

Hentzi looks at literature and its circumstances

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

English is a well-known subject, but what most people don't know is that English scholars do a lot of different things. One of these scholars is Dr. Gary Hentzi, whose interest in culture dates from a very early age. "I guess I always knew that I was interested in the arts and culture. I started out more interested in music than anything else, but it quickly branched out into an interest in literature," he says.

As a young professor, he specialized in one of the founders of the novel as a literary genre in the early 18th century: Daniel Defoe. This English trader, writer, journalist, pamphleteer and spy became most famous for his novel *Robinson Crusoe*. "Defoe certainly is one of the founders of the novel as a genre in the sense that his books are among the prose narratives from that period that continue to interest us, especially in retrospect. In part, it's because we've had almost 300 years of the novel after him," says Hentzi.

Because Defoe was so prolific, some think that he could not have written everything attributed to him and that he was not even one of the founders of the novel as a genre. "There are long prose fictions throughout Western history going back to the Greek and Roman worlds, and one school of thought has it that those are all in some sense novels and that it's all part of a continuous history. From this point of view, Defoe comes pretty late in a long, long history. But many other people—and I'm one of them—feel that things change in certain identifiable ways in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, that the kind of prose fiction that comes to the fore then is different in certain ways from earlier long prose narratives."

Hentzi, a native of Waterbury, Connecticut, obtained his bachelor's degree in English from Oberlin College in Ohio and his master's and doctorate in English from Columbia University in New York City. Today he is an associate professor in the Department of English and an associate dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences in Baruch College.

When asked why *Robinson Crusoe* is so popular 300 years after it was published, Hentzi is very clear. "There really are not many other works of literature



Dr. Hentzi at his office.

that continue to be studied in universities and that just about everybody knows. They may not remember or they may never have known that it was written by Daniel Defoe; they may not even remember the title; but the situation of the man marooned on a desert island who has to fend for himself, who has to construct his own world, is so resonant that it's taken many, many other forms in the culture."

But Defoe has not been the only writer who means something to him. Asked whether he thinks it's still important for English majors to read Shakespeare, he is quick to affirm that it is. "The sheer richness of his language is unparalleled, and then there are so many other dimensions to Shakespeare beyond that. I don't consider myself any great Shakespearean, but my life would be a lot poorer if I had never read Shakespeare," he says.

Hentzi has also studied the interface between

literature and cinema. "One of my essays is about a work of literature that was made into a movie, a novel by the Scottish writer Alexander Trocchi. He's a countercultural figure of the '50s, and his novel *Young Adam* was made into a film about fifty years later. The film reproduced the events of the narrative almost exactly, and yet the differences between the two were significant. It wasn't a question of which was better or worse. What interested me was the way that, even though the film was faithful to the novel, the comparison was a display of historical differences, cultural differences."

Students of literature are often confronted with the question of what makes a work of literature great. "I don't believe that there's such a thing as greatness that's inherent in any work. We begin to call things great when we notice that people have been talking about them for a long time and continue to find it

profitable to discuss them," Hentzi explains. "I spent a lot of my early career working on 18th century England, and there were many writers who were thought to be very important at the time but whom we don't read much anymore. Maybe greatness is a kind of historical accident; it signals a continuing interest. And then there are works that submerge for a while and then reemerge, and people rediscover them with a fresh perspective."

Hentzi defends both translators and those who use other media to make literary works more accessible. "A translation is always in some sense an interpretation. You have to make decisions about what you think the original means. Something similar happens when a film is made out of a book. The director chooses to put some things in and leave other things out."

One of the most difficult literary genres to translate is poetry. "There are those who say it can't be done or can be done only in an approximate way. And yet there are poets whom I wouldn't know as I do without translations. For example, I have a pretty crude knowledge of German, but I'm quite certain that Rilke is a remarkable poet; and to make that judgment, I'm relying in part on translations. When a poet is that able to command interest, it does sometimes come through, even though a native speaker's experience of the poem can't really be translated."

Hentzi has also written about how scientific writers have influenced English literature. "Darwin figures in English literature in several different ways—first of all, as a kind of catastrophe. There's a whole set of assumptions about the world that many people held dear and that were threatened by Darwin, and there's one whole body of writing about what it felt like to experience that threat. And then there were other writers who bought aspects of the scientific worldview into literature."

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