



## *Confessions of an Innamorata*

WHEN I ARRIVED IN ITALY FOR THE FIRST TIME in 1983 I knew only one Italian sentence: “*Mi dispiace, ma non parlo italiano*” (“I’m sorry, but I don’t speak Italian”). In my first minutes in the country, I repeated it half a dozen times, with ever-mounting panic in my voice, interspersed with pleas of “Stop this train!” Other passengers responded with concerned looks and torrents of incomprehensible Italian. Only the weary conductor followed my gaze as I pointed to my forlorn black suitcase, which the porter had left behind on the platform in Domodossola.

“*La sua valigia?*” (“Your suitcase?”)

“Si.” I nodded, frantic that I would never be reunited with it again.

“*Non c’è problema,*” he announced loudly. “*Domani mattina a Milano.*”

The faces encircling me smiled in relief. “*Domani mattina*,” they repeated reassuringly. “*Domani mattina*.”

Settling into my seat, I rolled the melodious syllables around my mouth. Yes, as soon as I arrived in Milan, I would find Signor Domani Mattina, and he would somehow retrieve my bag. In the colossal bleakness of the Milan station, I threaded my way down massive stone staircases. Late on a Sunday afternoon, everything was closed. I rushed to a man in a blue custodial uniform and entreated, “*Signor Domani Mattina?*”

“No, *signorina*,” he said, looking confused. I whipped out my pocket English-Italian dictionary to find the Italian word for “where,” which I mispronounced as if it were the English name of a gentle white bird: “*Dove?*”

“*Doh-VAY!*” he boomed before breaking into laughter. “No, *signorina*, the day after today. *Domani mattina*.”

My quest for the quixotic “Mr. Tomorrow Morning” launched my journey into the Italian language. Throughout that first semisilent excursion in Italy, I delighted in the beauty of what I saw, but I craved comprehension of what I heard. I wanted to understand the waiter’s quip when he set down my cappuccino, the *barzioletta* (funny story) the shopkeeper told with a wink, the verbal embraces couples exchanged as they strolled at twilight. And so, unlike Italophiles who trek through frescoed churches or restore rustic farmhouses, I chose to inhabit the language, as bawdy as it is beautiful, as zesty a linguistic stew as the peppery *puttanesca* sauce named for Italy’s notorious ladies of the night.

Over the last quarter-century, I have devoted countless hours and effort—enough, if applied to more practical pursuits,

for the down payment on a villa in Umbria—to the wiliest of Western tongues. I have studied Italian in every way I could find—from Berlitz to books, with CDs and podcasts, in private tutorials and conversation groups, and during what some might deem unconscionable amounts of time in Italy.

I've come to think of Italian as a *briccone*—a lovable rascal, a clever, twinkle-eyed scamp that you can't resist even when it plays you for the fool. *Croce e delizia*, torment and delight, Verdi's Violetta sang of love. The same holds true for the language his operas carried on golden wings. Yet, to an extent I never dreamed possible, Italian has become not just a passion and a pleasure but a passport into Italy's *storia*—a word that means both “history” and “story.”

As a country Italy makes no sense. Think of it: a spiny peninsula stretching from snowcapped Alps to sunbaked islands, spattered with stone villages bound by ancient allegiances, a mosaic of dialects, cuisines, and cultures united into a nation barely a century and a half ago. Metternich dismissed it as a “geographic expression.” Too long to be a nation, sniffed Napoleon. Possible to govern, growled Mussolini, but useless to try. The real Italy resides somewhere beyond blood or borders in what President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi has called “*la nostra prima patria*” (“our first fatherland”)—its language.

And what a language it is! Italian, handcrafted by poets and wordsmiths, embodies its native speakers' greatest genius: the ability to transform anything—from marble to melody, from the humble noodle to life itself—into a joyous art. English, like a big black felt-nosed Magic Marker, declares itself in bold statements and blunt talk. Italian's sleek, fine-pointed quill twirls

into delicate curlicues and dramatic flourishes. While other tongues do little more than speak, this lyrical language thrills the ear, beguiles the mind, captivates the heart, enraptures the soul, and comes closer than any other idiom to expressing the essence of what it means to be human.

