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Elisa Segnini speaks to Frederika Randall:

Tilting at the Leaning Tower, or Translating Irony in Two Writers from Northeast Italy

Frederika Randall translates from Italian. Pittsburgh-born, she holds degrees from Harvard and MIT and has lived and worked in Italy since 1986, as a cultural journalist for *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, the ANSA, the *Nation* and the Italian weekly *Internazionale* among others. Beginning in 2004, her focus shifted largely to translation – not only the transposition of texts into English, but the discovery and promotion of works and authors of value heretofore unfamiliar in the Anglophone mainstream. Many of her translations deal with multilingual texts, primarily Italian dialects within Italian. Among her publications: the Risorgimento epic, Ippolito Nievo's *Confessions of An Italian* (Penguin UK Classics) and novels by Guido Morselli (*The Communist*, *NYRB Classics*), Luigi Meneghello (*Deliver Us*, Ottavio Cappellani (*Sicilian Tragedy*) and Helena Janeczek, a contemporary Polish-Jewish-German native who writes in Italian (*The Swallows of Monte Cassino*). Randall has also published shorter texts in *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Arkansas International* and *Europe Now* by contemporary writers such as Davide Orecchio and Giacomo Sartori, as well as an excerpt in English from the multilingual *Caetano Veloso, Camminando controvento* by Somalian-Italian Igiaba Scego, in *Massachusetts Review*. Other translated works by Randall include several works by historian Sergio Luzzatto: namely, *Partigia (Primo Levi's Resistance)*, *The Body of Il Duce*, and *Padre Pio: Miracles and Politics in a Secular Age*, for which she and the author shared the Cundill Prize for Historical Literature in 2011. She was shortlisted for the Italian Prose in Translation Award (ALTA) in 2017 and received a PEN/Heim Translation Prize in 2009. Current projects are translations of Guido Morselli's *Dissipatio H.G.* and Giacomo Sartori's *Sono Dio*

In this conversation, we address the effect of the internationalization of the book market on the world-wide circulation of Italian fiction; the ethics and responsibility of the translator of Italian classics into American English, and the challenges entailed in translating irony.

Elisa Segnini:

As a translator from Italian into American English, you must have developed a keen sense of which books travel through cultural and linguistic boundaries, and which ones do not, or do so in a limited way. As I have argued in my own article in this issue (Segnini 2018), the books that become best sellers in translation are often those that embody national clichés, and thereby provide Anglophone readers with a taste of the exotic while presenting them with a familiar cultural landscape. How much is known about Italy's complex socio-cultural landscape in the US today? How is the notion of *italianità* understood by American readerships?

Frederika Randall:

Every worthwhile translation project has to do battle with the global wisdom about minor cultures. When it comes to Italian literature, you might call that “wisdom” the Leaning Tower Canon: those stories, themes, and images that make up the present stereotype of what's “Italian”. What's Italian is in itself based on a simplification, for Italy has been and remains a strongly regional country, with habits of mind, customs and languages (dialects) that differ strongly from place to place. I'm

speaking of mainstream culture here, of course; in academia you find a broader knowledge of the variety that makes up Italian literature today, although that knowledge is largely confined to specialist circles. The leaning tower is a mainstream cliché of *italianità* that invites a piling on clichés. Absurd ones, even: in my student days, our local pizzeria was called the Leaning Tower of *Pizza*. The Tower is a hegemonically-defined and highly artificial national stereotype, shaped by Italy's diminishing role as a world power, mass tourism, the Italian diaspora, the books and films already accepted in the canon of the known. In turn, the Italian literature that has appeared in translation is to some extent an arbitrary selection, its geographical and linguistic variety still limited, as is the topical knowledge of what writers address. And in turn that small set of examples limits what new voices can be heard because publishing markets *types*: "like Elena Ferrante", "reminiscent of Moravia," "Calvino on steroids."

Elisa Segnini:

What are the challenges that you encounter as a translator when approaching a text that, instead of cultural stereotypes, foregrounds idiosyncratic features and brings target readers in a direct confrontation with the unknown? Do you ever find yourself battling with publishers and editors?

