I

UGO FOSCOLO

Except to a few specialists in foreign literatures and some of the more inquisitive of literary critics the name of Ugo Foscolo is unknown in this country. No one here remembers the brilliant figure that once blazed across the Regency scene. Yet in those days he was as famous in England as he still is in Italy. As a poet he seemed to our ancestors in some ways akin to Byron, while his reputation as a patriot who had confronted Napoleon gave him a special glory in the eyes of the nation that had at last conquered the tyrant of Europe. His scholarship was discovered to be extensive by those able to judge; all who heard his discourse were enthralled by his combative eloquence. His clothes were as impeccable as Brummell’s and he took the most flattering pains to be charming to women. For eleven years—from 1816 to his death in 1827—he lived in London, at first mixing with the great and powerful, then in literary seclusion and, finally, a broken man with a false name, in hiding.

There are two aspects of Foscolo’s story that strike one immediately; the contradictory character of the man himself—both attractive and repellent—and the anomaly that such a man, so different from ourselves in his vices and virtues, should have lived so long and on such intimate terms with Englishmen. There is something almost bizarre in this unlikely association. The cosmo-politanism of high society and the common classical traditions of the educated classes of Europe made it possible, but the difference in temperament and manners between this Graeco-Italian and his English friends and associates was extreme.

It is difficult to convey to the English reader an appreciation of the artistic genius of a man who expressed his best and deepest thoughts in Italian, a language, now, alas! unfamiliar to most of
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us. His poetry is classical and his thought so closely knit into the Italian poetical diction that translation fails to reproduce the effect of the original. Italians have always acclaimed him as one of their great poets. We are certainly justified in accepting the unanimous verdict of their critics and—as this is biography and not literary criticism—forgo the perhaps impossible task of attempting to demonstrate it. But it is essential to appreciate that here is the story of an artist, of one who lived for art and aimed so high that he rarely felt satisfied with his creations. His ideal was a classical perfection of harmonious form. In this flawless medium the poet should express by suggestion, and yet with a beautiful precision of images, a sentiment of the inner meaning of life. There should be no northern vagueness, no yearning across unbridgeable gulf, no despair. The aspirations and fears of the individual, the anxieties of the solitary unsupported soul, are merged and lost in the panorama of human society, which itself gives them significance.

It is a strange paradox that such ideas, based on the calm acceptance of what is, were held by a passionate red-haired egotist, for ever at war with himself and his surroundings, for ever quarrelling, for ever in thrall to some woman, romantically inclined to introspection and self-pity, at times in despair, at times resplendent with the false glitter of megalomania, consumed by internal fires. The contradiction is remarkable! It is a contradiction that explains much in the curious variations both in his literary work and in his behaviour. Such a man could not be consistently happy, nor could he produce a long work that needed a consistent mood or a protracted application of effort. The Divine Comedies of art are created by men of a different temper. In considering the unremitting toil that Foscolo spent over his writing and the high ambition that sustained him, the works he has left seem only fragments of what he had to say. His literary career is strewn with unfinished and abandoned projects. But what he has left has been enough to assure his fame. When in some fortunate moment he was able to express his romantic ardour in the balanced
frame of classical diction so that it maintained its warmth within the due controls, then he could produce a masterpiece. Often in prose and sometimes in poetry he fell into the rhetorical or sentimental. Often the initial impetus died away.

As if it were not difficult enough to understand such a character, we have the added difficulty of trying to penetrate the veil of hero-worship with which Italians have shrouded the figure of their ‘patriot-poet’. Foscolo in his prose works most eloquently spoke up for virtue, honour and patriotism. Much, perhaps all, was sincerely felt—most effective rhetoric is sincere, or it would not be eloquent. But it is not reasonable to expect the orator always to be the living embodiment of his ideals. Certainly the man we shall see as he was in England has little of the hero about him. We shall be watching a tragic figure, often foolish, sometimes doing wrong, but to the last throwing off sparks of authentic genius.

The story of the later years of a man’s life must contain much of what has gone before. The rolling snowball collects and embodies the accretions of its own career. It will prove impossible, even were it desirable, to limit our view strictly to the English period. It will sometimes be necessary to look back. And though it is not my purpose to write a full-length biography of Foscolo, which would need a different method and different proportions, it is necessary, by way of introduction, to outline his history before he came to England.

