

JHUMPA LAHIRI



IN OTHER WORDS

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY ANN GOLDSTEIN



ALFRED A. KNOFF · NEW YORK · TORONTO · 2016

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK

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THE CROSSING



I want to cross a small lake. It really is small, and yet the other shore seems too far away, beyond my abilities. I'm aware that the lake is very deep in the middle, and even though I know how to swim I'm afraid of being alone in the water, without any support.

The lake I'm talking about is in a secluded, isolated place. To get there you have to walk a short distance, through a silent wood. On the other side you can see a cottage, the only house on the shore. The lake was formed just after the last ice age, millennia ago. The water is clear but dark, heavier than salt water, with no current. Once you're in, a few yards from the shore, you can no longer see the bottom.

In the morning I observe people coming to the lake, as I do. I watch them cross it in a confident, relaxed manner, stop for some minutes in front of the cottage, then return. I count their arm strokes. I envy them. ◇

For a month I swim around the lake, never going too far out. This is a more significant distance—the circumference compared to the diameter. It takes me more than half an hour to make this circle. Yet I'm always close to the shore. I can stop, I can stand up if I'm tired. It's good exercise, but not very exciting.

Then one morning, near the end of the summer, I meet two friends at the lake. I've decided to make the crossing with them, to finally get to the cottage on the other side. I'm tired of just going along the edge.

I count the strokes. I know that my companions are in the water with me, but I know that each of us is alone. After about a hundred and fifty strokes I'm in the middle, the deepest part. I keep going. After a hundred more I see the bottom again. ◇

I arrive on the other side: I've made it with no trouble. I see the cottage, until now distant, just steps from me. I see the small, faraway silhouettes of my husband, my children. They seem unreachable, but I know they're not.

After a crossing, the known shore becomes the opposite side: here becomes there. Charged with energy, I cross the lake again. I'm elated.

For twenty years I studied Italian as if I were swimming along the edge of that lake. Always next to my dominant language, English. Always hugging that shore. It was good exercise. Beneficial for the muscles, for the brain, but not very exciting. If you study a foreign language that way, you won't drown. The other language is always there to support you, to save you. But you can't float without the possibility of drowning, of sinking. To know a new language, to immerse yourself, you have to leave the shore. Without a life vest. Without depending on solid ground.

A few weeks after crossing the small hidden lake, I make a second crossing, much longer but not at all difficult. It will be the first true departure of my life. On a ship this time, I cross the Atlantic Ocean, to live in Italy. ◇

THE DICTIONARY



The first Italian book I buy is a pocket dictionary, with the definitions in English. It's 1994, and I'm about to go to Florence for the first time, with my sister. I go to a bookshop in Boston with an Italian name: Rizzoli. A stylish, refined bookshop, which is no longer there.

I don't buy a guidebook, even though it's my first trip to Italy, even though I know nothing about Florence. Thanks to a friend of mine, I already have the address of a hotel. I'm a student, I don't have much money. I think a dictionary is more important.

The one I choose has a green plastic cover, indestructible, impermeable. It's light, smaller than my hand. It has more or less the dimensions of a bar of soap. The back cover says that it contains around forty thousand Italian words. ◇

As we're wandering through the Uffizi, amid galleries that are almost deserted, my sister realizes that she's lost her hat. I open the dictionary. I go to the English-Italian part, to find out how to say "hat" in Italian. In some way, certainly incorrect, I tell a guard that we've lost a hat. Miraculously, he understands what I'm saying, and in a short time the hat is recovered.

Every time I've been to Italy in the many years since, I've brought this dictionary with me. I always put it in my purse. I look up words when I'm in the street, when I return to the hotel after an outing, when I try to read an article in the newspaper. It guides me, protects me, explains everything.

It becomes both a map and a compass, and without it I know I'd be lost. It becomes a kind of authoritative parent, without whom I can't go out. I consider it a sacred text, full of secrets, of revelations. ◇

On the first page, at a certain point, I write: "*provare a = cercare di*" (try to = seek to).

That random fragment, that lexical equation, might be a metaphor for the love I feel for Italian. Something that, in the end, is really a stubborn attempt,

a continuous trial.

