

In Transatlantic Translation



photo: Thomas Pritchett

For 20 years, British writer Tim Parks has lived in Italy, writing, teaching and reading translations of English books into Italian. His breakthrough into North America, though, requires a different kind of translation altogether

By Craig Scott

Contacted by an e-mail out of the blue, Tim Parks—novelist, essayist and scholar—has agreed to a blind date in Milan to discuss the art and craft of writing. He is on the eve of a tour of cities in the United States and Canada during which he will promote and read from his most recent book, *Destiny*. Arcade, the American publisher of *Destiny*, seems to have chosen to position the book by presenting Parks as a fiction writer who deserves recognition in North America, an undiscovered treasure from across the seas.

“Meet me at the foot of Centrale’s main staircase,” he replies to my e-mail. Now, just off the commuter train from his home near Verona, he makes his way via the subway system—interviewer in tow—from Milan’s fascist-grand Stazione Centrale to the suburban campus of the university where he is a literature professor. He will soon be at the front of a classroom, lecturing on how painstaking comparison of the original of a novel with its translation opens up horizons of critical insights into the literary style and (de)merits of the original. The students will hear a potted version of a theory compellingly argued in his *Translating Style: The English Modernists and Their Italian Translations* (1997). And he will be able to communicate with them in impeccable Italian. In 1981 at age 25, Parks came to Italy, for love. He settled down with wife Rita to raise their children, and is still here 20 years later. He does not intend to leave. After the formal interview starts in his university office, he makes sure, for good measure, that I know he does not see himself as part of “some tradition of English writers in love with Italy—or in love with something Italy represented to them.”

Tim Parks’ books, especially his life-in-Italy “memoirs” (*Italian Neighbours* and the marvellous *An Italian Education*) and a collection of non-fiction essays, *Adultery & Other Diversions*, convey how very deeply he understands the special group dynamics of Italians, patterns of interaction that simultaneously charm and frustrate almost anyone who tries to make sense of it all. And he does so with a wit born of insight, a wit at once affectionate and acerbic, a wit that seems to mirror the very paradoxes that bedevil yet sustain Italian family and culture—not to mention Italy’s chaotic yet vibrant economy and house-of-cards political system. Even a distinctly tell-all quality in his accounts of family (Rita spared), friends and acquaintances seems immune from causing offence. Well, at least offence beyond pique. This is not simply because his revelations are to some degree protected by our expectation of honesty in non-fiction. It is also because what may come across as an offensive appropriation in England or North America seems instead to have a cultural fit with the society in which he is taking liberties, dovetailing as his non-fiction does with that distinctive openness of Italians (at least Northern Italians) and their willingness to speak of deeply personal matters to, and share family “secrets” with, near-strangers.

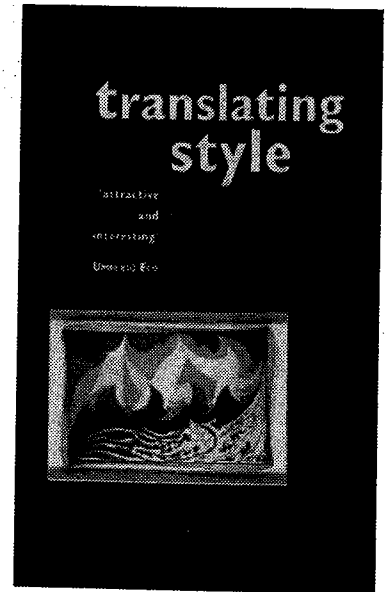
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Apart from *Translating Style*, his introductions to his books on his web page (timparks.co.uk), and his articles that appear mostly in the New York Review of Books, perhaps it is his essay "Rancour" in *Adultery & Other Diversions* which offers the greatest insight into how Parks' views on fiction have been shaped by his own experience of observing a world beyond that in which he grew up. "Art is coercive," we are told. "It rearranges our mental space, imposes a vision. Rational argument is bypassed, forgotten. So that with the best art one suffers"—an interesting choice of verb—"a sense of inevitability—which is exactly the experience of the seduced at the moment they succumb." In *Adultery*, he describes his own seduction. The young Parks glimpsed a world beyond his hyperactively Protestant upbringing in London—described in his heavily autobiographical first (published) novel, *Tongues of Flame*—when he came under the "thrall" of two men. "In a process not unlike the now popular serial monogamy, [Samuel] Beckett seduced me, [Henry] Green seduced me." When Parks eventually left England, first for a brief stint at Harvard and then eventually on to Italy due to Rita, it was as if he had eloped with Beckett and Green. For Parks left behind a cultural and family setting which was having what he describes as a "corrosive effect" on his personal development and on his writing. After half a decade of a classic starving-artist struggle nourished by his partner's stalwart faith in his writing, Parks produced—writing mostly in England—some six novels and, he tells us in "Rancour," "enough rejection slips to paper Buckingham Palace." And one must believe there

