

**studi
germanici**



English

2015

The Case of *Werther-Ortis*. The Manipulation of the Narrative Frame in the First Italian Translations*

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The story that links Ugo Foscolo's *Ultime Lettere di Iacopo Ortis* (*Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*) with *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (*The Sorrow of Young Werther*) began over two hundred years ago when Foscolo, writing to Goethe with a copy of his novel, half-confessed to having “perhaps” drawn inspiration from Goethe's work.¹ The controversy sparked by that *perhaps* was to continue throughout the nineteenth century; in a period dominated by a Romantic aesthetic which demanded innovation and originality of all literary works, the question of the extent to which *Ortis* relied on its German model was to become of considerable concern to scholars who were anxious to defend Foscolo's name from accusations of plagiarism. By then Foscolo had been established as one of the leading figures of Italian literature and therefore had to be above suspicion. Over time, perspectives regarding this issue shifted considerably, and not only because of an awareness of the important missing link between the two texts, that is, the translation – subsequently lost – that Antonietta Fagnani Arese carried out for Foscolo based on the second edition of *Werther*.² By the twentieth century

* This paper was originally presented at the conference on *Tradition, Translation, Transformation* (Bologna, May 5th-6th 2014) organized by the Università of Bologna and the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. It is part of a wider study carried out within the *Storia e mappe digitali della letteratura tedesca in Italia* project (FIRB 2013-2018), a collaboration between the Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici, Sapienza Università (Rome) and the Università per Stranieri di Siena.

¹ Cf. Ugo Foscolo, *A Wolfgang Goethe*, in *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere*, vol. XIV: *Epistolario (ottobre 1794-giugno 1804)* edited by Plinio Carli, Le Monnier, Florence 1970, pp. 129-130, where *Ortis* is defined an “operetta, a cui forse diè origine il vostro *Werther*” (a small work, which perhaps has its origins in your *Werther*). Foscolo himself later compared the two novels in the *Notizia bibliografica* that accompanied the Zurich edition of *Ultime Lettere* (1816), in the section entitled *Werther e Ortis*.

² Ugo Foscolo, *Lettere ad Antonietta Fagnani Arese*, in *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere*, cit., pp. 207-414. The translation of *Werther* is mentioned in letters LXX (November



there was also a alertness to the fact that *Ortis* should be assessed as part of that immense body of translations, rewritings and parodies that Goethe's novel seemed to inspire. In fact the *Werther-Krankheit*, the collective hysteria which had spread throughout Europe following the publication of the novel, spawned literary works which were not only serious in intent (such as the French *Werthérie*, translated into Italian by Foscolo's friend Luigi Muzzi), but also comic (such as Lenz's novel *Herz*, which Goethe himself published). There were also musical versions (Antonio Simeone Sografi's *Carlotta e Verter*) and even popular theatrical productions. No less an authority than Benedetto Croce refers to a show in Naples in which a Werther-Punch figure sets up his own gallows next to the bed of his beloved in order to commit suicide while she looks on; he abruptly changes his mind and, having stabbed the woman's husband, promptly jumps into bed with her.³

However, rather than offering yet another detailed analysis of how much *Ortis* owes to *Werther*, the present study intends to make an attempt at re-exploring that "Wertherian atmosphere" that pervaded the whole of Europe; in so doing, it will examine the first Italian translations of the novel, which preceded the publication of *Ortis*.⁴ Indeed, although it is impossible to establish precisely what Foscolo borrowed from Goethe, it is possible to make some sug-

1801), LXXIX and LXXXI (undated) as well as in letter CXXXI sent by Fagnani Arese to Foscolo (Milan, [January] 14th 1803), in which she says that she has enclosed the complete manuscript of the translation.

³ Benedetto Croce, *I teatri di Napoli dal Rinascimento alla fine del secolo decimottavo*, Laterza, Bari 1966, pp. 246-247.

⁴ These were: (a) *Werther, opera di sentimento del dottor Goethe celebre scrittore tedesco tradotta da Gaetano Grassi milanese. Coll'aggiunta di un'apologia in favore dell'opera medesima*, Giuseppe Ambrosioni, Poschiavo 1782 (hereafter referred to as Grassi 1782; an anastatic facsimile was published in 2001 in Locarno by Armando Dadò publishers under the title *I dolori del giovane Werther* with an introduction by Massimo Lardi); (b) *Gli Affanni del giovane Verter: dall'originale tedesco; tradotti in lingua toscana, da Corrado Ludger*, Hookham, London 1788 (Ludger 1788) and (c) *Verter, opera originale tedesca del celebre signor Goethe, trasportata in italiano dal D.M.S.*, Giuseppe Rosa Editore, Venice 1788 and 1796 (references will be made to the second edition, hereafter referred to as Salom 1796). I will only allude briefly to the numerous nineteenth-century translations of the novel; these are analyzed from a linguistic perspective in Franca Ortu, *I dolori del giovane traduttore. Note di grammatica testuale per tradurre dal tedesco*, CUEC, Cagliari 2011.



gestions of what he could *not* have taken, given that he had no access to the German original. One point deserves our particular attention: in the Italian translations which preceded the publication of *Ortis*, the element of ironic detachment in Goethe's novel, the "anti-Wertherian novel" (as Ladislao Mittner called it), seems to be largely absent; although the original had drawn on the features of the sentimental novel, it cannot be attributed to that genre.

