

The Labyrinth of Language

by Emma Piersanti

Languages are like a labyrinth. Enter the right passage, learn the right word, and you may discover an entire new world. Words have that power; they can help you learn new things, understand new perspectives, or uncover secrets. Secret stories. Stories that have existed as secrets to you, because sometimes the only way you can learn these stories is through the translation of one language to another. Or, for me, from someone who has the perspective of two languages at once.

This summer I visited my cousin, Gloria, in Italy. Fortunately, she speaks both Italian and English, and through her I learned more about the Italian language than I ever thought I would. It went deeper than hellos and goodbyes, but into the innerworkings of dialects from specific regions, and the specific words used between young people that a book or app probably couldn't teach you. But it didn't stop there. Through my cousin winding between Italian and English she revealed stories to me like shining pearls that lie in the center of a clam. I was being lead through the labyrinth of language, every new word telling me a story about the people, and every new tale telling me secrets of the land.

This is the power of language, and what I hope to illuminate through three places, three stories, three words – and the labyrinth they all lead me through.

The Rock – La Roccia

To start off my trip, Gloria and I visited our aunt in Sicily. She had been living there for 3 years, and during that time was able to understand the differences between Sicilian and Italian. She told me that when she first moved there people would constantly toss around the word

“curú” (coo-roo). She had no idea what they were saying. “It sounded as if everyone was imitating the sound of a coccoo bird”, she had confessed to us. Eventually, she learned that it means “love”, which reflects the Italian translation, “cuore” (co-war-ay), meaning “heart”.

Even between such similar languages as Italian and Sicilian words can create paths for new worlds of understanding. Worlds of sudden love and connection between two people.

It’s fitting then, that while taking a tour of Sciacca on the Mediterranean Sea the man steering our boat introduced my cousin and I to a story of love. As we sailed on the bright blue water, we passed a large rock jutting out close to the shoreline. The man, Gianni, pointed to it, and began speaking in the romantic tongue of Sicilian. My cousin listened intently, working her way through the slightly different sounds of the language, while I simply watched him. Watched her. Watched the words build a bridge between the two of them and continue towards the rock Gianni spoke of. Creating that invisible world I hadn’t been invited into yet. I waited patiently, cursing my inability to understand – my never learning the language my grandparents have spoken to my parents in all their lives. But I also caught glimpses. A noun, a verb, a phrase I could grasp and look into with comprehending eyes. How Gianni had called our attention with the word “picciotti” (pee-cho-tee), translating to “ragazzi” (ra-ga-zee), or more casually “raga”, in Italian. Its English equivalent is “guys”, or any other informal greeting for a group of people.

It wasn’t until my cousin turned to me, translating the words from Sicilian to Italian to English, and began retelling the story that the bridge existing between them and the rock broke off and grew towards me. That the labyrinth became more complex; more paths intersecting and intertwining.

The story goes that the daughter of Norman Count Ruggero I, who had conquered Sicily around the year 1000, had fallen in love with a man her father did not approve of. (1)

Unbeknownst to my cousin and I during the telling of this story, the man was her cousin.

(1)

Because of her father's disapproval of the pairing, the couple fled to the rock Gloria and I sat looking at decades later, now known as Rock Regina. (1) After finding refuge atop it, the couple had asked a friar to intercede for them to the woman's father, which in the end won him over. (1) She was also said to have given birth to their son right on top of Rock Regina. (1) I imagined what it would have been like to live atop that ragged piece of earth. To look out over water that seemed to never end. Would I be afraid? Would I feel free?

I'm not sure, but what I do know is that this world of love, heart ship, and secret dwellings would not exist to me without language and its ability to be translated. Its ability to transport. Its ability to let me look out at a landscape and see something completely new. I would soon learn that this was not only true of Sicily, that land made of bright blues and greens, but extended to a small town in northern Italy soaked in soft yellows and oranges.

The Mountain – La Montagna

From Sicily, we traveled to Gloria's sunset town she calls home, Francavilla al Mare. Every second of everyday I spent there beauty overwhelmed me. I woke up with an unobstructed view of the sea every morning and looked up at the bright stars that floated in the sky each night. Everyone there was privy to this beauty that I had only just observed. Beauty was the standard; it was blatant, and resided in the environment, the people, and even the language.

I remember on one of my first nights there while walking around town with Gloria and her friends, I heard one of them mumbling the word "iss" (ee-ss). A word is probably not an entirely accurate descriptor – maybe a sound, an expression would be closer to the truth.

Confused, I had leaned over towards Gloria and asked what her friend was saying. I'm not fluent in Italian, but after years of hearing my family speak the language I can pick up certain words – like collecting shells sunken in a sandy shore. This “iss” I could not grasp. I felt like my aunt in Sicily as she tried to decipher the sounds of coccoo birds.

Gloria had laughed at my question, and prompted me to follow her friend's gaze, which landed on a beautiful woman. “Iss” then, was just another expression of beauty. Although not as elegant as the sea or sky, or endearing as addressing someone with “curú”, it was still a passage into the language labyrinth. A word, a sound, three letters spun together that revealed a whole world of feeling.

It was a secret to the untrained ear, and soon I would discover another to the untrained eye.

On one of my last nights in town, as the sun was turning the sky into a vision of smokey colour and Gloria and I were making our way home from the sea, Gloria's father decided we had other plans. He guided us back out to the water and onto a small paddle boat, which took us far past the rock barrier meant to keep swimmers close to shore. He was searching for a view.

I did not realize yet that a pattern was forming; that the sea was once again carrying me to a story only translation could truly reveal. A world only found through paths made of words changed over. A world, once again, of beauty, because when we were far out enough that a full landscape view of the town was visible, for the second time in Francavilla al Mare my gaze was directed towards a beautiful woman. “Do you see that?” Gloria's father had asked me, his accent slipping into the spaces between each syllable, as he pointed to a series of mountains peeking above the houses and buildings. “La Bella Addormentata.”