Roger, was published, an ambitious effort in which the first-person narrator is a woman who has killed her boyfriend. From a complete shunning by the UK publishing world, Parks stormed back, a literary Napoleon mounting a vengeful return from his exile in Italy. Parks' return to his homeland did not, however, see him fall flat on his face in the process. He received three literary prizes (the Somerset Maugham, Betty Trask, and John Llewellyn Rhys Prizes) for these first two novels.

Six novels later, we can garner some appreciation of Parks' aspiration to attain a fusion of style and mind in his latest works, *Europa* and *Destiny*, by indulging a little bit more in the author's own explanations of his work. "Writing involves a complex movement of the spirit in which one is simultaneously aware of the most sublime and the most base." This in "Rancour." And if all good writing involves such an exercise of the mind, all good writers, Parks would seem to claim, should eventually find themselves on a trajectory to a place-beyond that is simultaneously a place-within. "There is an entirely natural inward-turning in a writer's later development. Not a withdrawal from action, but a penetration of what lies behind all action: the seductive, luminous, coercive, shadowy, genial and rancorous mind." And in a 1999 New York Review essay more or less trashing Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Parks puts his critical cards on the table by endorsing, in the very first sentence, Schopenhauer's view that the art of the novel "lies in setting the inner life into the most violent motion with the smallest possible expenditure of outer life."

Both our conversation and Parks' own writings on writing—including a number of review essays in the pages of the New York Review of Books—suggest how demanding is his vision of "literature." So demanding that it is a wonder his own writing is not paralyzed by his own standards. For Parks, great fiction must be seen in terms of a kind of a shared "mental life" between writer and reader. As already evident from the above discussion, the dominant metaphor seems to be one of seduction of reader by writer. "Reading," he tells me, "is the mind engaging, and the business of narrative seduction has to do with submitting to somebody else leading you through the text." So much so that, for Parks, teaching literature—which he would not

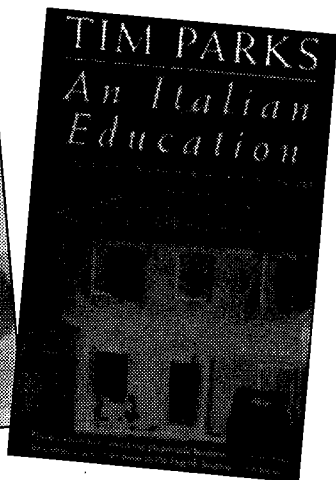


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were good books amongst those still in his closet. For instance, one called *Leo's Fire* (a story of arson in Boston, narrated in the first person by a young black man) was runner-up for the BBC book prize. And yet no publisher would bite.

In his first year in Italy, Parks appears to have been inspired by distance from England, not to mention a seemingly cathartic decision to structure a novel around his childhood. He began to discover his own skills of seduction. "I remember," he tells the world on his website, "this was the first time I had the sensation, no doubt illusory, of not being able to put a foot wrong." But recognition still did not come easily and rejection slips continued to flow. Only when a (now-defunct) Sinclair Prize jury panel that included Fay Weldon pulled him from the slush pile did a publisher—Heinemann—step forward. One reviewer lauded *Tongues of Flame* as the best novel on male puberty since Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. In short order a second novel, *Loving*



give up, he says, even if complete financial security were soon to come his way—"is very much a process of initiation. You can't actually tell students at the beginning that this is the body of information that you're going to get, because what you are actually inviting them to do is participate in a mental process."