Ugo Foscolo⁴ was born in 1778 at Zante (Zacynthos) in the Ionian Islands, of an Italian father and Greek mother. His father’s family could trace back a history as Venetian citizens established in the Near-East for many generations, although their importance and rank were not so high as Foscolo often suggested. His mother came of very humble stock, and the poet was born in a squalid little house in circumstances of almost peasant poverty. Andrea Foscolo was a doctor who practised as a ship’s surgeon. The family moved to Spalato on the Dalmatian coast in 1784 where the father

⁴ He was baptised Niccolò but adopted the name Ugo later.
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had been appointed to a post at the hospital of that town. Ugo had two brothers and a sister. When the poet was only ten years old his father died and the widow moved with her children to Venice where they lived in conditions of indigence. Very little is known of the poet’s childhood. Some anecdotes reveal him as a fiery-natured boy roving the narrow streets of his native town with a gang of other childish adventurers. On one occasion he is reported to have stormed the ghetto of Zante to liberate the Jews in the name of liberty and equality. His attempt at reform failed, but it cannot be said to have been out of place, considering the point of view of the authorities who had inscribed on the walls of the ghetto the words *In cruce quia crucifixerant.*

At Venice the schoolboy developed with a precocity even greater that is usual amongst people of his mixed race. He learnt quickly and at sixteen was already writing poetry and talking of love as ‘that most beneficent deity that inspires our existence and offers us illusory visions of pleasure and hope’. With his pale intense face, more strange than handsome, his curly red hair, his quick gestures, he was a figure to attract attention. He made a boast of his poverty and began to adopt the pose of virtuous republican, in part learnt from his school-books, in part from modern French examples. Women found him attractive and the beautiful Greek, Isabella Teotochi, adopted him as one of the members of her *salon.* Everything the young Foscolo did was done with passion. His studies, his politics, his friendships, his love affairs, were carried far beyond any normal or reasonable limits. No doubt he cultivated the pose of extremism; but his nature was such that even his poses were a genuine expression of temperament.

The French invasion of Italy, when Foscolo was eighteen, filled him with enthusiasm, for they came proclaiming glorious maxims of liberty and human brotherhood. He wrote poems on the theme and in particular an ode to Bonaparte the liberator. As the now effete oligarchy of Venice creaked to an inglorious standstill in a swiftly moving world, Foscolo and young men like him came out
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into the open as self-constituted tribunes of the new order. All was exciting and all was glorious! As the ragged Napoleonic armies swept across Italy with the sound of trumpets and the swirl of banners, the watchword of Liberty that outran them made men forget, at first, the inexorable requisition officers who came after.

There seems no doubt that Isabella Teotochi, with a kind of maternal solicitude—she was nearly twenty years his senior—accepted Foscolo as a lover, and perhaps by so doing was the cause of that constant inclination in him ever afterwards to look for love from women of mature experience, an inclination that in no way precluded admiration for the young and freshly beautiful. His love affair encouraged his classical readings, but it was not only in such an author as Tibullus that he found suitable expression of similar feelings to his own, but also in the then, for Italy, excitingly new Northern work that passed under the name of Ossian. He met Cesarotti of Padua who had translated this and much else from foreign literature, and the attractions of romanticism swept him away. Perhaps in no other Italian poet have the apparently contradictory influences of classicism and romanticism been so curiously and, at times, so successfully blended. The work that, despite its manifest faults, secured the young Foscolo’s temporary fame at this time was his tragedy Tieste (Thyestes). This was a drama cast in the heroic Alﬁerian mould, no better and no worse than the many others before and since with which young men have tried to express their enthusiasms on the stage.

Now came a blow to prove the world a harder place than it appeared and politics what they are. By the Treaty of Campoformio the French, instead of allowing the young tribunes to govern Venice, handed her over to the reactionary power of Austria. Fearing reprisals from those of his fellow-citizens who had watched him disapprovingly in his post as one of the municipal secretaries to the new government and had heard him haranguing the crowd with all the eloquence of his Jacobin sentiments, he left Venice and sought safety in the Cisalpine Republic. Leaving his
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mother, the still affectionate Isabella, his friends and the hopes of a political career behind him, he set out in November 1797 for Milan.