Frederika Randall:

A translator like myself, who proposes books to non-academic presses, cannot wish away the mainstream stereotype; she must do battle. Anglophone readers, including commissioning editors, are going to find it difficult to follow a book, even a novel, that doesn't correspond to anything they know. So the translator must constantly find ways to attach unfamiliar landscapes, settings, customs, ways of life, thought processes, and philosophies to the framework of the known. The concretely foreign often passes as a new word, although that happens more often in certain spheres than others. To cite an example from Northeast Italy relevant to my work: if some food writer somewhere had never used the term *polenta* in English, I would have to write "maize porridge" or "corn meal mush" every time it came up in novels I translated. But now *polenta* has become, as they say, a *thing*, and doesn't need to be put into a clumsy English equivalent.

What's true of food is not necessarily true for Italian history, however. Once an editor red-pencilled all references to the Risorgimento in a text I was translating. "Nobody's heard of it so let's delete," he said. Happily, I was able to contest that breath-taking swipe of the eraser, but so often the editing of a translation is a pitched battle about the known and the "what needs to be known." It's not just what needs to be known about Italy. Deleting the unknown impoverishes knowledge altogether. Americans (the publishers I appeal to are mostly American) so often consider the present state of their own knowledge to be the gold standard of knowledge tout court.

Elisa Segnini: What you have just said reminds me of Pascale Casanova's critical view of the notion of universality. In *The World Republic of Letters*, she stresses that even decisions of what books make it through cultural and linguistic boundaries are taken from a hegemonic point of view, and she defines universality as what the centre considers "acceptable and accessible to all" (154). As you have emphasized, these decisions are never politically neutral.

Frederika Randall:

Absolutely not, they are never neutral. Perhaps because I've lived in Italy so long, I'm painfully aware of this not only when translating what an Anglophone editor considers arcane material (often something known to every Italian schoolchild), but whenever I set out to promote an Italian author or topic. A fellow translator confessed that when plugging a text of the Risorgimento, she reluctantly compared the drive to Unity to Fascism to explain what it represented: a nationalist

movement that fought and prevailed politically. Now granted the parallel was used “reluctantly”, but it’s a highly misleading comparison. It was, she said, the only way she could think of combating an Anglophone stereotype: that Italian history is somehow unprincipled and unpolitical—except for that 20-year parenthesis involving the Duce.

The Sarajevo born American novelist Aleksandar Hemon used the term “metropolitan provincialism” to describe the belief “that anything and everything that is worthwhile is either already there or on its way” to the centre and that “nothing really interesting is happening elsewhere” (Chakrabarti 2016). That speaks to what I’ve encountered as a translator trying to persuade American editors of the value of a writer they’ve never heard of. Like Anglophone writers born abroad as well as just about any non-Anglophone intellectual, we translators find ourselves well-placed to observe the limitations of metropolitan provincialism, we see how the centre can be backward and the periphery informed and farsighted. The centre’s curiosity may also be very narrowly focused: the Iraqi novelist and translator Sinan Antoon has complained of the West’s “forensic interest” in Arabic literature, the expectation that “novels and poems are going to explain September 11 to you” (Antoon 2016). The centre’s preoccupations, in other words, are instrumental to maintaining position as the centre.

Elisa Segnini:

Anglophone countries are far behind other nations in the number of texts they select for translation. As an American who has been living in Italy for many years, how do you see your role as a translator? What are the ethics and responsibilities of translating Italian literature into American English?

Frederika Randall:

Let’s face it, a text that doesn’t get translated into English has a hard time reaching a global audience. And here the dilemma intensifies, especially for those who translate for US publishers and readers, for *americano* is not just a lingua franca, it is the hegemonic language of our times. The language whose slang and technical jargon are constantly slipping into the vocabulary of other languages, the one whose bold, declarative, simple structure so popular today is increasingly imitated by writers in other languages. Tim Parks, the novelist and translator, has written about the growing Anglicization and simplification of fiction in languages other than English. I believe that when you translate into *americano* you have a special responsibility that translators into other languages don’t have, for when you omit or “domesticate” you risk silencing the meanings and the cadences of a less powerful language and culture that may have no other way to be widely heard but through English.