The reader is thus the seduced in a mental space called literature. Parks sits scrunched forward in a swivel desk chair he has rolled over from his tiny cubicle at the university—where a stack of 15 or so bound student theses sit waiting for him. "There's a moment," Parks says, blocking out the background noise of other lecturers bustling about and chatting, "when Coleridge said that the really interesting thing about reading is not your passive enjoyment of the text but what starts happening to your mind as it's reading, and all the kinds of things that it generates." Later, when I ask if he is at all concerned about the e-book and what it will do to reading, he simultaneously remains optimistic in the seductive capacity of the traditional book and, with characteristic elitism-flirting forthrightness, rejects any virtues of the e-book: "The whole thing is farcical. What might take hold is a whole different experience, which isn't really even a reading experience. You might as well say that movies will take over from books. They'll take over that part, you know. In fact a lot of this stuff takes away the shitty readers. The field's open for the serious people again."

Parks himself writes with an authority that reflects—or, one rather senses, is carefully crafted to reflect—the fused perspective of an observer who is both acclimatized insider and querulous outsider, although at any one moment more one than the other. "From a writer's point of view, there is an advantage—yes, there is no doubt about that. It allows you to be, perhaps, more quickly suspicious of everything. And more aware of the extent to which the language is speaking rather than somebody's particular point of view.

Going back to the UK now, I have a very strong sense of that—of how much of what is being said was already there before it was said, as it were."

For Parks—pronounced Pax by many Italians—believes that "language is the ultimate point of view" in literature, as in life. One might even say that he lives that point of view. Few other contemporary writers in English are bicultural and bilingual to the extent he is. And perhaps no other contemporary writer has the special "privilege," as he calls it, of understanding the role of language as both frame and canvas for literature in the way only a serious translator of serious literature can. Parks is in high demand as a translator into English of the best Italian writers: four of Tabucchi's novels, three of Moravia's, two Calvino books, two by Calasso. He recognizes the value for his development as a writer of "the whole business of having genuinely stood outside English, above all through the literary translation, of being a messenger—constantly—back and forth, and appreciating—and this is what I am trying to teach my students—how much a culture gets imposed on a text when it is in that language, how D.H. Lawrence in Italian is not D.H. Lawrence any more."

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On the way to the university, I observe Parks' acculturation, his Italianness. Changing subway lines, we exit a feeder tunnel onto the platform just as the doors to our train start sliding shut. While I follow some distance behind, trying inexpertly to navigate against the surge just disgorged from the train we want, Parks does not hesitate. He takes two long but quick strides before completing his run with a

hop on his back foot, the other leg extended and raised at about waist level, like a soccer player ready to trap a ball coming at him on a high bounce. With this maneuver, he deftly inserts his raised foot in the gap between the closing doors, which immediately pop back open. Parks saunters in with me scampering behind. Nobody gives us a second glance, far

less the how-dare-you glares one might receive in Toronto or London or, less consistently, in New York. "Quite the trick," I comment, still not sure what the trick was. Is there an electronic eye in these doors? He shrugs. "He had to open the door," he says and I grasp he means either the driver or a conductor leaning out of a window. "When they see a foot go in, they have no choice."

But I also observe Parks' diffidence in the face of the Italian penchant for conformity. In one of the world's most fashion-conscious cities, he cuts an unpretentious figure in terms of attire. No Armani suit, Valentino tie, Ferragamo

shoes. Nor even a casual Euro-gesture of Helmut Lang slacks or a Pierre Cardin shirt for the author of Booker-Prize-shortlisted *Europa*. Simply an open-necked casual shirt a tad ruffled, a suede jacket that may well have been bought the day before but which is worn like an old friend, downright scruffy sneakers, and a battered satchel slung over a shoulder like a hobo's bundle. Perhaps this is one example of Parks' resistance to full acculturation in his adopted land—a lingering English aversion to investing so much identity in something so superficial as how well you dress. In any case, a veritable provocation to Italians, with their special knack for cutting la bella figura. In Italian terms, he may as well have been near-naked. No Prospero, Duke of

Milan, standing before his students but an alien—albeit completely unmonstrous—Caliban whose dramatic role these students must seek to understand in comparing the Italian translation of *The Tempest* with Shakespeare's original.