Nevertheless, Italy, and Europe in general, perceived *Werther* as a "work of sentiment". The three Italian versions investigated here date from 1782 to 1796 and all subjected the original to various kinds of alterations and cuts according to a translation practice which would be seen as being totally unethical these days, but was considered fairly normal at the time. Although the cuts that were made differed according to the specific target reader contexts, the general intention of each – albeit not necessarily consciously voiced – were similar: to transform *Werther* into a sentimental novel. This was particularly evident in the handling of the framing device of the editor figure; this 'brackets' Werther's letters and, far from being a merely structural expedient, has a precise narrative function. In fact, Goethe makes use of the lines given over to the editor to call into question his hero's motives in a subtle, albeit clear, way.

Before entering into the merits of the translations, it is useful to take a systematic look at the timescale of the various publications. As we know, the first edition of *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, commonly known as the *erste Fassung*, was published by Weygand of Leipzig in 1774⁵ at a time when Goethe was already making a name for himself as a man of letters in Germany. His *Götz von Berlichingen* had been a notable success on the stage, although it was *Werther* that was to make him the author who would represent an entire generation. However, much controversy accompanied the extraordinary popularity of the novel, causing Goethe to publish a revised version in 1787, the so-called *zweite Fassung*. The changes he made ranged from small modifications in grammar (such as the removal of the genitive 's' in *Werthers*, conforming to more modern rules of spelling) to the addi-

⁵ Henceforth *Werther* 1774.



tion of whole episodes, such as the country lad who murders his rival in the final part of the novel. Overall, additions in the narrative tend to create more of a marked distancing on the part of the author from the central character and his scandal-provoking suicide. Goethe also makes the secondary characters more individual and more rounded, particularly Albert, Lotte's fiancé, who is now described by his friends as an honest and intelligent man in contrast to the bourgeois simpleton that Werther takes him for. At the same time, Werther's point of view is slightly attenuated, and his feelings, rather than simply presented as given, are now introduced by more subjective verbs of perception. Thus a sentence such as "Albert gli rivolse il formale complimento di fermarsi a cena" (Albert paid him the formal compliment of inviting him to stay to dinner) becomes "Albert lo invitò a fermarsi, ma egli [...] *credette di sentire* solo un complimento formale" (Albert invited him to remain; but he [...] *believed he was bearing* a mere formal compliment).⁶ Without making point-by-point comparisons between the two versions – something that has been exhaustively carried out by Goethe scholars – suffice it to say that the three Italian translations mentioned earlier, including those published after 1787, are based on the *erste Fassung*, and thus on the version in which the author's critical attitude towards Werther is less apparent.

The first Italian translation was carried out by the Milanese Gaetano Grassi. He worked on his version in 1781, and it was published in Poschiavo in Switzerland the following year. Critics now agree – as some of Grassi's detractors also noted when his translation was published – that it was not based on the original text, but on the French version by J. G. Deyverdun.⁷ This practice of 'dual mediation' in rendering German literary works was common up to the be-

⁶ This example is quoted along with others of a similar nature in Ivo Carletton, *La febbre wertheriana. Il Werther di Goethe tra realtà e parodia*, Vittone Editore, Monza 2001, p. xxn. [Here, as elsewhere, the English version is taken from Wolfgang Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated by David Constantine, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012 (in this instance, p. 18)].

⁷ Jacques George Deyverdun (1734-1789) was born in Lausanne. He moved to Prussia and then to England, working as a tutor and journalist. His translation (*Werther – Traduit de l'Allemand. A Maestricht chez Jean-Edme Dufour et Philippe Roux, Imprimeurs et*



WERTHER

OPERA DI SENTIMENTO
DEL

DOTTOR GOETHE

CELEBRE SCRITTOR TEDESCO

TRADOTTA

DA GAETANO GRASSI
MILANESE.

COLL'AGGIUNTA DI UN' APOLOGIA
IN FAVORE DELL'OPERA MEDESIMA.

Nec verbum verbo.
Horat.

IN POSCHIAVO .

Per Giuseppe Ambrofini .

GLI

AFFANNI

DEL

GIOVANE VERTER:

DALL' ORIGINALE TEDESCO;

TRADOTTE IN

LINGUA TOSCANA,

DA CORRADO LUDGER.

PARTE PRIMA.

LONDRA:

PER T. HOOKHAM, NEW BOND-STREET.

MDCCLXXXVIII.

Fig. 1 and 2: Frontispieces of the novel translated by Gaetano Grassi (Poschiavo 1782) and Corrado Ludger (London 1788)

Libraires associés) dates from 1776 (cf. the entry on Deyverdun, edited by A. Juillard, in the *Dictionnaire des Journalistes (1600-1789)*, Universitas et Voltaire Foundation, Paris-Oxford 2011). That Grassi's translation was based on this French version was already claimed by Michiel Salom who, when translating the novel from German, condemned the work of his predecessor as an "infelice versione del *Verter*, lavorata sulla traduzione Francese, e piena delle scorrezioni di quella, oltre le proprie" (an unfortunate version of *Verter*, taken from the French, and full of the same errors as well as its own) (Salom 1796, p. 15). Corrado Ludger was also critical of the French version of *Werther*. Stressing the fact that he had translated directly from the original, he hoped that he had succeeded in rendering "quei Trattati Pittoreschi, Naturali e Vivi che nella traduzione francese – probabilmente per incertezza d'espressione – furon omessi" (those picturesque, natural and living features that in the French translation – probably due to ignorance of the expressions – were omitted) (Ludger 1788, p. IV).



ginning of the twentieth century; any cuts and alterations in Grassi can therefore be attributed to the French translator. What interests us here, however, is not so much identifying who is responsible for individual translation choices, but the fact that the novel, putting to one side the tortuous stages of its composition, was presented to the reading public as a sentimental epistolary novel.