Nearly twenty years after buying my first dictionary, I decide to move to Rome for an extended stay. Before leaving, I ask a friend of mine, who lived in Rome for many years, if an electronic Italian dictionary, like a cell phone app, would be useful, for looking up a word at any moment. ◇

He laughs. He says, "Soon you'll be living inside an Italian dictionary."

He's right. Slowly, after a couple of months in Rome, I realize that I don't check the dictionary so often. When I go out, it tends to stay in my purse, closed. As a result I start leaving it at home. I'm aware of a turning point. A sense of freedom and, at the same time, of loss. Of having grown up, at least a little.

Today I have many other larger, more substantial dictionaries on my desk. Two of them are monolingual, without a word of English. The cover of the small one seems a little faded by now, a little dirty. The pages are yellowed. Some are coming loose from the binding. ◇

It usually sits on the night table, so that I can easily look up an unknown word while I'm reading. This book allows me to read other books, to open the door of a new language. It accompanies me, even now, when I go on vacation, on trips. It has become a necessity. If, when I leave, I forget to take it with me, I feel slightly uneasy, as if I'd forgotten my toothbrush or a change of socks.

By now this small dictionary seems more like a brother than like a parent. And yet it's still useful to me, it still guides me. It remains full of secrets. This little book will always be bigger than I am.

EXILE



My relationship with Italian takes place in exile, in a state of separation.

Every language belongs to a specific place. It can migrate, it can spread. But usually it's tied to a geographical territory, a country. Italian belongs mainly to Italy, and I live on another continent, where one does not readily encounter it.

I think of Dante, who waited nine years before speaking to Beatrice. I think of Ovid, exiled from Rome to a remote place. To a linguistic outpost, surrounded by alien sounds. ◇

I think of my mother, who writes poems in Bengali, in America. Almost fifty years after moving there, she can't find a book written in her language.

In a sense I'm used to a kind of linguistic exile. My mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America. When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement. You speak a secret, unknown language, lacking any correspondence to the environment. An absence that creates a distance within you.

In my case there is another distance, another schism. I don't know Bengali perfectly. I don't know how to read it, or even write it. I have an accent, I speak without authority, and so I've always perceived a disjunction between it and me. As a result I consider my mother tongue, paradoxically, a foreign language, too. ◇

As for Italian, the exile has a different aspect. Almost as soon as we met, Italian and I were separated. My yearning seems foolish. And yet I feel it.

How is it possible to feel exiled from a language that isn't mine? That I don't know? Maybe because I'm a writer who doesn't belong completely to any language.

I buy a book. It's called *Teach Yourself Italian*. An exhortatory title, full of hope and possibility. As if it were possible to learn on your own. ◇

Having studied Latin for many years, I find the first chapters of this textbook fairly easy. I manage to memorize some conjugations, do some exercises. But I don't like the silence, the isolation of the self-teaching process. It seems detached, wrong. As if I were studying a musical instrument without ever playing it.

At the university, I decide to write my doctoral thesis on how Italian architecture influenced English playwrights of the seventeenth century. I wonder why certain playwrights decided to set their tragedies, written in English, in Italian palaces. The thesis will discuss another schism between language and environment. The subject gives me a second reason to study Italian.

I attend elementary courses. My first teacher is a Milanese woman who lives in Boston. I do the homework, I pass the tests. But when, after two years of studying, I try to read Alberto Moravia's novel *La ciociara* (*Two Women*), I barely understand it. I underline almost every word on every page. I am constantly looking in the dictionary. ◇

In the spring of 2000, six years after my trip to Florence, I go to Venice. In addition to the dictionary, I take a notebook, and on the last page I write down phrases that might be useful: *Saprebbe dirmi? Dove si trova? Come si fa per andare?* Could you tell me? Where is? How does one get to? I recall the difference between *buono* and *bello*. I feel prepared. In reality, in Venice I'm barely able to ask for directions on the street, a wake-up call at the hotel. I manage to order in a restaurant and exchange a few words with a saleswoman. Nothing else. Even though I've returned to Italy, I still feel exiled from the language.