But there is more at work than simply the jarring of complacency through contrast, than an embodied signaling, however subliminal, that Lawrence in Italian is not Lawrence any more. Parks' view of fiction is such that he manages to hold in equipoise visions of fact and value that to some would appear contradictory. On the one hand, fiction is embedded in the collective systems of meaning-making that provide the linguistic resources which lie at the very core of the generation and appreciation of great art of all kinds. On the other hand, he believes that the great artist is driven by a universal regulative ideal, a kind of artistic imperative to strive to achieve a state of pure mind through—and in—one's work. "It is not that you become bicultural or anything, but you have what Nietzsche referred to as the 'honour of being without a nation.' Nationality is something you should grow out of, isn't it? Something that a certain development will lead you to grow out of." Then, paraphrasing a commentator on Samuel Beckett: "Of course it is terribly important that Beckett is Irish—and of course it is not important at all since the aim of every writer is to have no more biography than God himself. Well, this is very ironic stuff, but at a certain point," so some would argue, "Beckett actually grows out of his biography." And even if we know this is

not possible for Beckett or anyone else to actually reach that point, "the direction must be that."

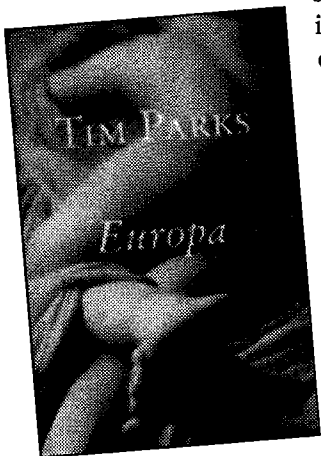
Yet, in the end, one wonders how firmly Parks can hold to his contention that transcendence of biography is the ultimate artistic ideal all the while noting the irony of it being "terribly important that Beckett is Irish." Perhaps a shedding

of nationality (as nationalism or as arbitrary collective identity) is a normative ideal to work towards; but can the same be said of the other markers of embeddedness—of neighbourhoods, of cities, of communities of all kinds, and so on? Consider the significance of a passage from the non-fiction Parks, discovered in an unlikely place—parachuted

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into a book aimed mostly at a popular audience, *An Italian Education*. Parks begins by reflecting on an encounter with the local village priest who is worried for the souls of Parks' heathen children: "It was frankly churlish of me to start talking in this dogmatic fashion about baptism, thus excluding [my] children from the community merely for the sake of some ridiculous pride that attached itself to dubious notions of sincerity and coherence. But it would take me another while yet in Italy to appreciate that. Or perhaps it's writing about it that gets you there." And then: "As a rule of thumb, the more you write, the less sure you feel about your point of view. One hopes that's as it should be." But, is it really a question of the cumulative practice of writing that decentres perspective, or is it, rather, more a question of gradual acceptance that the contending values of situatedness and autonomy are always—and inevitably—vying for our loyalty, as writers no less than as human beings? On this view, it is not transcendence but complexity that allows a writer to one day question tradition and the next day to question license.

Destiny would seem to represent an advanced stage of development in relation to Parks' own aspiration to grow beyond nationality and biography, although it is also true to say that *Destiny* is not so much a departure as it is an intensification of some of Parks' earlier work—certainly *Europa* but also *Goodness*. The novel tells a story that answers a simple question presented on the novel's first page (will a man, English, leave his wife, Italian, because their son has committed suicide in a home for the mentally ill?) by sucking the reader into a mental vortex of a first-person narrator in a way which folds (quintuples, rather) in on itself to produce a kind of spiraling to infinity, to a



secular God's eye view of the world. This is a stylistic achievement that complements the novel's substantive themes—the profound sociality of human existence, the contingency of madness, how relationships create their own destiny in a world without God. *Destiny* captivates in the way it interweaves time and space in human consciousness.