In the Lombard capital he found employment with a political newspaper, the *Monitore Italiano*, and had the congenial task of reporting the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly. He met the *letterati*, took respectful walks with the ageing poet Parini, became intimate with Vincenzo Monti and fell in love with the latter’s attractive wife. On the suppression of the *Monitore* in 1798 Foscolo left Milan for Bologna, where he enrolled in the National Guard with the rank of lieutenant. He saw action against the Austrians and the peasant bands that were sacking and pillaging in the neighbourhood. He received a bayonet wound in an assault on the town of Cento. When the Austro-Russian counter-offensive swept the French back to their frontiers in 1799, Foscolo, now attached to a regiment of Cisalpine Hussars, was one of those who defended Genoa and there shared the hardships of the besieged garrison. His duties, however, left him time for love and poetry, and it was in those apparently unfavourable circumstances that he composed his famous classical ode *A Luigia Pallavicini Caduta da Cavallo*.

After Napoleon had once again defeated the Austrians at Marengo, the way back to a ‘liberated’ Italy was open. In the course of his duties Foscolo found himself in Florence and there met Isabella Roncioni, the fair blue-eyed girl with whom he fell passionately in love, and who for ever after remained in his mind as an ideal of young love. With sudden fervour he rewrote the epistolary novel he had begun some time previously and which had been published in a garbled form without his permission.

*Le Ûltíme Lettere di Jacopo Ortis* owed a great deal to the *Werther* of Goethe but, at the same time, the book is all Foscolo. A young man embarks on a hopeless love affair after profound political disillusion and then takes his own life. Despite the rhetoric and self-pity that such a plot encourages, there is an inner reality in
the novel that saves it from the sentimentalities inherent in the situation. It is the reality of the voice of youth protesting against all that impedes its generous impulses. Money, husbands, seniority, the compromises of politics, all the conventions should give way before the rush of passionate sentiment welling up in the heart of ingenuous, unimpassioned youth. In real life the youth grows older, accepts the practical limitations of society, and becomes himself one of the husbands and even possibly one of the rich. In the novel the hero commits suicide. Foscolo did neither, for although he grew older in years he never lost the ingenuous impulses that are so heroic or so foolish, according as you may regard them.

The novel became enormously popular and was read in all the boudoirs of Italy. Women like poetic young men with breaking hearts—or they did then, for it was still the age of sensibility. When Foscolo came to England young ladies were apt to call him Ortis, and he found the renown of his early work embarrassing. Perhaps even now it can appeal to the tender-hearted. Unhappy lovers may still find there a reflection of their own sentiments. In the mid-nineteenth century Matthew Arnold returned a copy of the novel to his Marguerite with a poem that expresses the despair of all lovers parted by fate:

Who order’d, that their longing’s fire
Should be, as soon as kindled, cool’d?
Who renders vain their deep desire?
A God, a God their severance rul’d;
And bade betwixt their shores to be
The unplumb’d, salt, estranging sea.

Leaving Florence with what he thought was a broken heart (for Isabella Roncioni’s circumstances, like Teresa’s of the novel, precluded her marriage to a penniless lieutenant), Foscolo was once more quartered at Milan. He was not in favour with his superior officers and it is plain they would have welcomed his retirement from the army. He found it difficult to get his pay and allowances
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and his lack of promotion was a constant grievance with him. He was given various administrative tasks, including the compilation of the Code of Military Law. He was always running into debt and trying to save himself by gambling. Meanwhile he embarked on a passionate liaison with a lady who, in the easy manners of the day, was known without disapproval for the number and variety of her lovers, Countess Antonietta Fagnani Arese. Like mother, like daughter, for it was Antonietta’s mother that Sterne found so accommodating when they met and blocked each other’s passage at the door of a concert room.

Seeing no còrisbò near her I begged to hand her to her coach, so we went down the stairs, stopping at every third step to talk of the concert and the adventure. Upon my word, said I when I had handed her in, I made six different efforts to let you go out. And I made six efforts, replied she, to let you enter. I wish to Heaven you would make a seventh, said I. With all my heart, said she, making room. Life is too short to be long about the forms of it; so I instantly stepped in, and she carried me home with her. . . . And what became of the concert? St Cecilia, who, I suppose, was at it, knows more than I.