Elisa Segnini:

Your choice of texts to translate is unusual, and underlines your deep knowledge and familiarity with Italian culture. Instead of translating authors who are already well known in North America, you seem to be deliberately focusing on delivering the “unknown”. Do you think you would have proposed the same texts to translate if you had been living in the United States? What led you to develop an interest in authors like Luigi Meneghello and Ippolito Nievo, who set their texts in the rural northeast of Italy?

Frederika Randall: Yes, it’s true that I’ve worked mostly on little known authors; little known outside Italy, that is. It can be a thankless task: it takes a lot of work to persuade someone to

publish, and a lot of work to interest readers. But having lived in Italy for more than 30 years, I find the clothes of the cultural go-between/mediator are now the only ones that fit. In the present publishing and journalistic climate, Italy and Italian culture are underestimated. Italy is seen as a country of pleasures and beautiful things; there's little interest in the intellectual life. That offends me, I guess. Over the years, I've developed that Italian chip on my shoulder. I'm like the British historian G.M. Trevelyan, who said his studies of Italy were "reeking with bias" (77).

I don't know whether I might have proposed different authors had I stayed in the U.S. But I do think my motivations as a translator as well as my *modus operandi* are somewhat different from my U.S.-based colleagues, or many of them. I adore literature, but I don't conceive of translation as being exclusively, or even mainly, about literature. Most of what you find between two covers is not just made of words, it's made of the ideas and the culture the words transmit. Maybe because I started as a cultural journalist, trying always to convey what is particular to Italy, I'm drawn to translating projects that I hope will enlarge a reader's knowledge and challenge her assumptions.

Quite frankly, what moved me to want to translate the novels of Ippolito Nievo, who wrote in the 19th century, and Luigi Meneghello, of the mid-20th century, was simply reading them. When I got to the last page of each book, I said to myself, this is just wonderful, I want to translate it. And so, I set about finding a publisher. Both *Confessions* and *Deliver Us* are novels that expand our knowledge of their respective historical periods and historical actors, the authors have strong, identifiable voices, a delightful style, and an outlook that is somewhat eccentric by the standards of the Italian stereotype. Either book would probably be a rather difficult translation job for a newcomer to Italy or to the language, because they demand an ear for dialect and nonstandard Italian and a knowledge of the history and culture that not every foreigner has.

The place, too, is unfamiliar. Unlike Naples or Sicily, some of whose customs and folklore are kept alive by the diaspora, the once largely rural northeast of Italy is mostly *terra incognita* in the Anglophone global imagination, with the possible exception of the venerable sea-going republic of Venice itself. For the rest, the northeast's traditional poverty, its backwardness, its domination by conservative Catholicism, are qualities usually associated with southern Italy. As I researched and translated those two writers from the Northeast, I realized I also had an opportunity to shine a light on this corner of Italy. That's part of the reason why I included extensive notes in each translation; I knew the setting was unfamiliar and saw that as an opportunity—where some might have decided it was a reason to move on to something else. Whether mine is the right approach, I can't say. For me, it is part of a determination to challenge the conventional wisdom. It's another kind of "foreignization" if you will.

If an unfamiliar context is tricky to render in English, unexpected tone is just as difficult. Nievo and Meneghello further defy expectations in their mordantly ironic tone. And in both cases, the problem of conveying irony is connected to genre.

Elisa Segnini:

Meneghello's *Libera Nos a Malo* (1963) became a canonical text in Italy in the 1970s, but the first translation (into French) was issued only in 2010, followed by your own translation into English (2011). What do you think were the causes of this delay? Did the text's multilingualism, the interpolation of standard Italian and dialect, play a role in the book's translation history?