Centuries before there was an Italy, there was Italian. Its roots date back nearly three millennia. According to legend, in 753 B.C., Romulus, son of the god Mars and a vestal virgin, after killing his twin brother, Remus, founded a settlement for his band of itinerant shepherds and farmers on the hills above the Tiber. Their utterances evolved into the *volgare* (from the Latin *sermo vulgaris*, for the people's common speech), the rough-and-ready spoken vernacular. Scrappy street Latin, not the classical, cadenced rhetoric of Caesar and Cicero, gave rise to all the Romance languages, including Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian.

The first miracle of Italian is its survival. No government mandated its use. No mighty empire promoted it as an official language. No conquering armies or armadas trumpeted it to distant lands. Brutally divided, invaded, and conquered, the Mediterranean peninsula remained a patchwork of dialects, often as different from one another as French from Spanish or English from Italian. Sailors from Genoa couldn't understand—or be understood by—merchants from Venice or farmers from Friuli. Florentines living in *il centro*, the heart of the city, couldn't speak the dialect of San Frediano, my favorite neighborhood, on the other side of the Arno.

Italian as we know it was created, not born. With the same thunderbolt genius that would transform art in the Re-

naissance, writers of fourteenth-century Florence—Dante first and foremost—crafted the effervescent Tuscan vernacular into a language rich and powerful enough to sweep down from heaven and up from hell. This priceless living legacy, no less than Petrarch's poetry, Michelangelo's sculptures, Verdi's operas, Fellini's movies, or Valentino's dresses, is an artistic masterwork.

Through centuries of often brutal foreign domination, words remained all that Italy's people could claim as their own. "When a people has lost homeland and liberty, their language takes the place of a nation and of everything," observed Luigi Settembrini, a nineteenth-century Neapolitan "professor of eloquence" who dedicated his life to the language that came to define Western civilization. "Italians" gave the name "America" (a tribute to the Florentine navigator Amerigo Vespucci) to Americans; created the first universities, law and medical schools, banks, and public libraries; taught diplomacy and manners to Europe; showed the French how to eat with a fork; mapped the moon (in the 1600s); split the atom; produced the first modern histories, satires, sonnets, and travelogues; invented the battery, barometer, radio, and thermometer; and bestowed on the world the eternal gift of music.

Yet as a national spoken tongue, Italian, practically born yesterday, is *nuovissimo* (very, very new), says the noted linguist Giuseppe Patota in an interview in his apartment in Rome. Rallying for one nation united by one language, Italians won their country's independence in 1861, almost a century later than the United States. At the time four in five of its citizens were illiterate. Fewer than 10 percent spoke Italian exclusively or with greater ease than a local dialect. Not until 1996—135 years after

unification—did more than half of Italians report using *italiano standard* (the national language) rather than dialect outside their homes. Word by word, generation by generation, village by village, the people of the peninsula became Italian speakers.

Ever-growing numbers of people around the world are trying to do the same. English may be the language everyone *needs* to know, but Italian is the language people *want* to learn. With only an estimated 60 to 63 million native speakers (compared to a whopping 1.8 billion who claim at least a little English), Italian barely eclipses Urdu, Pakistan's official language, for nineteenth place as a spoken tongue. Yet Italian ranks fourth among the world's most studied languages—after English, Spanish, and French. In the United States, Italian has become the fastest-growing language taught in colleges and universities. So popular is the “new French,” as the *New York Times* dubbed it, that parents—and not just those of Italian descent—are sending toddlers to *piccole scuole* (little schools) to learn it.

This trend mystifies many. When I mentioned my Italian studies to a venture capitalist in San Francisco, he asked if I could have chosen a less practical language. I might have cited Urdu, but I saw his point. My husband can unfurl his college French (or at least a few tattered remnants of it) everywhere from Paris to Polynesia, and Spanish unlocks the keys to an entire atlas of nations. Only four countries other than Italy—Switzerland, Croatia, San Marino, and Slovenia, along with the Vatican—recognize Italian as an official language. No scientific society, multinational trade association, or global enterprise, even if based in Italy, requires Italian as its lingua franca. And certainly tourists can get by with a smile and a *ciao* in a coun-

try that has been serving, seducing, and satisfying foreigners for centuries.