A few months later I receive an invitation to the Mantua literary festival. There I meet my first Italian publishers. One of them is also my translator. Their publishing house has a Spanish name, Marcos y Marcos. They are Italian. Their names are Marco and Claudia.

I have to do all my interviews and presentations in English. There is always an interpreter next to me. I can more or less follow the Italian, but I can't express myself, explain myself, without English. I feel limited. What I learned in America, in the classroom, isn't sufficient. My comprehension is so meager that, here in Italy, it doesn't help me. The language still seems like a locked gate. I'm on the threshold, I can see inside, but the gate won't open. ◇

Marco and Claudia give me the key. When I mention that I've studied some Italian, and that I would like to improve it, they stop speaking to me in English. They switch to their language, although I'm able to respond only in a very simple way. In spite of all my mistakes, in spite of my not completely understanding what they say. In spite of the fact that they speak English much better than I speak Italian.

They tolerate my mistakes. They correct me, they encourage me, they provide the words I lack. They speak clearly, patiently. Just like parents with their children. The way one learns one's native language. I realize that I didn't learn English in this fashion.

Claudia and Marco, who translated and published my first book in Italian, and who were my hosts the first time I went to Italy as a writer, give me this turning point. In Mantua, thanks to them, I finally find myself inside the language. Because in the end to learn a language, to feel connected to it, you have to have a dialogue, however childlike, however imperfect. ◇

THE CONVERSATIONS



Returning to America, I want to go on speaking Italian. But with whom? I know some people in New York who speak it perfectly. I'm embarrassed to talk to them. I need someone with whom I can struggle, and fail.

One day I go to the Casa Italiana at New York University to interview a famous Roman writer, a woman, who has won the Strega Prize. I am in an overcrowded room, where everyone but me speaks an impeccable Italian.

The director of the institute greets me. I tell him I would have liked to do the interview in Italian. That I studied the language years ago but I can't speak well. ◇

"Need practicing," I say.

"You need practice," he answers kindly.

In 2004 my husband gives me something. A piece of paper torn from a notice that he happened to see in our neighborhood, in Brooklyn. On it is written "*Imparare l'italiano*," "Learn Italian." I consider it a sign. I call the number, make an appointment. A likable, energetic woman, also from Milan, arrives at my house. She teaches in a private school, she lives in the suburbs. She asks me why I want to learn the language. ◇

I explain that I'm going to Rome in the summer to take part in another literary festival. It seems like a reasonable motivation. I don't reveal that Italian is a fancy of mine. That I nurture a hope—in fact a dream—of knowing it well. I don't tell her that I'm looking for a way to keep alive a language that has nothing to do with my life. That I am tortured, that I feel incomplete. As if Italian were a book that, no matter how hard I work, I can't write.

We meet once a week, for an hour. I'm pregnant with my daughter, who will be born in November. I try to have a conversation. At the end of every lesson the teacher gives me a long list of words that I lacked during the conversation. I review it diligently. I put it in a folder. I can't remember them.

IMPOSSIBILITY



Reading an interview with the novelist Carlos Fuentes in an issue of *Nuovi Argomenti*, I find this: “It’s extremely useful to know that there are certain heights one will never be able to reach.”

Fuentes is referring to literary masterpieces—works of genius like *Don Quixote*, for example—that remain untouched. I think that these heights have a dual, and substantial, role for writers: they make us aim at perfection and remind us of our mediocrity.

As a writer, in whatever language, I have to take account of the presence of the greatest writers. I have to accept the nature of my contribution with respect to theirs. Although I know I’ll never write like Cervantes, like Dante, like Shakespeare, nevertheless I write. I have to manage the anxiety that those heights can stir up. Otherwise, I wouldn’t dare write. ◇

Now that I’m writing in Italian, Fuentes’s observation seems even more pertinent. I have to accept the impossibility of reaching the height that inspires me but at the same time pushes me into a corner. Now the height is not the work of a writer more brilliant than I am but, rather, the heart of the language itself. Although I know that I will never be securely inside that heart, I try, through writing, to reach it.

I wonder if I’m going against the current. I live in an era in which almost anything seems possible, in which no one wants to accept any limits. We can send a message in an instant, we can go from one end of the world to the other in a day. We can plainly see a person who is not with us. Thanks to technology, no waiting, no distance. That’s why we can say with assurance that the world is smaller than it used to be. We are always connected, reachable. Technology refutes distance, today more than ever.