Unlike the first, the second Italian translation was published in England by Corrado Ludger in 1788.⁸ Its publisher was the London-based Thomas Hookham, who in the same period was also responsible for the publication of works by the likes of Ann Radcliffe and Clara Reeve; his work was thus a crucial factor in the popularity of the Gothic novel in English-speaking countries. Ludger's translation, however, was not readily available in Italy, and for this reason it can be considered of minor importance in terms of influence, although not as far as textual interpretation is concerned. The third and final translation is the one which has attracted most interest on the part of scholars of Italian literature, given that we can be reasonable certain that it is the version that was read by Ugo Foscolo. As with the version by Grassi, it was carried out in 1781, but published much later for reasons relating to censorship and the personal vicissitudes of the translator, Doctor Michiel Salom of Padua. It was finally published in Venice in 1788, and was reprinted in almost identical form in 1796.⁹

⁸ The only information about Conrad Ludger is found in *Grundriss zur Geschichte der Deutschen Dichtung aus den Quellen* by Karl Goedeke (Ehlermann, Dresden 1913, vol. X, p. 7). Born on October 6th 1748 in Burtscheid bei Aachen, Ludger was a tradesman in his home town between 1769 and 1775 before moving to Bruges and then to England. He had been living in London for various years when his translation of *Werther* was published. He subsequently lived in Paris (1788/92), Bremen (1799), Leipzig (1818) and Dresden (1819).

⁹ Giorgio Manacorda retraces the life of Michiel Salom in *Materialismo e masochismo. Il "Werther", Foscolo e Leopardi*, La Nuova Italia, Florence 1973 (see in particular, chapter 1 *Quale "Werther"*). A revised version of the same essay was published by Artemide in 2001, but with few changes as far as the historical-philological part of the paper is concerned). From Manacorda's investigations, it emerges that Salom was the victim of censorship due to his Jewish background and his Jacobin sympathies. He therefore had to

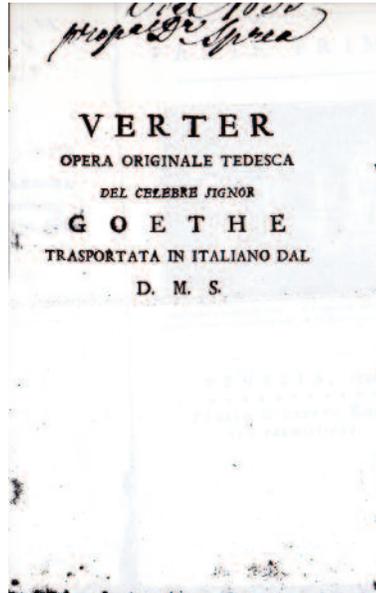


Fig. 3: Frontispiece of the novel translated by Michiel Salom (Venice 1796)

Although they all vary in different ways from the original text, none of the three translations is totally free from cuts and instances of censorship. On the one hand, as we have said, this is because the translator was free to rework texts which would then circulate in ways which were difficult to control (one need only recall the fact that author's royalties did not exist), while on the other, publishers, and editors in general, tried to avoid publishing works that might attract to censorship or clash too violently with readers' sensibilities. In this way, the anti-clerical content was modified in the Deyverdun-Grassi

postpone the publication of his translation for several years, eventually having it published under the pseudonym 'D.M.S.' In Jacobin circles in Padua, Salom would have also met Ugo Foscolo, who, in all probability, read his version of *Werther* in the 1796 edition (cf. *ibid.*, *Quale "Werther" lesse Foscolo*, pp. 27-36). Giuseppe Toffanin later provided more information regarding Salom, discovering that he converted to Christianity in 1801 and continued his career as a translator under the name of Michelangelo Arcontini (*Goethe, Padova e la prima traduzione del "Werther"*, in "Atti e memorie dell'accademia patavina di scienze, lettere ed arti", vol. XCVIII, parte III (1985-1986), pp. 181-195).



translation, while the letters containing a positive view of suicide disappeared in the Salom text (as did the letter of August 22nd criticizing “bourgeois morality”).¹⁰ What these versions have in common is that they did not ‘translate’ the curbs and checks that Goethe placed on the sentimental novel and on the fictional conventions of his time. They thus reimposed on *Werther* the very strictures that the original had sought to call into question. To understand how this came about in practice, the following analysis will focus on textual features which, by definition, have the role of manipulating readers’ attention, encouraging them to realize, even before they begin reading the main text, the type of book that they are about to embark upon. I am referring here to the paratextual features of the title, the editor’s introduction and, above all, the notes.