Frederika Randall:

Well, Meneghello himself believed it was untranslatable. He worked with Raleigh Trevelyan on *I piccoli maestri* (The Outlaws) but rejected proposals to translate *Libera nos a malo*. Beyond that, there's more intellectual and literary interest in dialect today than there was thirty or forty

years ago. Christophe Mileschi, the French translator, essentially invented a dialect language in French (based on a regional variation) to replace the *alto vicentino* used by the author. His translation had not been published when I did mine, but I had immediately discarded the idea of using Welsh, Irish or Scottish Gaelic, or some American vernacular to represent dialect in the English translation. Anthropologically they are all wrong. For poetic purposes, it might have been possible to invent an English dialect, but I'm not sure how I would go about it.

Elisa Segnini:

Libera Nos a Malo is considered a novel in Italy, and was labelled as such when it was first published by Feltrinelli in 1963. The English translation, however, presents the book as a "memoir" in the English edition. What is the rationale behind this choice?

Frederika Randall

Italians appreciate the book for its fresh, unsentimental treatment of the dialect, but *Deliver Us*, as it is titled in translation, also provides a fascinating record of rural and provincial Italy under the rule of Fascism and the Church. Meneghello (born, as he often recalled, in 1922, "the year of the March on Rome") writes of his boyhood in the provincial town of Malo so bizarrely cited in the "Pater noster". *Libera nos a malo*, the verse went, "Deliver us from evil". In English, in fact, the only pigeonhole we have for such a book is memoir. Yet as the Italian label *romanzo* suggests, and as Meneghello freely divulges, he sometimes moulds the facts to tell a good (and deeply true) story.

The Veneto reader will know that Meneghello is not making things up, in the sense of being dishonest. But when the leap to English is made, a guarantee of the author's reliability is demanded; what's described must correspond to fact. If he's being ironic, can we trust him? (It's hard to see how Meneghello could have embarrassed the publisher by "lying" or "inventing" elements of the tales he tells, but the problem of memoirs that play with the facts has been a bitter issue in several recent US publishing cases.)

I felt it was legitimate that *Deliver Us* be presented as a memoir in English, as long as readers were told this was considered a "novel" in Italian. The important thing, I believed, was to let readers know that genres are defined differently in different places, and that an American Fiction/Non-Fiction dichotomy does not exhaust the possibilities. It's only been a few years since *Deliver Us* came out, but I think the genre boundary between fiction and non-fiction is already loosening in Anglophone publishing.

Elisa Segnini:

Earlier in the interview, you mentioned irony as a challenge in the translation process. Can you give us an example of the type of irony that Meneghello uses in the novel? What was your approach to translating irony?

Frederika Randall:

Irony is one of Meneghello's distinctive ways of framing his memories of the Fascist period. It was his *forma mentis*, you might say. For example: his father and his uncles had been Mussolini enthusiasts after the Great War, and schooled under the Fascist system, Gigi was articulate in the rhetoric of the regime. In 1940, when he was eighteen years old, he won a national prize in the government-sponsored Littoriali della Cultura e dell'Arte in the category of "Fascist Doctrine." It

wasn't an award to boast about after the war but Meneghello, who joined the Resistance in 1943, used to joke years later that he was still the Fascist Doctrine title holder, having never been superseded by any later winner (personal communication, Giulio Lepschy).

Writing of the great March on Rome of Fascist lore, Meneghello drolly skewered the inflated rhetoric of the regime

“But did you really take part in the March on Rome?” I asked, out of the blue, one day at table.

“Only as far as Isola,” said my father. Isola is four kilometers away, to the south. So he was going in the right direction. “At Isola I told them my child was sick—that was you—and so I went back home. Also what's-his-name, he also took advantage of the occasion to turn back. He said he had a stomach ache. But Uncle Ernesto took my place.”

“So Uncle did the March on Rome.”

“Yes,” said Papà, “he went ahead with the others in my place.”

“In other words he really did go to Rome.”