An intricate mosaic of time-location fragments are fused into a special kind of narrative syntax by Parks' deployment of a creative tension between mobility and stability, a tension which always threatens to degenerate into a violent rupture between the will to flee and the resignation to an entrapment by Fate.

So accomplished is the result in *Destiny* that it may well be that, with future hindsight, it will be seen as some pinnacle of achievement not just for Parks but for modern fiction. I don't know, perhaps there is an illusion of universality at work. Perhaps *Destiny*—and *Europa* and *Goodness* before it—only fully work for male readers who share the outlines of a certain biography. Perhaps the captivation I experienced in reading this book will not be shared by many others, however much they may—should—marvel at the virtuosity of the writing and the courage of the experiment. All this may be so, and I would of course not be able to tell. But, all I can say is that it works. And to use the word “works” is not some crass slip. There is no doubt about the complex architectonics in which the intuitive side of writing—the Zen of writing, as Parks calls it—is deliberately and instrumentally embedded. Parks is candid on his website about the techniques and mind-imploding intricacy with which he constructs Christopher Burton's fractured point of view in *Destiny*—a “fake structure,” he calls it. The result, Burton's intense self-awareness wrestles with an endless lack of self-knowledge, and the constant possibility of choice of one's life path is rendered illusory by the structures (of community and family) that cannot be abandoned without turning choice into madness-inducing chaos. A fragile verbal mosaic parallels a fragile mental life.

But will *Destiny* survive its transatlantic passage? I started out by noting the approach Parks' new publisher, Arcade, is using to promote *Destiny*. By choosing not to plaster *Destiny's* cover with any number of laudatory UK reviews of the book itself and instead using blurbs about Parks' writing talents, Arcade seems to want to produce a breakthrough for Tim Parks the author and not just *Destiny* the latest book. While this is a strategy that deserves to work, another scenario may be more likely: Hollywood may do what the book business will not—or cannot—do. The latest news is that perhaps Parks' most populist novel, *Cara Massimina* (published as *Juggling the Stars* in the U.S.), will definitely be made into a film.

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Cara Massimina and its sequel, *Mimi's Ghost*, feature the delightfully deluded and murderous character of Morris Duckworth. The Morris books are comedic farces nestled within the “psychological crime thriller” genre most associated with Patricia Highsmith and her Ripley books. Parks is not unaware of the Highsmith comparison. “Of course,”

Parks tells me, “Morris is a comic version of Ripley, without a shred of humour.” Later, he tells me, “The first Ripley [The Talented Mr Ripley, as in the book that generated the Matt Damon film version of Tom Ripley] was an interesting work, although far too

long for the subject matter. But the others were truly dull. Obviously *Cara Massimina* was an attempt to say, you know, that a serial killer isn't like this at all. He is a fool and a muddler. Ripley is terribly efficient.” Yet, whether or not Parks' Morris books provide superior character studies and literary craft to Highsmiths' Ripley books, it will be comparisons with Ripley that may very likely generate a box office draw for *Cara Massimina/Juggling the Stars*. As will another Ripley legacy: the attraction of the gifted actor who has signed to play Morris, namely British actor Jude Law who played Dickie Greenleaf opposite Damon in *Ripley*.

Parks is already having fun with an idea for a third and final Morris book which he is ready to write now that the green light for the movie seems to be on for good. Then, charmed by these books, some readers will move onto *Europa* and *Destiny*—perhaps via the more accessible *Goodness*—and enough will be seduced that a word-of-mouth momentum will take hold, perhaps to be submerged by literary-star-generating hype of the sort that Parks tells me he abhors so much. Will we see Parks on Oprah some day? Welcome to the world of translation into American.

the version. You say you will go deep, I repeat, but then you just want to impress more and more sagging more and more into analysis, without being the superior on your wife. You could even have your body head on. You must get and look at your body it is in the... is a specific... you must look at it

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