We shall start with the title, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, by first jumping forward to the 1930s when Giulio Einaudi asked Alberto Spaini to edit a new version of *I dolori del giovane Werther*, for his publishing house. Einaudi proposed, however, a change of title. In this we can surmise that he was displaying more of a publisher’s acumen than scholarly awareness, hoping to distinguish this new version from the many others available on the market, and in particular, from the Mondadori edition which had been published a few years earlier with Giuseppe Antonio Borgese’s acclaimed translation. Spaini replied:

We agreed that our Werther should have a poetic-popular rather than a cultural-literary feel to it, didn’t we? As to the title, I think that ‘I dolori del giovane Werther’ (The sufferings of young Werther) is the best thing about the whole book; it has such a Rococo feel to it, with a foretaste of the neo-classical, sentimental-ironic. No, Einaudi, let’s not change the title.¹¹

¹⁰ For a more in-depth discussion of passages missing in the various translations, cf. Manacorda, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-27.

¹¹ Letter of May 19th 1938 from Alberto Spaini to Giulio Einaudi, quoted in Francesca Billiani, *Culture nazionali e narrazioni straniere: Italia, 1903-1943*, Le Lettere, Florence 2007, p. 273 [Here, and elsewhere unless otherwise stated, the English version is by the present translator].



Alberto Spainì was born in Trieste and was one of the most sophisticated translators from German into Italian in the twentieth century. He did not miss that nuance of the “sentimental-ironic” suggested in the German title of the novel, a nuance that conveys the sense of a secondary voice which seems to provide an external commentary to events. Doing what Einaudi suggested would have weakened the effect of this particular device, but this is precisely what happened in the late eighteenth-century translations: the title itself was the first thing to be altered.

Gaetano Grassi’s translation is the most evident in this respect: significantly, *Werther* is reduced to a *work of sentiment*, written by *Doctor Goethe, the famous German writer* who, introduced in this manner, might hardly be suspected of adding even a trace of irony to his novel. The title chosen by Corrado Ludger is in a similar vein: *Die Leiden* becomes *Gli affanni* (the anxieties / labours) which is perhaps a fairly small shift in meaning, but which again contributes to overemphasizing the pathos. The third translation, by Salom, appears to be the most straightforward: in fact the title is simply rendered as *Verter*. This, however, is explained as follows on the first page of the novel:

In the Italian language there is a real equivalent to the German title of this brief work. *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* should be translated: *La passione del giovinetto Verter* (the passion of the young man Verter) but in order for its true spirit to be felt, it is preferable to call it: *Il passio di Verter* (the Passion of Verter). The true meaning of this might have been a little obscure in Italian, and if by chance it had not been, the translator himself might have refrained using such an extremely loaded expression, which is not necessarily seen as such in Protestant countries. [*Verter* 1796, p. 17]

Not only does any sense of the “sentimental-ironic” which Spainì mentions completely disappear, but Salom even provides *Werther* with an almost religious aura, stressing the pathos to the point of pure tragedy. It has been observed that when it was published, the German title of the novel was meant to sound “like the blasphem-



mous secularization of a text written for religious edification”;¹² Salom is thus aware of the allusion to religious lexis, but consciously avoids rendering it in translation, timorous of that “extremely loaded expression” which Goethe, on the contrary, intended. The three titles are thus different in different ways, but they clearly tend towards the same effect, that is, accentuating the sentimental element at the cost of a more ironic, confrontational reading.

We now come to the second paratextual feature, that is, the frame provided by the voice of the editor who has collected and transcribed Werther’s letters. *Werther* is, in fact, a frame narrative in epistolary form: two elements which, when taken individually, are not particularly innovative: we need only think of the epistolary novels of Richardson or Rousseau, or of Gellert in Germany, and of the use of the framing device in ancient story writing, although Goethe does present them ‘in dialogue’, having one comment on the other. It is in creating this frame that the young Goethe makes a first, crucial break with tradition. According to the conventions of the eighteenth-century novel, readers had to be guided in some way in how they interpreted the story, all the more so if the tale raised moral issues, like the suicide of a young man. Rather than fulfil this function, however, the short page which introduces Werther’s letters explicitly calls on the reader to suspend judgement as regards the unfortunate whose story is about to be told. In other words, readers are left to read the novel and face any problems that this might incur ‘on their own’. Going beyond the title page, readers in 1774 would have thus found this meagre declaration; there was no further information provided and a fundamental question left hanging of just *who* was urging them not to pass judgement: Goethe? Some bogus author? The editor? And should this editor be considered a character in the novel or someone who is not part of the story?

While it is normal for today’s reader to handle the shifts in point of view that are typical of the contemporary novel, it was a strategy that must have slightly perplexed the reader of two centuries ago. Indeed the translators intervened to mend any such divide which

¹² Giuliano Baioni, *Il giovane Goethe*, Einaudi, Turin 1996, p. 228.



opened up between readers and the work. Grassi, for example, entitles this page *L'autore a chi legge* (The author to the reader), thus placing the former *outside* the story, a choice that seems to have been made purely to put the reader on some kind of familiar footing. Grassi does not hesitate to provide direct guidance, and between the title and the frame he inserts a translator's introduction (also foregrounded on the frontispiece). A good nine pages long, this is an *apologia in favore dell'opera medesima* (a defence of the present work) and it aims to counter any possible accusations of immorality by explaining the correct way that Werther's suicide should be interpreted.