“Ah, Rome—no. They stayed for two days in Vicenza, and then they came home.”

Vicenza is sixteen kilometers away, and it too is in the right direction.

What's unusual here is the gentle mockery. When the book was published in 1963, it was dismissed by some Italian veterans of the Resistance who held that Fascism was never a joking matter. *Deliver Us* did not fit the mold of post-war Italy's neorealist writers and filmmakers (who have by now joined the global canon, and shape international knowledge of the Italian sensibility). Neorealism didn't especially favor irony. Right after the war, the issues were too raw. One reviewer of the translation (Epstein, 2011) was disappointed that Meneghello didn't write more about his Fascist education. Strange, for that is largely the subject of the book. Perhaps the author of a memoir is obliged to flag the political content of his tale and frame it with disapproving parentheses? Perhaps, in the Anglophone world, a memoir of childhood under a dictatorship is expected to adhere to realist transparency or bold indictment, but may never be tongue in cheek?

Elisa Segnini:

Ippolito Nievo is a very different kind of writer, although he shares with Meneghello the irony and the political engagement. How is his irony connected to genre, and what strategies did you adopt to render the ironic tone in your own translation?

Frederika Randall:

An admirer of the radical Mazzini and a soldier as well as a writer, Nievo lavished his wit on the 18th and 19th century's 1 percent: the reactionary minor aristocrats (his own social class) and the aged and corrupt officials of the Republic of Venice. He didn't mind taking a swipe at Napoleon and the Turks either, but he especially made fun of himself. Here is how Nievo begins his novel, with a short *précis* at the head of the chapter (what Nievo's beloved Ariosto would call the *argomento*):

Chapter One: A brief introduction to the motives inspiring these Confessions of mine, to the famed Castle of Fratta where I spent my childhood, the kitchen of that aforementioned castle, as well as the masters, the servants, the guests and the cats who lived there around the year 1780. The first invasion of *dramatis personae*, interrupted here and there by many sage

observations on the Venetian Republic, the military and civilian orders of the day, and the significance given to the word *patria* – native land – as the century came to an end. (Nievo 2014, 3)

It seemed important to quickly establish the inherent irony, using English words that were slightly hyperbolic, that call attention to the voice: “famed” instead of “well-known”; *dramatis personae*, and not “characters”; “sage” observations and not “wise”. As the Nievo scholar Michele Carini has pointed out (Carini 2011, 17), Nievo himself used that same hyperbole in Italian to signal humour in his introductory passage.

Comparing *Confessions* with the preeminent 19th century historical novel *The Betrothed*, one major difference lies in the authorial voice. Alessandro Manzoni’s is confident, third person omniscient; Nievo instead adopts a self-mocking first person, à la Tristram Shandy. Manzoni, a 19th century moralist with a Catholic’s typical feeling and tolerance for the weaknesses of his characters, views Don Abbondio through a humourous, ultimately forgiving lens. He ironizes about the human and psychological side of the man. Nievo’s approach is more modern and he also demonstrates his political vocation: his irony points at the social and political foibles of his characters. He delights in sending up his Venetian backwater, the little fiefdom of Fratta where the actors of the *ancien régime*—the Count, the Countess and their attendants, all frozen in time—play out “the last, farcical act of the great drama of feudalism” (Nievo, 2014, 4). His first English translator Lovett F. Edwards, who published an abridged translation of *Confessions* in 1957, heard Nievo’s extended irony only intermittently, and missed a good part of the novel’s energy.

At the same time Nievo was also a committed man of the Risorgimento, and a member of Garibaldi’s Thousand, who went to Sicily to oust the Bourbons. When Nievo sent his novel to publishers in 1858, it frightened them, it was so blatantly political. After his brief, arch introduction, the novel proceeds thus:

I was born a Venetian on the 18 October 1775, the day of St Luke of the Gospel, and by God’s grace I shall die an Italian, whenever that Providence that so mysteriously governs the world deems it right. (2014, 3)

Narrator Carlo Altoviti’s determination to “die an Italian” signaled that the author was a dangerous rebel fighting the Austrians to claim the Veneto for Italy. When it was published posthumously in 1867, the novel’s radical politics led the Florentine publisher Le Monnier to change the title to *Le confessioni di un Ottuagenario* (*The Confessions of an Octogenarian*) “so that it won’t be thought the usual political pap from some hardened convict.” (Nievo, 2011,13). It was not published under its given title until 1931.