For some two years Foscolo went through all the exultations, jealousies, and despairfs that are the lot of lovers of such women as Antonietta—passions so real to the participants and so tedious to the onlookers. Despite this distraction, the poet produced his famous Oration to Bonaparte for the use of the Cisalpine delegation on its way to Lyons where a congress was to ratify the great man’s intentions in regard to North Italy. It was a bold, even foolhardy, composition, for under the flattering words to Napoleon it attacked the instruments of his policy in Italy. At this period Foscolo published the definitive edition of his novel, a selection of his poems containing only two odes and a dozen sonnets, and an erudite edition and Italian translation of the version of the Coma Berenices by Catullus. This last he pretended he had written to out-pedant the pedants at their own game. He also continued his experiments in translating Homer.
MILITARY DUTIES

Foscolo now applied for a post on active service and, after some delay, was promoted captain and ordered to join the Italian division stationed in Northern France, part of the great army in position for the invasion of England. In the early summer of 1804, the poet, much to his disgust at the nature of his posting, was ordered to Valenciennes to take charge of a depot. In the neighbourhood he met several English families living under the restraints then imposed on them by the French authorities. Several love affairs helped to pass the time, and from one of them came consequences we shall have later to consider in detail. At Valenciennes and at Calais, where he spent several months, Foscolo began to make a serious study of the English language and to put it to good use by translating Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* into vigorous modern Italian.

Napoleon did not invade England, and Foscolo in March 1806 found himself once more in Milan. After some months’ leave in Venice, where he saw his mother and came once more under the spell of Isabella Teotochi, he was occupied with semi-literary official duties, translations, the representation of prisoners arraigned before military tribunals, and finally the editing of the works of the seventeenth-century General Raimondo Montecuccoli. Despite these various distractions, his studies of classical and Italian letters had never been abandoned and his mind was becoming ever more set on poetry and poetic fame. In the spring of 1807 he published from the press of Niccolò Bettoni of Brescia a poem of 295 blank-verse lines, a masterpiece that immediately placed him in the first flight of Italian poets. Very many different streams of thought and feeling converge and blend in *Dei Sepolcri*. The mythology and history of Greece and Rome, the Italian genius of the Renaissance, contemporary events, the charm of nature, the ideals of love and friendship, the personal hopes and sufferings of the author, all combine to illustrate the fate of man. Standing halfway between the rational materialism of the eighteenth century and the romantic mysticism of the nineteenth, the poet, without
any precise philosophy, draws from his feeling for all that is humane a profound sense of spiritual values. In this erratic, promiscuous, unreliable young officer there were creative fires that could blaze out for all to recognise.

The composition and publishing of this great poem coincided with a love affair with the beautiful Countess Marzia Martinengo Cesaresco of Brescia. He was able to spend some months of the summer of 1807 with his new love. With the reputation of learned editor and inspired poet to support him, Foscolo now applied for the Chair of Eloquence at the University of Pavia. In March 1808 he was appointed, and by the end of that year he was established with a luxury beyond his means in a house at Pavia. In the interval between appointment and establishment he had laid his susceptible heart at the feet of the blonde nineteen-year-old Francesca, daughter of Count Giovanni-Battista Giovio. A new period of ordered industry and happiness appeared to be opening before Foscolo’s eyes but with the ill-luck that so often seemed to dash his hopes, and for general policy reasons quite unconnected with the persons of the professors, a number of University chairs were suddenly abolished by the Government, amongst them the Chair of Eloquence at Pavia. The professors were granted a year’s salary and could lecture or not as they wished. Foscolo chose to do the duty for which he was paid, and the result was a splendid series of lectures that still preserve in print something of the eloquence that captivated the audiences that heard them. The purpose of literature, the functions of the man-of-letters, the Italian language; broad considerations rather than particular criticisms, provided the material for his observations.

At the conclusion of his course and suspension of his salary Foscolo returned to Milan. He now became embroiled in a literary feud with Vincenzo Monti, his one-time friend, and a number of lesser men of whom the most active was a certain Urbano Lampredi. It was this cabal of enemies who packed the Scala theatre on the night of 9 December 1811 and helped to