And yet this Italian project of mine makes me acutely aware of the immense distances between languages. A foreign language can signify a total separation. It can represent, even today, the ferocity of our ignorance. To write in a

new language, to penetrate its heart, no technology helps. You can’t accelerate the process, you can’t abbreviate it. The pace is slow, hesitant, there are no shortcuts. The better I understand the language, the more confusing it is. The closer I get, the farther away. Even today the disconnect between me and Italian remains insuperable. It’s taken almost half my life to advance barely a few steps. Just to get this far. ◇

In that sense the metaphor of the small lake that I wanted to cross, with which I began this series of reflections, is wrong. Because in fact a language isn’t a small lake but an ocean. A tremendous, mysterious element, a force of nature that I have to bow before.

In Italian I lack a complete perspective. I lack the distance that would help me. I have only the distance that hinders me.

It’s impossible to see the entire landscape. I rely on certain paths, certain ways to get through. Routes I trust and probably depend on too much. I recognize certain words, certain constructions, as if they were familiar trees during a daily walk. But ultimately when I write I’m in a trench. ◇

I write on the margins, just as I’ve always lived on the margins of countries, of cultures. A peripheral zone where it’s impossible for me to feel rooted, but where I’m comfortable. The only zone where I think that, in some way, I belong.

I can skirt the boundary of Italian, but the interior of the language escapes me. I don’t see the secret pathways, the concealed layers. The hidden levels. The subterranean part.

At Hadrian’s Villa, in Tivoli, there is a gigantic network of streets, an impressive and imposing system that is entirely underground. This complex of passages was dug to transport goods, servants, slaves. To separate the emperor from the people. To hide the real and unruly life of the villa, just as the skin hides the unsightly but essential functions of the body. ◇

At Tivoli I understand the nature of my Italian project. Like visitors to the villa today, like Hadrian almost two millennia ago, I walk on the surface, the accessible part. But I know, as a writer, that a language exists in the bones, in the marrow. That the true life of the language, the substance, is there.

To return to Fuentes: I agree, I think that an awareness of impossibility is central to the creative impulse. In the face of everything that seems to me

unattainable, I marvel. Without a sense of marvel at things, without wonder, one can't create anything.

If everything were possible, what would be the meaning, the point of life? ◇

If it were possible to bridge the distance between me and Italian, I would stop writing in that language.

VENICE



In this disquieting, almost dreamlike city, I discover a new way to understand my relationship with Italian. The fragmented, disorienting topography gives me another key.

It's the dialogue between the bridges and the canals. A dialogue between water and land. A dialogue that expresses a state of both separation and connection.

In Venice I can't go anywhere without crossing countless pedestrian bridges. At first, having to cross a bridge every few minutes is exhausting. Each journey seems abnormal and somewhat difficult. In a short time, though, I get used to it, and slowly this journey becomes habitual, enticing. I ascend, cross the canal, then descend on the other side. Walking through Venice means repeating this act an incalculable number of times. In the middle of every bridge I find myself suspended, neither here nor there. Writing in another language resembles a journey of this sort. ◇

My writing in Italian is, just like a bridge, something constructed, fragile. It might collapse at any moment, leaving me in danger. English flows under my feet. I'm aware of it: an undeniable presence, even if I try to avoid it. Like the water in Venice, it remains the stronger, more natural element, the element that forever threatens to swallow me. Paradoxically, I could survive without any trouble in English; I wouldn't drown. And yet, because I don't want any contact with the water, I build bridges.

I notice that in Venice almost all the elements are inverted. It's hard for me to distinguish between what exists and what seems an illusion, an apparition. Everything appears unstable, changeable. The streets aren't solid. The houses seem to float. The fog can make the architecture invisible. The high water can flood a square. The canals reflect a version of the city that doesn't exist.

