more" which makes of it a radically different text from Sterne's, and not his stylistic choices.

Foscolo frames the fiction of Yorick's travels through France within a fiction of his own. An anonymous editor claims to have received the translated manuscript from one Didimo Chierico, an enigmatic character living a self-imposed exile in France. The manuscript consists not only of the translated text, but also of Didimo's notes to it, explaining certain points to his Italian readers, taking issue with others; sometimes reprimanding Yorick. At the end of the book, after the translation of Sentimental Journey, is appended a Notizia inforno a Didimo Chierico (Notice concerning Didimo Chierico). In sixteen paragraphs, or short chapters, similar in length to those of Sentimental Journey, the editor gives a sketchy account of the eccentric behavior and beliefs of this Didimo, whom he encountered for only a brief time during his travels in France. The editor presents Didimo as an interesting but bizarre character whom he can't really figure out. He tells the reader that he will just report those of Didimo's words and actions which he knows and leave it for the reader to figure them out. Among such words and actions would be included the manuscript of the translation from Sterne.

The presence of these two other voices, which are superimposed on Yorick's, alters the textual strategies considerably. The reader's work in processing the text, which is complicated enough in Sterne's work, is made even more complicated here. Yorick/narrator's voice reaches the reader filtered through, and thus altered by, two other voices: that of the ambiguous Didimo, and finally that of the anonymous editor who claims ignorance of what it all means but deems it important enough to publish. It's the role of the reader in the two texts which makes them so fundamentally different. In the end the difference amounts to this: Sterne's text asserts the power of the reader over the text; Foscolo's text denies this power to its readers. The textual strategies in Sterne force the reader to take over the signifying function in the text; while the textual strategies in Foscolo make sure that it's the text that retains control of the reader's responses, or at least denies the reader the autonomy he had in front of Sterne's text.

A Sentimental Journey could be read as an allegory of reading and writing, where travel is a metaphor for reading, if we understand "reading" as the ability to seek out, receive, and process new information.

"Writing," on the other hand, would be the ability to formulate and impart information, the ability to make authoritative pronouncements. Seen in this key, Yorick's journey amounts to a refutation of his own, and possibly man's, ability to write, that is to state truths authoritatively; and a confirmation of his own, and man's need to read, that is to learn and derive meanings from the world, rather than impose them.

The book opens in medias res, at the end of a conversation, as Yorick makes an authoritative and presumptuous pronouncement, which is immediately challenged by his interlocutor:

"--They order, said I, this matter better in France--
 --You have been in France? said my gentleman, turning quick upon me with the most civil triumph in the world.--
 Strange! quoth I, debating the matter with myself, That one and twenty miles sailing, for 'tis absolutely no further from Dover to Calais, should give a man these rights--I'll look into them: . . ."4

This scene sets the pattern for the whole book: no sooner does Yorick/character state a belief, conclusion, or resolution than it is challenged, proven to be unjustified, and he is left to continue his travels, momentarily humbled, but never defeated, resolved to learn more before he speaks; or to insist on our metaphor, to read more before he writes.

But of course, he is writing. Yorick/narrator is writing his memoirs, giving an account of Yorick/character's adventures and misadventures. Does this mean that after his journey he now has the necessary authority to be a writer instead of a reader? Not really, because the distinction between Yorick/narrator and Yorick/character is not always maintained. There is a symbiosis between the two of them whereby one seems to learn from the other. Yorick/narrator continues his travels as he writes about them, and continues to learn from them: he continues to be a reader even as he is writing. Shortly after arriving in Calais a spirit of good will overwhelms Yorick. The second chapter ends with these words:

"When man is at peace with man, how much lighter than a feather is the heaviest of metals in his hand! he pulls out his purse, and holding it airily and uncompress'd, looks round him, as if he sought for an object to share it with--In doing this, I felt every vessel in my frame dilate--the arteries beat all cheerily together, and every power which sustained life, perform'd it with so little friction, that 'twould have confounded the most physical precieuse in France: with all her materialism, she could scarce have called me a machine--

I'm confident, said I to myself, I should have overset her creed.

The accession of that idea, carried nature, at that time, as high as she could go--I was at peace with the world before, and this finish'd the treaty with myself--

--Now, was I a King of France, cried I--what a moment for an orphan to have begg'd his father's portmanteau of me!"5

The feelings and the words belong to the narrator as well as the character here. However, in the very next chapter a Franciscan monk enters the restaurant seeking charity, and all he gets from Yorick is a severe and cruel tongue lashing on the evils of living off other people's earnings. The juxtaposition makes the narrator realize first how empty and unjustified the words of good will had been; but later Yorick/character comes to the same realization and feels the same shame. Narratively his realization follows, but chronologically, of course, it precedes; which suggests that the narrator has not really learned anything, or doesn't remember it if he did, but has constantly to relearn the lesson.