Ludger's decision is more radical: in his version, Goethe's introductory note totally disappears, providing further proof of the fact that a part of the novel that contained no indications about how it should be read must have seemed insignificant to readers and translators of that time. As regards Salom, if on the one hand there is a closer adherence to the original text, on the other there is just as strong a tendency for him to come between the author and the reader as Grassi does. In fact, his version also has an introduction of approximately ten pages providing the historical context of the novel and a two-letter exchange with the author. In other words, there is no longer any trace of that provocative 'abandonment of the reader' that Goethe had intended in the original text.

A third significant feature is the presence of editor's notes, employing the same 'framing voice' that we hear in the introduction. These comment on Werther's letters, and in particular the famous letter of June 16th which describes a key scene in the novel. This regards not only the plot – Werther meets Lotte for the first time, dances with her and falls in love – but also that which we might call the metanarrative. In fact, during the carriage ride on their way to the ball, Werther and Lotte have a conversation about contemporary novels and Werther is astonished at the wisdom of Lotte's critical judgement. Her likes and dislikes perfectly coincide with his own tastes. Above all, Lotte loves sentimental novels and particularly the novel that at that time was considered the masterpiece of the genre: Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. As a reader of Goldsmith and Klopstock (who is later read aloud in the moonlight), Goethe's



Lotte represents the innocence of the rural idyll; a charm, however, that is destined to be swept away by the egoistic fury of the new, modern ego: Werther himself.¹³ Lotte's literary tastes are the means by which the reader can appreciate her allegiance to a solid set of values. Nevertheless, the happy ending which puts right all the upset created by the seducer in *The Vicar of Wakefield* is lacking in *Werther*. Here Goethe *polemicalizes* with the sentimental novel, adopting its form in parody. Supporting such a reading is the fact that the conversation between the two (future) lovers is commented upon externally by the same discreet editor who urged us in the introduction not to judge Werther, and who now, unprompted, reappears in the text. Justifying the omission of the names of authors that Lotte does not like, he comments:

*) Man sieht sich genöthigt, diese Stelle des Briefs zu unterdrücken, um niemand Gelegenheit zu einiger Beschwerde zu geben. Ob gleich im Grunde jedem Autor wenig an dem Urtheile eines einzelnen Mädgens, und eines jungen unsteten Menschen gelegen seyn kann. [*Werther* 1774, p. 33]¹⁴

“Ein einzelnes Mädgen”, a mere “girl” like any other, and “ein junger unsteter Mensch”, an inconstant “unsteady” young man, is how Carlotta and Werther are *seen from the outside*. The editor's comments given an unflattering picture of the novel's hero and he explicitly distances himself from the way in which Werther behaves. If up to this point the reader has been encouraged to identify with this rakish young man and his powerful feelings, then the editor's note comes as something of a sharp rebuke. What is more, this

¹³ Cf. Baioni's commentary on the Sesenheim “idyll” in *Il giovane Goethe*, cit., in particular pp. 113-117 and p. 198: “One has the impression that Goethe [...] is aware of the fact that the “German idyll”, the culture of the sentimentally sublime and the optimism of European Enlightenment, had virtually ended the moment that he conceived *The Sorrows of Young Werther*”.

¹⁴ *) “We have thought it necessary to suppress this part of the letter so as to give no one any cause for complaint. Though really no author could care very much for the opinions of a girl and an unsteady young man.” [*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, cit., p. 18].



voice ‘from the outside’ is *not* that of Weygand, the Leipzig editor, but the editor-character, as much Goethe’s creation as Lotte and Werther are.

In 1774 this strategy was anything but expected, a fact that is confirmed by how the footnote was rendered in the Italian translations of the novel. In the Deyverdun-Grassi version, as well as in Ludger’s translation, it simply disappears. In contrast, Michiel Salom provides a blatant paraphrase of what Goethe wrote:

(a) Qui l’autore si scusa di aver soppresso i nomi degli accennati libri, pel rispetto dovuto agli autori. (Here the author apologizes for keeping the names of the books mentioned unknown out of respect for the authors) [*Werter* 1796, p. 40]

Therefore, in all three versions the reference to the “unsteady young man” disappears, and with it any distance that the author (thanks to his use of a supposed editor) aims at creating between himself and Werther. Salom’s paraphrase illustrates better than any other commentary the idea that was behind this and earlier modifications: what happens in all three translations is that the framing device of the editor – which opens, closes and occasionally comments on the action – is not considered an integral part of the work, but the external voice of the author or of a ‘real’ editor. The translator is therefore quite within his rights to substitute it when rendering the text in another language. Salom seems to view it as the voice of someone who has actually edited the book for publication: not by chance, when Salom refers to the work as a whole, he (like Foscolo and Leopardi who both read *Werther* in his version) does not usually call it a *novel*, but *letters*,¹⁵ as if the narrative frame simply does not exist. The latter, however, not only exists, but also has the function of creating a dialogue with the text; the two parts of the novel converse with each other, the frame providing a commentary on the let-

¹⁵ Cf. the *Introduzione del traduttore*, in which Goethe is called “l’autore di *queste Lettere*” (the author of these Letters), for which “*queste Lettere* [...] hanno acquistata la stima universale” (*these Letters* [...] have won universal praise) [*Werter* 1796, p. 5, my emphasis].



ters. Although this is done extremely discreetly – and avoids, except perhaps in the aforementioned lines, judging Werther – its basic function is to create a *distance* from him. In so doing, Goethe obtains through purely narrative means what was, at that time, generally expressed through direct authorial intervention. If the narrative frame of the novel is lost, then that ‘safe distance’ which prevented, or at least added ambivalence, to any identification between the character and the reader, is also lost. In this respect, for fear of producing a book that actually was morally suspect, the translators felt compelled to render it through more traditional means such as prefaces and ‘defences’.