The disorientation I feel in Venice is similar to what possesses me when I write in Italian. In spite of the map of the *sestieri*, I get lost. The Venetian

maze transcends its own map the way a language transcends its own grammar. Walking in Venice, like writing in Italian, is an experience that throws me off balance. I have to give in. Writing, I come up against so many dead ends, so many tight corners to get myself out of. I have to abandon certain streets. I continually have to correct myself. There are moments in Italian, just as in Venice, when I feel suffocated, distraught. Then I turn and, when I least expect it, find myself in an isolated, silent, shining place. ◇

Over the years Venice has had an increasingly unsettling impact on me. Its devastating beauty pierces me, I'm overwhelmed by the fragility of life. I'm enveloped in a passionate dream that always seems about to dissolve. A dream that's truer than life. Crossing the bridges again and again makes me think of the passage that we all make on the earth, between birth and death. Sometimes, crossing certain bridges, I fear I've already reached the beyond.

When I write in Italian, I feel the same disquiet, in spite of my love for the language. The step that I'm taking seems like a leap into the void, an inversion of myself. Like the reflections of the buildings that tremble on the surface of the Grand Canal, my writing in Italian is something impalpable. Nebulous, like the fog. I'm afraid that the bridge between me and Italian doesn't, ultimately, exist. That it will remain, at best, a chimera.

Yet both in Venice and on the page, bridges are the only way to move into a new dimension, to get past English, to arrive somewhere else. Every sentence I write in Italian is a small bridge that has to be constructed, then crossed. I do it with hesitation mixed with a persistent, inexplicable impulse. Every sentence, like every bridge, carries me from one place to another. It's an atypical, enticing path. A new rhythm. Now I'm almost used to it. ◇

THE IMPERFECT



There are so many things that continue to confuse me in Italian. Prepositions, for example: **alla parete, per terra, dal calzolaio, in edicola** (on the wall, on the ground, at the shoemaker, at the newsstand). To review them, I could take notes **nel quaderno** or **sul taccuino** (in the exercise book or in the notebook). I have a grammar containing a series of exercises of this sort, to help foreign students: "*Mettiti miei pantaloni e prova vedere la situazione i miei occhi*" (Put yourself my clothes and try see the situation my eyes). They are tedious, but I do them anyway, if I want to master the language, there's no way out. And yet I never manage to fill in those blank spaces perfectly. Maybe this stupendous sentence from a story by Alberto Moravia would be sufficient to teach me the prepositions once and for all: "*Sbucammo finalmente su una piazza al sole, in un venticello frizzante da neve, davanti un parapetto oltre il quale non c'era che la luce di un grande panorama che non si vedeva*" ("We finally emerged onto a square in the sun, in a crisp breeze hinting at snow, in front of a parapet beyond which there was only the light of a grand panorama that couldn't be seen").

Another thorn in my side is the use of the article—it's not clear to me when you use it and when it's dropped. Why does one say *c'è vento* (it's windy), but *c'è il sole* (it's sunny)? I struggle to understand the difference between *uno stato d'animo* (a state of mind) and *una busta della spesa* (a shopping bag), *giorni di scirocco* (days of sirocco) and *la linea dell'orizzonte* (the line of the horizon). I tend to make mistakes, putting the article when there's no need (as in "*Parliamo del cinema*," instead of *di cinema*, or "*Sono venuta in Italia per cambiare la strada*," instead of *cambiare strada*; "We're talking about the movies" instead of "about movies"; "I came to Italy to change the course" instead of "to change course"), but reading Elio Vittorini I learn that you say *queste sono fandonie* (those are lies). Thanks to an advertising poster on the street, I learn that *il piacere non ha limiti* (pleasure has no limits).

THE SECOND EXILE



After spending a year in Rome I return to America for a month. Immediately, I miss Italian. Not to be able to speak it and hear it every day distresses me. When I go to restaurants, to shops, to the beach, I'm irritated: Why aren't people speaking Italian? I don't want to interact with anyone. I have an aching sense of homesickness.

Everything I absorbed in Rome seems absent. Returning to the maternal metaphor, I think of the first times I had to leave my children at home, just after they were born. At the time, I felt a tremendous anxiety. I felt guilty, even though those brief moments of separation were normal, important both for me and for them. It was important to establish that our bodies, until then connected, were independent. And yet now, as then, I am acutely conscious of a painful physical detachment. As if a part of me were missing.