My instinct was to look at my cousin. The English Gloria's father spoke was choppy, and throughout my time with him we stumbled through sentences together – trading words and phrases we both knew like secret passwords through a locked door. Gloria was always the one who could open it. And that was what I was asking her to do then – to open the door to the path her father was trying to lead me down.

“The sleeping beauty,” she translated, but I was no less confused. That was until she brought my gaze back to the mountain and outlined it with her finger. There, against the luminous orange sky, was the profile of a sleeping woman made of hills and plains.

The lore behind the mountain traces back to Greek mythology. It is said that the goddess Maja, after dying of grief from the loss of her son, Hermes, laid to rest in the form of the Gran Sasso Mountain – or, La Bella Addormentata. (2)

It amazed me that something so big, so obvious, could be a secret to me. A giant goddess fell to her final resting place in the landscape before me, but I only knew because a few words transported me there. I remember thinking how many languages, how many mouths it must have taken for this tale to travel to my ears. I pictured tracing the connections between each person, each translation like lines on a map. Paths in the labyrinth.

They all led to worlds of beauty. From informal words used for a pleasing person on the street, to legends recounted about wonders laid in the earth, language carried me – many people – to beautiful, elusive realms. They seemed to be right in plain sight, right in ear shot, and this power language has to reveal the obvious would only become clearer when I arrived in Rome.

The Fountain – La Fontana

If language had led me through a labyrinth during my travels, Rome was the most complex part. Every structure in that city has a story pulsing through it. Everything has a double

meaning. A window is not simply a window. A door would not dare to simply be a door. Rome is a city of history. I knew this. As Gloria and I ascended the Scalinata della Trinità dei Monti I knew I was walking on pieces of roman travertine weathered by millions of feet over thousands of decades. And as we gazed up at the Colosseum I knew I was looking at the work of ancient hands and tools. What was not apparent to me at the time, is how intrinsically intertwined language and history are. History cannot exist without language, and that became completely transparent when Gloria brought me to Piazza Navona.

It is a beautiful place, inhabited by Sant'Agnese in Agone, one of the countless beautiful churches that litter Rome, which sits large and magnificent at the front of the square. I remember when the sun began to set I could see through the church's many windows and make out the intricate details of the inside, and how I wanted desperately to get a closer view. Although the church was breathtaking, it was what sat in front of it that Gloria was most excited to show me: the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi.

The fountain is of four men that each represent rivers and revolve around an obelisk protruding towards the sky. Gian Lorenzo Bernini was the sculptor that made the fountain and the reason Gloria had been so adamant about me seeing it. "He is one of my favorites," she told me once we were close enough that I could see why.

How could men made of marble contain so much life? How could faces stuck in time and space show so much emotion? I'm embarrassed to say I didn't even know of Bernini before my cousin introduced me to him, and that in my ignorance I was blind not only to the details of the curving marble, but the meaning buried inside them.

Bernini was a master of tricks, and left innuendos in his work for people to decipher for years to come. One of these tricks lives in the statue representing the Rio de la Plata River on the

Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi. The statue faces towards Sant'Agnese in Agone, with his arm thrown above his head as if he is frightened the building will fall on him. Strange, how a sculpture that sits right in front of a religious oasis was made to look so scared.

The story, or the version that Gloria was familiar with, goes that to spite the church Bernini hid a look of disgust behind one that could be interpreted as awe.

Someone might be reading this and thinking I could have just learned this theory through a simple google search; that the transportation of translation was not necessary to learn about this secret world of disguises. But sometimes a google search cannot compare to living and breathing language, because when I searched the web for background on this story I could not find anything that mirrored the words Gloria had told me. She may have been guided to this theory by a book or a lecture, but in that moment it was pulsing and present language that was able to lead me to it. Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi contains a world of secrets, history, and hidden meaning, but without language no one would be able to see it.

As Gloria had told me the story, I once again saw that bridge being built, just as it had on on the sea with Gianni and Gloria's father, from our bodies to the face of a river conveying an emotion we could not know for certain.

Later that night, when we were lucky enough to eat dinner with a view of the piazza, I heard a woman at the table next to ours say to the man she sat with, "shalla". Gloria had told me earlier during our stay that the Roman dialectal word was equivalent to "chill" or "whatever". I remember being astonished at how such a casual word could be uttered when such mastery sat before us. Such a magnificent piece of history, hidden in a sculpture only to be revealed by language. It seemed that most Romans had this cool air about them; walking casually in front of beautiful but slowly deteriorating structures as if they were not some of the most famous pieces

of history in the world. Maybe it is because they live with it every day. Unlike me, they do not need a translation to enter the language labyrinth and understand the secret worlds around them. They are already there. They live inside those worlds.

This may seem like a disadvantage; a nuisance to have to be lead through a complex set of paths to enter worlds of love, beauty, and history. But without the need for translation to transport how could we understand the power of language? If Gianni and I could have simply discussed Rock Regina and the events that took place on it, would I now know the slight differences between Sicilian and Italian? If I was already privy to the meanings behind slang phrases in northern Italy, would I have seen the connection between the story of a fallen goddess and a word directed towards a beautiful woman on the street? Most importantly, if translation was not necessary, would my cousin and I have been able to explore these secret worlds together? Me, for the first time, and her from a new perspective? I'm certain the answer to all these questions is no. This intricate act of carrying a word from one meaning to another is what makes language a labyrinth. A labyrinth of time and space and words shared from person to person, from language to language. It holds power, not only to reveal stories of forbidden love and fear of god, but, perhaps more importantly, to connect you with the people and places you are surrounded by.

Works Cited

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