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A Conversation with Tim Parks: Global Literature and Translation

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Tim Parks was born in England, studied at Cambridge and Harvard and has lived in Verona (Italy) since 1981. He is known across the world under three different guises. In Italy he is recognised as a Professor of Literary Translation and Technical Translation at the prestigious Independent University of Modern Languages (IULM) and a brilliant critic of translated English fiction. Across Europe, his works have led him to critical acclaim, with his novel *Europa* shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 1997. In the US, he is an outspoken critic of translated Italian works for the *New York Review of Books* and is considered an expert on Italy and Italian culture. He has written 17 novels, 13 works of non-fiction and most interestingly for readers of *The AALITRA Review*, he has translated some of Italy's most prestigious authors including Alberto Moravia, Italo Calvino, Antonio Tabucchi, Niccolò Machiavelli, Giacomo Leopardi and Roberto Calasso. His work as a translator, author, professor and critic in two languages make him a perfect subject with which to discuss the topic of 'global literature'. This interview took place on the 3rd of September, 2016 at Monash University following a Master Class held by Tim Parks on the topic *Global Literature and Translation*. He was visiting Melbourne as guest of the Melbourne Writer's Festival.

Kylie Doust (KD): I am very interested in this concept of the globalization of literature. I worked as the Literary Agent for Niccolò Ammaniti [a contemporary, Italian author translated into more than 40 languages] for over ten years and I had the opportunity to see different publishers around the world and how they reacted to his texts. I found that, despite the fact that his books seem simple and by that I meant that he's good at making things easily understandable –

Tim Parks (TP): Simplicity at a stylistic level can be part of complexity. What interests me is that it is not so much about how good or bad the book might be, but that there are other factors at work such that they cause a kind of natural selection. Books of a certain kind, regardless of how good or not good they are, are going to get more exposure. Sometimes it is because the books are easily translatable.

KD: I found that in the translation of *Come Dio comanda* into Scandinavian languages there was a common problem. The first sentence was “Cazzo. Svegliati, cazzo!” [literally: “Fuck. Wake up, fuck!”] and the Scandinavian languages tend not to use swear words. During an event in Ammaniti's honour at the Italian Cultural Institute of Oslo in 2007, the Norwegian translator, Birgit Owe Svihus, spoke at length about her difficulty in maintaining the aggressive tone without having a suitable option in Norwegian. So even though the book is more accessible it felt...

TP: It might have a bit of impact. One of the problems of course is that Italians swear at slightly different moments and use slightly different kinds of swear words. You just can't find a way to give that kind of emphasis, I've seen that go on. And vice versa. If you think of the number of times the English introduce “fucking” as an adverb in the middle of sentence structures.

KD: My feeling is that while globalization moves forwards it also moves sideways as well because the natural selection process can overcome some hurdles but others will always remain.

TP: Actually, the mistake is to imagine that a certain kind of communication is going on. As I see it, what you've got is: new readers appropriating a text and putting it out there and it's different, it's a product. You don't create a great deal more communication in terms of syntax and content. What you begin to create is a public who will read the same things and so they can talk to each other because they move in the same world. The public rhetoric is that you translate greatness and other people absorb it and are enriched by it. It may be that that happens to a certain extent, but that is not why there is this phenomenon. This phenomenon is happening [in order] to create an international community (which is not that big). What about the actual quality of the literature? As you can see by looking at some of the people that win the Nobel Prize or the Booker Prize – you can see it's more a question of having an object that, for its political or ideological content, or its topical interest in relation to the country it's coming from, can be dropped into the international conversation. If you've got some fantastically precious book which talks about whichever particular Kenyan tribe and how it reacts to a certain event it's just not going to sell, no matter how good the book is for Kenyan people. I deeply object to the notion that a book will reach out to everybody. I think the idea that everybody has to like it because it's good is a disaster. Because, who is everybody? Does that include all the guys who never read a book anyway?

KD: And because also, often good books take time to –

TP: – acquire a different audience at different times.

KD: If they're challenging what people know about literature it can take years –

TP: It's all the windy rhetoric blowing around literature that obscures the nature of what's going on. And the nature of what's going on is so interesting. We went to a translation seminar recently where we were discussing these issues and the chairperson said: nobody actually looks at or wants to look at the exact correspondence to quality translation anymore because what matters is getting the books out there into all these countries. It's really not what matters to me but it might be what matters to some in an overarching agenda.

KD: That was another interesting thing that I found – that you mentioned that one Italian publisher, you didn't specify which but I can imagine, found that Italian readers were not affected by the quality of a translation.

TP: We've got the Goldstein [Ann Goldstein, English translator of Elena Ferrante and Primo Levi] example there, which shows that the same thing happens. There are loads of miserable translations out there but it's the content that makes the difference. The Goldstein translation was basically exotic and gives people the feeling that they are reading something else that is stranger than they've ever heard. There are loads of bad translations around. I don't mind reading a bad translation if the book is interesting, but I know it's a bad translation. Publishers are right about the Italians: there are loads of bad translations and the books did very well.

KD: Well, now they appear to choose the translator that costs the least.

TP: But also translators are agreeing to work for awful money.

KD: I used to believe that we needed to introduce a union for the translators in Italy, like in Norway.