I'm aware of the distance. Of an oppressive, intolerable silence. ◇

The absence of Italian assails me more forcefully every day. I'm afraid I've already forgotten everything I learned. I'm afraid of being annihilated. I imagine a devouring vortex, all the words disappearing into the darkness. In my notebook I make a list of Italian verbs that signify the act of going away: *scomparire, svanire, sbiadire, sfumare, finire. Evaporare, svaporare, svam-pire. Perdersi, dileguarsi, dissolversi.* I know that some are synonyms of *morire, to die.*

I suffer until, one afternoon on Cape Cod, a journalist from Milan calls, to interview me. I can't wait for the phone to ring, but as I'm talking to her I'm worried that my Italian already sounds awkward, that my language is already out of practice. A foreign language is a delicate, finicky muscle. If you don't use it, it gets weak. In America, my Italian sounds jarring, transplanted. The manner of speaking, the sounds, the rhythms, the cadences seem uprooted, out of place. The words seem irrelevant, without a meaningful presence. They seem like castaways, nomads.

In America, when I was young, my parents always seemed to be in mourning for something. Now I understand: it must have been the language. Forty years ago it wasn't easy for them to talk to their families on the phone. They looked forward to the mail. They couldn't wait for a letter to arrive from Calcutta, written in Bengali. They read it a hundred times, they saved it. Those letters evoked their language and conjured a life that had disappeared. When the language one identifies with is far away, one does everything possible to keep it alive. Because words bring back everything: the place, the people, the life, the streets, the light, the sky, the flowers, the sounds. When you live without your own language you feel weightless and, at the same time, overloaded. You breathe another type of air, at a different altitude. You are always aware of the difference. ◇

After living in Italy for only a year, I feel a little like that in America. And yet something doesn't add up. I'm not Italian, I'm not even bilingual. Italian remains for me a language learned as an adult, cultivated, nurtured.

One day on Cape Cod I happen on a secondhand book sale, outside, in a small square. On the grass are a lot of folding tables piled with all types of books. They're very cheap. Usually I like rummaging for an hour or so and buying a bunch of things. This time, however, I don't want to buy anything, because all the books are in English. Feeling desperate, I look for a book in Italian. There are a few boxes devoted to foreign languages. I see a beat-up German dictionary, some tattered French novels, but nothing in Italian. The only thing that attracts me is a tourist guide to Italy written in English; it's the only thing I buy, and only because it makes me think of returning to Rome at the end of August. All the other books, even a copy of one of my own novels, leave me indifferent. As if they were written in a foreign language.

Now I feel a double crisis. On the one hand I'm aware of the ocean, in every sense, between me and Italian. On the other, of the separation between me and English. I'd already noticed it in Italy, translating myself. But I think that emotional distance is always more pronounced, more piercing, when, in spite of proximity, there remains an abyss. ◇

Why don't I feel more at home in English? How is it that the language I learned to read and write in doesn't comfort me? What happened, and what does it mean? The estrangement, the disenchantment confuses, disturbs me. I feel more than ever that I am a writer without a definitive language, without

origin, without definition. Whether it's an advantage or a disadvantage I wouldn't know.

Midway through the month I go to see my Venetian Italian teacher, in Brooklyn. This time we don't have a lesson, just a long chat. We talk about Rome, about her family and mine. I bring her a box of *biscottini*, I show her photographs of my new life. She gives me some of her books, paperbacks, taken down from the shelves: stories by Calvino, Pavese, Silvio d'Arzo. Poems of Ungaretti. It's the last time I'll come here. My teacher is about to move, she's leaving Brooklyn. She's already sold the house where she lived for many years, where we had our lessons. She is preparing to pack everything for the move. From now on, when I return to America, to Brooklyn, I won't see her.

I come home carrying a small pile of Italian books, and with these, in spite of a pervasive melancholy, I am able to calm myself. In this period of silence, of linguistic isolation, only a book can reassure me. Books are the best means—private, discreet, reliable—of overcoming reality. ◇

I read in Italian every day, but I don't write. In America I become passive. Even though I've brought the dictionaries, the exercise books, the notebooks, I can't write even a word in Italian. I describe nothing in the diary, I don't feel like it. As far as writing is concerned, I remain inactive. As if I were in a creative waiting room, all I do is wait.