There is an extraordinary moment in Sentimental Journey where the roles of the narrator and the character are completely reversed. About six or seven pages into the text we find the Preface to the book. Yorick/character has been left alone to consider what carriage he wishes to procure for his travels. While waiting for the proprietor to return he enters a Désobligeante and decides to write the preface to the book which he intends to write about his travels, that is the book we are now reading. The chapter which follows consists of that preface, written by Yorick/character in which Yorick/narrator is only a future project, an imagined character in a projected book. But even more significant is that at the end of this chapter the last word is not given to either Yorick/character or Yorick/narrator but to a couple of bystanders who happen to overhear the last words of Yorick's preface. Yorick has been writing, and apparently talking out loud, about the advantages and disadvantages of travel. He concludes in a rhetorical flourish, asking his countrymen why they should want to travel at all:

"--But there is no nation under heaven abounding with more variety of learning--where the sciences may be more fitly woo'd, or more surely won than here--where art is encouraged, and will so soon rise high--where Nature (take her all together) has so little to answer for--and, to close all, where there is more wit and variety of character to feed the mind, with--Where then, my dear countrymen, are you going--"⁶

At which point he is answered by two real Englishmen standing outside the carriage:

"--We are only looking at this chaise, said they--Your most obedient servant, said I, skipping out of it, and pulling off my hat--We were wondering, said one of them, who, I found, was an inquisitive traveller--what could occasion its motion.--
--'Twas the agitation, said I coolly, of writing a preface--"

So not only is Yorick/character's preface yanked back into Yorick/narrator's énoncé or discourse, but both are appropriated and somehow questioned by the two travellers. The preface had ended by exhorting Englishmen not to travel. But the Englishmen Yorick would dissuade turn up as travellers, and as part of the same chapter which contains

the preface. Their intrusion thus negates what has just been asserted in that very preface.

The position of the preface within the book rather than before it is strategic. It appears to be less accomodating of the reader, apparently ignoring his presence and making no attempt to situate him at the beginning, or give him any background information. In effect, however, this works to make the reader define his own role in the text; and that role turns out to be a dominant one. The irony in the text always ends up being wielded by the reader against Yorick and his discourse. The preface is the place where a narrator establishes his authority, gives guidelines and ground rules to his readers--tells them how to read. By the time the preface is presented here it is too late, the reader has already established his dominant role over Yorick and his discourse, and is not about to relinquish it. Throughout the book it is the implied author, and not the narrator, who is in cahoots with the implied reader. Their conspiracy at the expense of narrator and character serves to magnify the reader's role in the text. Its meanings ultimately depend on him, the reader--not on what is said, but on how he interprets what is said.

Things are quite different in Foscolo's text. There the reading and interpretation of Sterne's text is taken over by Didimo. Although Yorick's preface remains where it is in the original, Didimo opens the book with his own preface, wherein he tells the reader about Yorick and Sterne, what they're like and what they mean. He is not going to give his readers the same free reign that Yorick did: he will guide their reactions. At each point of ambiguity or irony in the text where Sterne's reader would be given room to exert his free power of interpretation there is a note from Didimo telling his readers how to react, how to interpret.

The implication is that Didimo doesn't have the same faith in his readers that Sterne has. He can't trust them to come up with the right meaning. But if that's the case, why choose to translate a text which gives such an important role to the reader in the first place? Paradoxically, by translating Sterne's book, Foscolo seemed to want to stress the importance of the reader's participation in the literary text; but by enveloping it in another discursive layer--that of Didimo--he seemed to deny his own readers that participation.

But perhaps Didimo's voice is not there to deny participation to the Italian reader so much as to recognize the fact that the Italian reader who can participate in the text had not yet been formed.

Ian Watt, in The Rise of the Novel,⁷ has shown how the development of the bourgeois novel in 18th-century Britain paralleled the development of the bourgeois reading public. A centralized democratic form of government and things like free schools, lending libraries, inexpensive editions of books assured novelists like Fielding, Richardson, and Sterne that they had a reading public on whose competence they could rely.

No such assurance was possible in Italy at the beginning of the 19th-century. The peninsula was highly fragmented and most of the small

states were under foreign domination. The official or bureaucratic languages tended to be French or German, and most people tended to speak their particular dialects, which for the most part, were very different from standard Italian, which really existed only in literature. And literature was really the province of only a handful of litterati.

The problem for someone like Foscolo and other writers of his time was that they were not satisfied with that state of events. Italian intellectuals were inspired by those same ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution that had excited all of Europe: democracy, progress, education of the masses. But to accomplish such goals they needed a country and they needed Italians, neither of which existed yet. Foscolo was therefore writing for a reading public that wasn't there. The choice of Sterne's text suggests the need and desire for such a public to exist; the presence of Didimo indicates the frustration that it did not.

Thus the thrust of Sterne's text is both retained and modified. Foscolo's text ends up stating the opposite of Sterne's text in what it says about the society for which each was written. And yet, Sterne's message is also retained to suggest new possibilities. The translation thus both altered the original, in support of Shklovsky's claims, and served to challenge the conditions of the tradition into which it was introduced, in confirmation of Kenner's claims about the iconoclastic function of translation.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in Lemon, Lee T. and Marion J. Reis, eds., Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 118.
2. An interview with Hugh Kenner, The Johns Hopkins Magazine, 28, No. 6 (1977), 12.
3. Ugo Foscolo, Prose varie d'arte, ed. Mario Fubini (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1951), p. xxxiv. My translation.
4. Laurence Sterne, A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick, ed. Ian Jack (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 3.
5. Sterne, p. 4.
6. Sterne, p. 13.
7. Sterne, p. 13.
8. Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962).