TP: One hears this stuff all the time. There are reasons why, in a country like Holland or Germany, you can impose this stuff. It's never going to work in Italy. Why? Because it's generally understood that you get the work you get through a system of relationships and contacts and because then what matters to you is your contact with the people giving you the work on a human basis and you will never go against that by uniting against them. So unionization in Italy would only work there where the job is not considered to be given out in that way. Factory workers, for example. But even inside the university system, they've never really managed to get the unions to have that much bite because they worry about whoever is

protecting them. The thing that really prevents translators from being protected is that the Italians are never going to stop working for nothing.

KD: With the ease of communication today, one would expect that translators could collaborate more directly with authors to find working solutions for their books. Yet in my experience this doesn't happen a lot.

TP: No, it doesn't happen a lot. There are reasons why it doesn't happen a lot and it has to do with the whole psychology. I myself kept away from authors as much as possible. One of the problems, particularly with English, is that the author always knows enough English to *think* they understand. Calasso [Roberto Calasso, Italian author and editorial director of Adelphi Publishing House in Milan] was an unusual case there. Calasso was very good because he knew when I'd made a semantic error but he realized that I knew a lot more than him about British style and about how to put prose into English. In general, if a translator feels they've really understood the original there is no reason why they should be contacting the author. Of course, if the author can read the language like I can read Italian, it can be very useful just for pointing out mistakes. There are authors like Umberto Eco or Gunter Grass who will gather together all their translators. I always felt like it was just holding court.

KD: I saw that happening once at the Frankfurt Book fair. These famous authors would sit there surrounded by their publishers and translators and it did look like they were holding court and I feel that it was their way of propagating their own fame, and like Eco, they managed to make a career out of it.

TP: Why did they propagate it? They propagated it because once they'd been canon they had made it. The whole thing about holding court is that some people want to sit around a court. I would turn it down. If parts of a translation are difficult, we can figure them out. My translators will usually write and ask me a few questions. The Dutch translator was incredibly diligent. She sent me six pages of comments. She's very good at finding mistakes.

KD: Translators love to point out mistakes.

TP: I'm all for that. I wish she'd told me before I'd published it. I'll tell you what I think should be done. For example, when books are "fuori diritti" [out of copyright] – suddenly all these editors rush to publish their version of the book which is now past copyright, but nobody actually seems to work on the translation. If, instead, the publishers just paid for the translators to spend just one day with someone like me, where I explain, "Look, this is what this paragraph is doing...". Then it's up to the translator to figure out the solution. You look at the different translations of *The Great Gatsby* and you just get the feeling that these translators just didn't realize what was at stake.

I think that translations would best be improved by having publishers that are genuinely aware that this is a part we need to pay attention to. We don't need to necessarily pay the translators more but they should pay them to be in contact with someone that can really make a difference.

KD: That's something I find myself in agreement with. I used to find, when I would read books translated from Australian English into Italian, that no-one had even thought of talking to an Australian to work out the difference in the language.

TP: Isn't that unbelievable?

KD: They would just say. "I don't know what that means so, I'll ask an American". And an American wouldn't necessarily have any idea of what it meant either. Your American publishers try and force you to Americanize everything so that the American public –

TP: They don't try, they force you. You can argue your point – I remember I argued my point with the difference between "carriages" and "cars". I just said: "Look, it's such a different syllable length and I hear my sentences when I write them". If we just automatically used a "search" and "change" some of the sentences would sound wrong.

KD: It's not even that hard as a concept. In your whole discussion about this, minority English language speakers such as Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand do not even figure.

TP: For you it's a big issue, I guess, because when you are translating into English you are thinking, "Am I translating for Australians or for all English readers?"

KD: No Australian publisher can really afford to do a translation unless the cost of the translation is shared with other English language publishers, usually British or American.

TP: You know that, when I was translating Calasso, for example, I managed to translate *The Marriage of Cadmus* – that's 120 pages – without ever using the past participle of got. It just has to be international. So, obviously, there are many other issues but I think that's fine that we try. You know it is bad when we're reading American translations and they sound like they're American. Of course the Americans would very rarely make these kinds of concessions because they're dominant. It's not because they're stupid or "cattivi" [mean], it's just because they have the upper hand.

KD: My feeling is that they're scared, they really are scared that anything foreign will scare off the reader.

TP: You're absolutely right. But surely you read a little bit to learn.

KD: And to have a sense of a different country.

TP: For example, I wrote a novel and the title was *Cara Massimina* in English but in America they wouldn't accept that. They picked up something in the text and called it *Juggling the Stars*, which is a terrible title.

KD: Before we finish I wanted to ask you for a heartfelt piece of advice for Australian translators. Do they have to fight for the right to translate and get their translations published?

TP: If they're translating they've been commissioned to translate. The two things are very [interesting and] different. If you've been commissioned to translate, the publisher will have told you what will be required; you're being paid to do something. I was always working with the knowledge that it would be read in the UK and in America. I would work hard and there were a few markers that are particularly important and I would fix them and it was never a problem for me. I don't know enough about Australian English – but obviously the more markers the language has, the more the problem develops. We don't even realize how different things are. I was amazed when the American editors edited *Italian Ways*, because they changed a whole bunch of things, particularly adverbial positions, which felt really weird to me. I thought: "I've been reading American books with these adverbial positions without ever noticing it".

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