Analysis of how Goethe’s novel was rendered in translation according to fictional models that were already familiar to readers can also extend to features that go beyond those comprising the frame narrative. Goethe challenges the sentimental novel form not just at the structural, but also at the stylistic and linguistic level. An example of this approach can be seen in the opening lines of Werther’s very first letter, dated May 4th 1771. Our young hero writes:

Wie froh bin ich, daß ich weg bin! Bester Freund, was ist das Herz des Menschen! Dich zu verlassen, den ich so liebe, von dem ich unzertrennlich war, und froh zu seyn! [*Werther* 1774, p.3]¹⁶

Baioni notes how these apparently insignificant and unremarkable lines, are in fact “Goethe’s first challenge to the reader of the sentimental novel”.¹⁷ Goethe launches a full-scale attack on the late eighteenth-century culture of *Empfindsamkeit* which decreed that enjoyment of nature and worldly goods was reliant on being at the centre of a group of friends. According to this ideal, a friend leaving a friend (from whom he is supposedly “inseparable”, this also a first inkling of Werther’s “unsteadiness”) cannot be truly happy because happiness is not meant for the individual in isolation. Goethe, however, has no intention of being yet another German imitator of Gold-

¹⁶ [How glad I am to be away! My dear friend, what a thing the human heart is! I leave you, whom I love so much, from whom I was inseparable, and I am glad! *op. cit.*, p. 5]

¹⁷ Giuliano Baioni, *op. cit.*, p. 232.



smith or Rousseau, and immediately is warning us that established models are about to be completely overturned. In his novel there will be no triangular relationships involving brotherly love and beautiful souls, nothing like the average educated reader might have read in works like Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*. Werther refutes any sublimation of physical love in friendship; he wants Lotte *for himself*, and he will commit suicide if he cannot have her. In spite of their simplicity therefore, these lines would have already sounded like an alarm bell for the reader of the time, and once again this seems to find confirmation in the various choices the translators make in order to diminish the impact of the original. Salom's version, with its slight mistranslation, again provides the most eloquent example of this. It reads:

Oh com'io son contento d'essere partito! ma vedi un poco le contraddizioni del cuore umano; lasciar te ch'io amo cotanto, da cui era inseparabile, e poi essere contento. (Oh how happy I am to have left! but see a little the contradictions of the human heart; leaving you, who I love so much, from whom I was inseparable, and, what is more, being happy) [*Werther* 1796, p. 17]

The shift is minimal, yet radical: in the line “ma vedi un poco le *contraddizioni* del cuore umano” (but see a little the *contradictions* of the human heart), Salom deliberately adds “*contraddizioni*” (contradictions) whereas there is nothing comparable in the original text [“Was ist das Herz des Menschen”]. Goethe says nothing at all about there being anything contradictory about being happy when leaving one's dearest friends; indeed, his text challenges this eighteenth-century commonplace. In labelling such feelings “contradictions”, Salom juggles with the meaning, attributing these strange thoughts to Werther alone. The ideal of kindred spirits is thus safeguarded and the ‘insult to the reader’ is neutralized from the very start.¹⁸

¹⁸ I note in passing that in the second part of *Ortis* there is a direct echo of the beginning of *Werther* in the exclamation “I am really happy to have left!” uttered by the narrator who has just taken his leave, perhaps forever, of his friend Lorenzo (letter of February 11th), and almost word for word in the letter of March 14th: “What is man after all?”.



Further textual analysis would undoubtedly reveal other examples of manipulation of this kind; they are not misunderstandings as such, nor arbitrary cuts, but the result of, and on closer examination completely consistent with, the sentimental reading that the translators give the novel. When focussing on a group of translations rather than the behaviour of individual translators, a picture emerges which is fully in line with the conventions of this literary genre. Although not written rules, they were felt to be binding by translators (and often even by writers) of that period.¹⁹ The way that Grassi, Ludger and Salom interpreted the novel was the rule rather than the exception: perhaps the methods that Goethe used in the first *Werther* to distance himself from the protagonist were *excessively* sophisticated, and perhaps too subtle and difficult for the reader of that time to decode. Even someone like Lessing, hardly the average reader, would have preferred it if Goethe had added “another short chapter at the end” with “a brief, dispassionate final speech” which explained more clearly how young men might protect themselves from such a tragic fate.²⁰

