



## Neke Interview 1: Tim Parks

### 1. How did you get into translation?

In my mid-twenties I was teaching English at a school in Verona when my employers began to ask me to do commercial and technical translations. I remember my first was a brochure for high-security safes. For some five or six years then I paid the bills more or less exclusively with such translations. A precious apprenticeship. At the same time I wrote regularly to British publishers asking for literary translations. Oddly the break came at more or less the same time as my first novel was accepted for publication, in 1985, though the two developments were quite independent of each other. William Weaver, after huge success of *The Name of the Rose* asked for a high rate for translating a short-story collection by Moravia and the publishers turned him down. They gave the work to Isabel Quigley, but on beginning the translation she felt it was pornographic and refused to work on it. Having little time left to get the book ready for publication, they phoned me. Could I translate a book in two months? With no idea how long it was I immediately said I could, and I did. They were pleased with the work and we took it from there.

### 2. What is it about translation that interests you the most?

I suppose nothing more than translation reminds us of the fatal connection between language, thought and expression. Moving from one language to another is like going back and forth between quite distinct equally powerful enchantments and I suppose it is this savouring of the languages and their differences that has always fascinated me. Plus of course the pleasure of working over and over a text to get it at once as close as possible to the original and as functional and seductive as possible in one's own language. A lot can be done if you have the patience.



### **3. Where do you see Translation Studies heading in the future?**

We are in a period where politics informs, or confuses, more or less everything we do and talk about. So I fear there will be a lot of dull and worthy reflections about gender and imperialism and so on, a lot of claims made about the political value of translation in opening minds and avoiding wars and the like (people forget that in the 1930s the two countries in Europe translating more than all the others were Italy and Germany). More generally, there seems to be a tendency to use translation to create a publishing event of great success in the target country, regardless of the nature of the original, rather than a desire to get close to a culture that is genuinely different. Very few people are talking about this, because it is not politically convenient and no one wants to hear it. Translation studies are almost always absurdly flattering to translation.

No doubt a great deal of jargon-ridden generalizations will be made in more or less indigestible papers. The best translation studies are almost always those that analyse particular texts and their versions in different languages. On the generalist front, though, I think there is a lot of interesting research to be done on the extent to which large-scale translation in some countries can shift and shape the target language, over time. There is a lot that could be done with corpus linguistics in this regard. My suspicion is that translation is one of the ways that English is extending its tentacles worldwide.

### **4. What role do you think technology plays in Translation Studies?**

Well it can't be ignored. Anyone doing commercial translation would be a fool not to be able to use CAT tools of one kind or another. They simply offer a more organized and much more powerful way of doing many things translators were already doing. I know an excellent literary translator who works into Trados, simply for the awareness it gives of words and expressions already used, and so on.

Machine translation is also fascinating, though more problematic. The computer doesn't know it is translating, doesn't know what language is, or literature, doesn't cry when the content is distressing or laugh when it is funny. Yet the newest programmes often do a fairly good job on whole sentences, albeit with occasional



bizarre glitches of that kind that require post editing. What the machine can never do, though, is read the text and reflect on how it needs to be reshaped to fit into a different language and culture. It doesn't decide to rearrange and refocus a sentence in order to be faithful to some aspect of the original that will not emerge if the syntax is left as it is. The machine knows nothing of cultural differences. That said, what has been achieved is quite extraordinary and I'm sure many translators are using it without admitting it.

**5. How important do you think it is for a scholar to be a practitioner and vice versa?**

Of course a linguist can write interesting things about the transformations that occur in translation without being a practitioner, but only a practitioner is aware of the extraordinary difficulties involved, and above all the attrition one is constantly up against in a long translation, the need to keep one's attention and one's awareness of the target language fresh, the resources one needs. Very likely a practitioner will understand the reasons behind certain transformations in a way the scholar who studies a translation without having practiced the art hardly could. Looked at the other way round, it is certainly useful for a translator to study other people's translations. One learns to respect other approaches, to avoid certain mistakes, and to borrow effective strategies. In general, the more experience one brings to any enterprise the better one will do it. I'm definitely a better translator for having taught and written about translation, and if I sometimes write well about it, it's partly because I have practiced it.



**5+1. What are you currently working on in terms of research or translation project?**

I translate less often these days, the last things I did being Machiavelli's *The Prince* and sections of Leopardi's *Zibaldone*. I have my own books to write and I teach at the university. But there are a couple of novels for which I would dearly like to offer retranslations and I'm presently talking to a publisher about that. Fingers crossed.

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Born in Manchester in 1954, **Tim Parks** grew up in London and studied at Cambridge and Harvard. In 1981 he moved to Italy where he has lived ever since, raising a family of three children. He has written fourteen novels including *Europa* (shortlisted for the Booker prize), *Destiny*, *Cleaver*, *Sex is Forbidden* and, most recently, *In Extremis*, all of them published in half a dozen countries. During the nineties he wrote two, personal non-fiction accounts of life in northern Italy, *Italian Neighbours* and *An Italian Education*, books that won acclaim and popularity for their anthropological wryness. These were complemented in 2002 by *A Season with Verona*, at once a comic microcosm of provincial fandom and a grand overview of Italian life as seen through the business and passion of football. Other non-fiction works include a history of the Medici bank in 15th century Florence, *Medici Money* and a narrative reflection on health, illness and meditation, *Teach Us to Sit Still*. In 2013 Tim published his most recent non-fiction work on Italy, *Italian Ways, on and off the rails from Milan to Palermo*. During his years in Italy, Tim has translated works by Moravia, Calvino, Calasso, Machiavelli and Leopardi; his book, *Translating Style*, which analyses Italian translations of the English modernists, is considered a classic in its field and he currently runs a post-graduate degree in translation at IULM University in Milan. A regular contributor to the





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New York Review of Books and the London Review of Books, his many essays are collected in *Hell and Back* and *The Fighter*. Over the last three years he has been publishing a series of blogs on writing, reading, translation and the like in the *New York Review online*. These have recently been collected in *Where I am Reading From*.

(biography and author's image from: [www.timparks.com](http://www.timparks.com))