And so, a few decades after *The Betrothed*, we have a big, serious novel about Italian politics and history told by an untypical narrator, both tongue in cheek and deadly serious. A human narrator, whose faults and failures are evident along with his virtues. Who doesn’t just smile at his characters as Manzoni does, but demolishes them, sometimes with lethal vulgarity. Here he introduces the epitome of the old regime, the Count of Fratta, an aging nobleman with an estate on the mainland:

The Count of Fratta was a man past sixty who always looked as if he had just stepped out of his armour, so stiffly and pompously did he sit in his chair. But his elaborate bagwig, his long cinder-coloured, scarlet-trimmed *zimarra*, and the boxwood snuff container forever in his hands detracted somewhat from the warrior pose. True, there was a sliver of a sword stuck between his legs, but the sheath was so rusty you could mistake it for a roasting spit,

and in any case, I couldn't swear there was really a steel blade inside, nor had he himself perhaps ever taken the trouble to find out. (2014, 8)

This is not just a comic portrait, it is ridicule: the old man has “sliver of a sword stuck between his legs.” Coming right at the beginning of the novel, and risqué enough to make a translator doubt for a moment she has read it right, this passage not only defines the Count (a tired and foolish embodiment of the old regime) but sets a slightly racy mocking tone the reader can expect to meet again below. The humour is two-fold: At 60, the Count is not much of a military man; he doesn't even know whether his scabbard contains a sword. But also, at 60, the Count isn't very virile or generative; he's not even sure he has a sword between his legs.

Elisa Segnini: How do you define irony, and how can a translator convey this quality without resorting to domestication?

I'm not sure I can give a definition of irony that would satisfy the various philosophers and thinkers who have written on humour: Bergson, Freud, Pirandello, and so on. From the translator's point of view, conveying irony depends greatly on the hearer's knowledge of discrepancies between what is stated and what is known to be true. To give full rein to irony like Nievo's means the translator must provide, unobtrusively, that information the non-Italian reader needs to see paradox, either with notes or discreet prompts. As to the problem of domesticating humour, I was asked more than once whether I had Anglicized the irony of the *Confessions* - domesticated in short—because the book was wittier and more ironic than these readers expected. In other words, Anglophone wit is wittier than Italian? Not only isn't that true, but Nievo himself even comments on the matter in *Confessions*. “Those who believe the origins of humour are to be found in England have evidently never lived in Venice or passed through Portogruaro. There they would have found a southern sense of humour— the fruit of centuries of ease and leisure, of excellent meals and quick, bright, clever minds” (Nievo, 2014, 227).

A dull, plodding translation, however, will never convey wit, humour and irony, and so the translator must heighten the colouring of a phrase, bend the sentence structure to make it energetic in English, and stretch the lexicon to make the translated language as interesting and expressive as possible. And sometimes she must take liberties with the words of the original to convey voice and tone. This contradicts what seems to be the rule among many leading translators from the Italian today who hold that a conservative translation is *tutto sommato* best, most faithful to the original. A conservative translation—one that closely follows the original sentence structure, and relies on dictionary equivalents and cognates—is certainly transparent, but it will rarely convey tone and only weakly, voice. At times, interpretation is more important than the author's exact words. In the witty prescription of Italian poet and translator Franco Buffoni, the best translation is *leale* (loyal, fair, true) rather than *fedele*, suffocatingly and monogamously faithful.

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Notes on contributor

Elisa Segnini is a lecturer in Italian at the University of Glasgow, UK. Her research interests include the translation, circulation and international reception of Italian fiction and the poetics and politics of multilingual texts.

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