¹⁹ As a target-system based analysis, this study shares the basic premises of the so-called Manipulation School which developed in the 1970s through the convergence of the theories of the Dutch-based scholars James Holmes, José Lambert and Raymond Van Den Groep, and of Polysystem Theory which was developed in Tel-Aviv by Itamar Even-Zohar. On this basis, “from the point of view of the target literature, all translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose.” (Theo Hermans, *The Manipulation of Literature. Studies in Literary Translation*, Croom Helm, London-Sydney 1985, p. 11; and Theo Hermans, *Translation in Systems. Descriptive and System-oriented Approaches Explained*, St. Jerome, Manchester 1999). According to Lambert (with Hendrik van Gorp in *On Describing Translation*, in Hermans, *The Manipulation of Literature*, cit., pp. 42-53), the unwritten conventions of the target system of reception condition translation practice and can be observed particularly well in paratextual features. Lambert himself (in *Functional Approaches to Culture and Translation: selected Papers*, edited by D. Delabastita, L. D’hulst and R. Meylaerts, Benjamins, Amsterdam 2006) later proposed a less marked opposition between target and source systems, given that translated texts often go through a series of specific stages irreducible to a two-way process: these observations are particularly germane in the case of *Werther/Ortis*, which, as we noted earlier, has been subject to various forms of rewriting (musical and theatrical) apart from the strictly textual.

²⁰ “Meinen Sie nicht, daß es noch eine kleine kalte Schlußrede haben müßte? [...] Also, lieber Göthe, noch ein Kapitelchen zum Schlusse; und je cynischer je besser!”:



Indeed, the great success of the novel ended up being due to those very mechanisms of reader identification, also strengthened by the fact that the plot, as is known, was based on a real-life tragic event. Goethe often complained about this in letters to his correspondents, and his indignation was fuelled by translators who saw their work as an *Umschreibung*, or a ‘rewriting’, thus contributing to changing the meaning of his work to an even greater degree.²¹ Time after time, the space that the author wanted to create between the text and the reader was filled by various people in the publishing trade – first and foremost translators – with their prefaces, comments and unwanted “apologies in defence of the novel”. Putting all these things together, to which we can add the disagreements with the Kestners – the models for Lotte and Albert – Goethe became convinced that he needed to revise the novel. However, he did not do so by following Lessing’s advice, or as the Italian translators had done on their own initiative; he did not add opening and closing declarations, but exploited the narrative resources of the novel itself. Initially, the addition of an explicit declaration might have seemed to him the most effective means for distancing himself from Werther (as with the motto *Sei ein Mann, und folge mir nicht*

letter of 26th October 1774 to Eschenburg in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, edited by Wilfried Barner et. al., vol. XI/2: *Briefe von und an Lessing (1770-1776)*, edited by Helmut Kiesel, Deutscher Klassiker, Frankfurt a. M. 1988, p. 667.

²¹ See the letter of December 13th 1781 to Charlotte von Stein in which Goethe complains about the Italian translation: “Man hat mir eine Italiänische Übersetzung des *Werthers* zugeschickt. Was hat das Irrlicht für ein Aufsehn gemacht! Auch dieser Mann hat ihn wohl verstanden, seine Übersetzung ist fast immer Umschreibung [...] Auch meinen vielgeliebten Namen hat er in *Annetta* verwandelt.” (Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Briefe an Charlotte von Stein*, edited by Jonas Fränkel, vol. I (1776-1783), Akademie-Verlag, Berlin 1960). Taking their lead from Johann Wilhelm Appell, nineteenth-century commentators long thought that the letter referred to Grassi’s translation. However, according to Spaini, the editor of the Italian edition of the letters (*Lettere alla signora von Stein*, Parenti, Florence 1959, vol. I, p. 434) and Manacorda (*op. cit.*, p. 4), Goethe is referring here to Salom’s translation. Goethe’s undated response can be read at the beginning of *Verter* 1797: this dates from February 1782, as can be deduced from the Weimar archive of Goethe as well as from the *Nota bene* added by Salom, according to which “around this period” (that is, of the letter) the Poschiavo translation appeared.



nach, already added in the 1775 reprint). However, as Goethe progressed with his revision of the novel he realized that by parodying sentimental speech, adding different points of view within the story (the friends of Albert who praise his qualities), and making Werther's perceptions more subjective and less absolute (things "seem" and "appear" to *him* rather than "are"), he could maintain a distance just as effectively from Werther's inner world and his indefensible act.

These features could not have had any influence on the Italian translations as the latter were based on the 1774 version, but this impacted in no way on the success of the novel. However, a discussion of their various merits must have arisen immediately, as in *Italian Journey* Goethe himself notes, "Everyone is pestering me here with translations of *Werther*, showing me them and asking me which is the best [...]. It is a misfortune that would follow me even to India." The note is dated February 2nd 1788 – the year, not by chance, that both Ludger's and the first of Salom's versions were published. Beyond the question of the correspondence between individual translation choices and the various judgements that might be given of them, it was probably already noticeable that something had shifted the genre-related 'atmosphere' of the novel. Indeed, readers' 'horizons of expectation'²² which Goethe had deliberately confounded by doing away with the rhetorical conventions of the age, had, in fact, been systematically replaced in translation. This is something that should not be ignored when discussing the influence of *Werther* in Italy. Foscolo and Leopardi – who had access to the translations of Grassi, Ludger and Salom as well as Deyverdun's French version – were actually reading an *epistolary* or *sentimental* novel, completely purged of the controversial features that the author, albeit somewhat covertly, had incorporated in the origin text. When mentioning *Werther*, both Italian writers, like Salom, almost always refer to "letters" – and "letters" are