Finally, at the end of August, at the airport, at the gate, I am surrounded by Italian again. I see all the Italians who are going home after their vacations in New York. I hear their chatter. At first I feel relief, joy. Immediately afterward I realize that I'm not like them. I'm different, just as I was different from my parents when we went on vacation to Calcutta. I'm not returning to Rome to rejoin my language. I'm returning to continue my courtship of another.

Those who don't belong to any specific place can't, in fact, return anywhere. The concepts of exile and return imply a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world, even at my desk. In the end I realize that it wasn't a true exile: far from it. I am exiled even from the definition of exile. ◇

THE WALL



There is pain in every joy. In every violent passion a dark side.

The second year in Rome, after Christmas, I go with my family to see the temples at Paestum, and afterward we spend a couple of days in Salerno. There, in the center, in a shop window, I notice some nice children's clothes. I go in with my daughter. I turn to the saleswoman. I tell her I'm looking for pants for my daughter. I describe what I have in mind, suggest colors that would suit, and add that my daughter doesn't like styles that are too tight, that she would prefer something comfortable. In other words, I speak for quite a long time with this saleswoman, in an Italian that is fluent but not completely natural.

At a certain point my husband comes in with our son. Unlike me, my husband, an American, looks as if he could be Italian. He and I exchange a few words, in Italian, in front of the saleswoman. I show him a jacket on sale that I'm considering for our son. He answers in monosyllables, Sure, I like it, yes, let's see. Not even an entire sentence. My husband speaks perfect Spanish, so he tends to speak Italian with a Spanish accent. He says *sessenta y uno* instead of *sessantuno* (sixty-one), *bellessa* instead of *bellezza* (beauty), *nunca* instead of *mai* (never); our children tease him about it. My husband speaks Italian well, but he doesn't speak it better than I do. ◇

We decide to buy two pairs of pants plus the jacket. At the cash register, while I'm paying, the saleswoman asks me: "Where are you from?"

I explain that we live in Rome, that we moved to Italy last year from New York. At that point the saleswoman says: "But your husband must be Italian. He speaks perfectly, without any accent."

Here is the border that I will never manage to cross. The wall that will remain forever between me and Italian, no matter how well I learn it. My physical appearance. ◇

I feel like crying. I would like to shout: “I’m the one who desperately loves your language, not my husband. He speaks Italian only because he needs to, because he happens to live here. I’ve been studying your language for more than twenty years, he not even for two. I read only your literature. I can now speak Italian in public, do live radio interviews. I keep an Italian diary, I write stories.”

I don’t say anything to the saleswoman. I thank her, I say goodbye, then I go out. I understand that my attachment to Italian is worthless. That all my devotion, all the passion signify nothing. According to this saleswoman, my husband can speak Italian very well, he should be praised, not me. I feel humiliated, offended, envious. I’m speechless. Finally I say to my husband, in Italian, when we’re on the street, “*Sono sbalordita*” (I’m stunned).

And my husband asks me, in English, “What does *sbalordita* mean?” ◇

The episode in Salerno is only one example of the wall I face repeatedly in Italy. Because of my physical appearance, I’m seen as a foreigner. It’s true, I am. But, being a foreigner who speaks Italian well, I have two linguistic experiences, remarkably different, in this country.

Those who know me speak to me in Italian. They appreciate that I understand their language, they gladly share it with me. When I speak Italian with my Italian friends I feel immersed in the language, welcomed, accepted. I take part in the language: in the theater of spoken Italian I think that I, too, have a role, a presence. With friends I can talk for hours, at times for days, without having to rely on any English word. I’m in the middle of the lake and I’m swimming with them, in my own way.