So why do so many people want to study Italian? “I suspect it is because Italy and the Italian language are perceived as beautiful, fun, and sexy,” observed Stephen Brockman, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, in a recent essay called “A Defense of European Languages,” adding, “And why not? I can’t see anything wrong with that.” The Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, reporting on the boom in Italian courses at American universities, cited the soaring popularity of Italian food, fashion, art, architecture, music, and culture and noted that Americans see Italian “*come una lingua polisensoriale capace di aprire le porte al bello*” (“as a multisensory language able to open the gates to beauty”).

I bring the question of Italian’s eternal appeal to the language’s oldest and most prestigious champion: the Società Dante Alighieri, founded in 1889, with some five hundred branches spanning the globe, from Australia to Argentina to Nepal to Croatia. Its offices in Rome’s Palazzo Medici, once the ornate home of the Florentine ambassador, are a shrine to the language, with shelves of leather-bound volumes lining the walls of the high-ceilinged rooms, and busts of Dante and other literary giants mounted on pedestals.

In these hallowed halls, Luca Serianni, a renowned professor of the history of the Italian language at Rome’s La Sapienza University and one of the Società’s *consiglieri*, tells me that the foreigners thronging to Italian classes around the globe are seeking more than vocabulary and grammar. “You cannot separate our language from our culture,” he explains. “When you learn

Italian, you enter our history, our art, our music, our traditions.”

In fact, you enter the Italian soul. Acclaimed as the most musical of tongues, Italian is also the most emotionally expressive. Its primal sounds—virtually identical to those that once roared through Roman amphitheaters and forums—strike a chord in our universal linguistic DNA.

“Pronto!” (“Ready!”), Italians say when they answer the telephone. And ready they are—to talk, laugh, curse, debate, woo, sing, lament. Their native tongue conveys a sense of something coming alive. Its sinewy verbs flex like *muscoli* (muscles), from a Latin word for “little mice,” scampering under the skin. In Italy the ubiquitous @ in e-mail addresses mischievously curls into a *chiocciola*, or snail, just as a spiral staircase spins into a *scala a chiocciola*. Rome’s local dialect describes a tightwad as someone with pockets in the shape of a snail.

Even ordinary things—such as a towel (*asciugamano*) or handkerchief (*fazzoletto*)—sound better in Italian. The reasons start with its vigorous *vocali*, or vowels, which look like their English counterparts but sound quite different. In my first formal class in Italian, the teacher had us look in a mirror as we mouthed a-e-i-o-u in the flat English manner and then in the more emphatic Italian style, with the vowels puffing our cheeks, tugging at our lips, and loosening our jaws.

An Italian *a* slides up from the throat into an ecstatic “aaaah.” Its *e* (pronounced like a hard English *a*) cheers like the hearty “ay” at the end of *hip-hip-hooray*. The *i* (which sounds like an English *e*) glides with the glee of the double *e* in *bee*. The *o* (an English *o* on steroids) is as perfectly round as the red circle

Giotto painted in a single stroke for a pope demanding a sample of his work. The macho *u* (deeper, stronger, and longer than its English counterpart) lunges into the air like a penalty kick from Italy's world-champion soccer team, the Azzurri (the Blues).

Sounds of all sorts take on different accents in Italian. Rather than with a sloppy "ah-choo," an Italian sneezes with a daintier "èccì." Italian distinguishes between the sound of swallowing water (*glu glu glu*) and chewing food (*gnam gnam gnam*). Bells ring *din don dan*. Trains *ciuff-ciuff*. Motors *vrum-vrum*. Clocks *tic-tac*. Guns fire with a *pim pum pam*. A telephone's busy signal stutters *tuu tuu tuu*. Over the years I've been awakened by little birds that *cip cip cip*, dogs that *abbaiano*, roosters that go *chic-chirichì*, and crickets that *cri-cri-cri*. In the morning, Bambola, the mangy stray cat who has become my pet at the villa we rent every summer, curls onto my lap and *fa le fusa* (purrs).