²² Cf. the concept of *expectations*, clearly indebted to Jauss, in Theo Hermans, *The Production and Reproduction of Translation: System Theory and Historical Context*, in *Translations: (Re)shaping of Literature and Culture*, edited by Saliha Paker, Bogazici University Press, Istanbul 2002, pp. 175-194.



precisely what Foscolo has Jacopo Ortis write. For them Goethe's novel was an example, albeit an excellent one, of that fashionable literary genre of the time (that is, the epistolary novel), rather than a novel that weakened its form and questioned its own ethical basis.²³

Being a distinct creative work, Ugo Foscolo's 'rewriting' is in every sense a unique interpretation, and thus merits a separate discussion which cannot be fully covered here. Perhaps by virtue of that mysterious sympathy between writer and translator that he called for in his analysis of Pindemonte's translation of the *Odyssey* – in which he stated that the best translators are those who understand “the poetry” of the original even before its “language” – or, more prosaically, because he had discovered that in the meantime Goethe had published the *zweite Fassung*, Foscolo, despite not knowing German, intuitively seemed to grasp the limitations of the translations available. For this reason, he called on the foreign language skills of Fagnani Arese in his attempt to produce his ‘own’ *Werther*. In the letter he writes to Goethe he is careful to emphasize that this new version, reworked in the “style of Ortis”, is based on “the latest edition” of *Werther*.²⁴ It should be stressed, however, that there is no framing device in *Ortis* intended to distance the central character, unless we see the addition of Lorenzo as a sort of ‘compensation strategy’. Lorenzo is his correspondent (he also appears, but without saying anything, in *Werther*), who takes on the role of dialoguing with Ortis, the ‘I’ of the novel. Indeed, Foscolo intentionally removes the figure of the external editor, preferring him to be an actual character, and thus a part of the story; he is his hero's friend who organizes and publishes his letters. Having done this, Foscolo even claims that compared to *Werther* “the method has been improved in the Italian novel

²³ The structure of the epistolary genre was also extremely flexible at that time and its transformation from the context of “real” writing to that of fictional writing was not yet complete. This is discussed from the theoretical perspective of Even-Zohar by Shelley Yahalom, *Du non-littéraire au littéraire. Sur l'élaboration d'un modèle romanesque au XVIII e siècle*, in “Poétique”, vol. 11 (1980), pp. 406-421.

²⁴ Ugo Foscolo, *A Wolfango Goethe*, cit., pp. 131-132.



[*Ortis*] to the extent that the reader, not aware of the author's pen, does not even suspect that anyone but *Ortis*'s friend, could have been the editor of the book".²⁵ Any analogy between the framing device of *Werther* and the figure of the editor-friend in *Ortis* is therefore only apparent: far from questioning the point of view of the narrative 'I', Lorenzo guarantees its reliability.

Nevertheless, the ways in which a writer calls into question his characters and the events narrated are potentially infinite in number, ranging from explicit macroscopic intrusion to subtle linguistic nuance. In *Werther* this is done first and foremost through the narrative frame, an integral, not to say, crucial element in the work through which Goethe succeeds in distancing his central character. He transforms the 'sentimental' *Werther*, his first person narrator, into something similar to what in modern terms would be called an *unreliable narrator* – that is, someone you cannot trust, whose viewpoint you cannot share. It is the 'technical' aspect of this innovation that the translators do not transfer to the target culture, even though they were conscious of the fact that *Werther* was a text that broke with tradition. Salom was undoubtedly conscious of this if he could claim, "cheché ne dicano i pedanti, io mi glorierò di aver tradotto *Verter*" (whatever the pedants say about it, I am exceptionally proud to have translated *Verter*).²⁶ The difference between the ultimate goals of a translator and his/her ability to render innovation in practical terms²⁷

²⁵ Ugo Foscolo, *Notizia bibliografica in Edizione Nazionale delle Opere*, cit., vol. IV, *Ultime lettere di Iacopo Ortis*, edited by G. Gambarin, p. 512.

²⁶ This quotation is taken from Giuseppe Toffanin (*op. cit.*, p. 191), who does not, however, provide the source.

²⁷ This mismatch between the translators' understanding of the text and the actual translation product partially complicates the binary scheme proposed by Even-Zohar (*Polyystem Studies, Special Issue of "Poetics Today"*, I (1990), no. 11, in particular *Polyystem Theory*, para. 2.2.4 *Primary vs. Secondary Types*). From the viewpoint of formal choices, the Italian translations examined here are evidently of the secondary type, that is, conservative with respect to the literary repertory, although their impact on the target system ends up being innovative (thus primary), as is shown by the high number of rewritings and reinterpretations which it inspired (Foscolo in first place). As some commentators on Even-Zohar have occasionally noted, a certain element of chance comes into play here, given that no one, let alone the translator, can pre-empt the entire reception process.



is, in fact, often dependent on the silent influence of the literary conventions of the age, conventions which may change over time, but which – as the work of Grassi, Ludger and Salom demonstrates – are inevitably part of a translator’s cultural baggage.

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