But when I go into a shop like the one in Salerno I find myself abruptly hurled back to shore. People who don’t know me assume, looking at me, that I don’t know Italian. When I speak to them in Italian, when I ask for something (a head of garlic, a stamp, the time), they say, puzzled, “I don’t understand.” It’s always the same response, the same scowl. As if my Italian were another language. ◇

They don’t understand me because they don’t want to understand me; they don’t understand me because they don’t want to listen to me, accept me. That’s how the wall works. Someone who doesn’t understand me can ignore me, doesn’t have to take account of me. Such people look at me but don’t see me. They don’t appreciate that I am working hard to speak their language;

rather, it irritates them. Sometimes when I speak Italian in Italy, I feel reprimanded, like a child who touches an object that shouldn’t be touched. “Don’t touch our language,” some Italians seem to say to me. “It doesn’t belong to you.”

Learning a foreign language is the fundamental way to fit in with new people in a new country. It makes a relationship possible. Without language you can’t feel that you have a legitimate, respected presence. You are without a voice, without power. No chink, no point of entrance can be found in the wall. I know that if I stayed in Italy for the rest of my life, even if I were able to speak a polished, impeccable Italian, that wall, for me, would remain. I think of people who were born and grew up in Italy, who consider Italy their homeland, who speak Italian perfectly, but who, in the eyes of certain Italians, seem “foreign.”

My husband’s name is Alberto. For him, it’s enough to extend his hand, to say, “A pleasure, I’m Alberto.” Because of his looks, because of his name, everyone thinks he’s Italian. When I do the same thing, the same people say, in English, “Nice to meet you.” When I continue to speak in Italian, they ask me: “How is it that you speak Italian so well?” and I have to provide an explanation, I have to say why. The fact that I speak Italian seems to them unusual. No one asks my husband that question. ◇

One evening, I’m presenting my latest novel in a bookstore in the Flaminio neighborhood of Rome. I’ve prepared for a conversation with an Italian friend—also a writer—on various literary topics. Before the presentation begins, a man whom my husband and I have just met asks if I’m going to make the presentation in English. When I answer, in Italian, that I intend to do it in Italian, he asks if I learned the language from my husband.

In America, although I speak English like a native, although I’m considered an American writer, I meet the same wall but for different reasons. Every so often, because of my name, and my appearance, someone asks me why I chose to write in English rather than in my native language. Those who meet me for the first time—when they see me, then learn my name, then hear the way I speak English—ask me where I’m from. I have to justify the language I speak in, even though I know it perfectly. If I don’t speak, even many Americans think I’m a foreigner. I remember running into a man on the street one day who wanted to give me an advertising flyer. I was returning from a library

in Boston; at the time I was writing my doctoral thesis, on English literature in the seventeenth century. When I refused to take the flyer, the man yelled: “*What the fuck is your problem, can’t speak English?*”

I can’t avoid the wall even in India, in Calcutta, in the city of my so-called mother tongue. There, apart from my relatives who have known me forever, almost everyone thinks that, because I was born and grew up outside India, I speak only English, or that I scarcely understand Bengali. In spite of my appearance and my Indian name, they speak to me in English. When I answer in Bengali, they express the same surprise as certain Italians, certain Americans. No one, anywhere, assumes that I speak the languages that are a part of me. ◇

I’m a writer: I identify myself completely with language, I work with it. And yet the wall keeps me at a distance, separates me. The wall is inevitable. It surrounds me wherever I go, so that I wonder if perhaps the wall is me.

I write in order to break down the wall, to express myself in a pure way. When I write, my appearance, my name have nothing to do with it. I am heard without being seen, without prejudices, without a filter. I am invisible. I become my words, and the words become me.

When I write in Italian I have to accept a second wall, which is very high and even more impermeable: the wall of language itself. But from the creative point of view that linguistic wall, however exasperating, interests me, inspires me. ◇

A last example: one day in Rome I go to have lunch with my Italian publisher and his wife at the Hotel d’Inghilterra. We talk about the publication of my latest book in Italy, and about what I’m writing now, about my desire to write something about my relationship with the Italian language. We talk about Anna Maria Ortese and other Italian writers I’d like to translate. My publisher seems enthusiastic about these new projects I have in mind. He says that what I’d like to do—write, for the moment, in Italian—seems to him a good idea.

After lunch, something catches my eye in the window of a shop selling shoes and purses on Via del Corso. I go into the shop. This time I say nothing. I’m silent. But the saleswoman, seeing me, says immediately, in English, “May I help you?”—four polite words that every so often in Italy break my heart.