A color becomes more than a hue in Italian. A *giallo* (yellow) refers to a mystery—in life, literature, or movies—because thrillers traditionally had yellow covers. A Telefono Azzurro (blue telephone) is a hotline for abused children; a *settimana bianca* (white week), a ski holiday in winter; and a *matrimonio in bianco* (white wedding), an unconsummated and ostensibly unhappy marriage. While Americans who overspend their budgets wind up in the red, Italians go to the green (*al verde*), an expression that dates back to the time when the base of a candle was painted green. When the flame burned down to the green, people, presumably out of money to buy another, ran out of light as well. According to another etymological explanation, *al verde* refers to the hapless state of a gambler who has lost everything—

*il proprio gruzzoletto*, his hard-earned life savings—and sees only the bare playing table, traditionally green, in front of him.

Prince Charming always appears as *Principe azzurro* (the blue prince). *Viola* (purple) triggers so much apprehension that the wife of the Italian consul in San Francisco stopped our interview to ask me to switch to a different pen. Italians, she explained, associate purple with Lent, when drapes of that color shroud church statues. For many centuries, theaters closed during this penitential season so actors and singers lost their jobs and incomes. Because of their misfortune, unlucky purple became a color to avoid.

Italian's basic word chest, as tallied in a recent dictionary, totals a measly 200,000, compared to English's 600,000 (not counting technical terms). But with a prefix here and a suffix there, Italian words multiply like fruit flies. *Fischiare* (whistle) sounds merry enough, but *fischiettare* means "whistling with joy." No one wants to be *vecchio* (old), but *invecchiare* (to become old) loses its sting—and, according to an Italian proverb, no one does so *al tavolo* (at table). Sooner or later we all may end up in a *garbuglio*, or muddle, but stumbling through the syllables of *ingarbugliarsi* is sure "to get (you) muddled." A sign outside a rustic *osteria* (a tavern serving simple food) summarized its entire menu in three variations on a single word: *pranzo* (lunch)—fifteen euro; *pranzetto* (lighter lunch)—ten euro; *pranzettino* (bite to eat)—five euro.

I might never have appreciated such linguistic finesse if not for Niccolò Tommaseo, a nineteenth-century essayist and iconoclast (arrested and exiled for his political views) whose passions included women and words. He demonstrated his de-

votion to the latter by compiling the *Dizionario dei sinonimi*, an encyclopedic narrative dictionary of Italian synonyms, published in 1864, and unmatched in any other language and literature. Italian alone, he contended—and in particular the Tuscan dialect that shaped the language—captures life's *sfumature* (nuances), the same word Italian uses for Leonardo's subtle brushstrokes.

"It is worth learning Italian just for the pleasure of reading Tommaseo's dictionary," Maurizio Borghi, a visiting professor from Milan, tells me during an interview at the University of California, Berkeley. Rather than compiling a straightforward list of words, Tommaseo played with Italian's treasure chest of metaphors and diminutives in a mammoth collection of 3,579 synonyms, from *abbacare* (to daydream) to *zuppa* (soup). As soon as I read a sampling, I pegged him as a kindred soul, as captivated as I by the ability of Italian words to take flight, soar, spin, dip, and pirouette with incomparable flair.

Take, for instance, Tommaseo's entry on Italy's national pastime (past and present): flirting, which translates into *fare la civetta*, or "make like an owl." Only Italian distinguishes between a *civettino*, a precocious boy flattering a pretty woman; a *civettone*, a boorish lout doing the same; a *civettina*, an innocent coquette; and a *civettuola*, a brazen hussy. A *giovannotto di prima barba* (a boy who starts flirting even before growing a beard) may turn out to be a *damerino* (dandy), a *zerbino* (doormat), a *zerbinetto* (lady-killer), or a *zerbinotto* (a fop too old for such foolishness). If he becomes a *cicisbeo*, he joins a long line of Italian men who flagrantly courted married women.

I've met every one of these varieties over the years. On my first trip to Florence, I was craning out the window of a taxi to

take in the Duomo's multistriped magnificence when I felt a hand sliding up my skirt.

"What are you doing?" I snapped at the young driver.

"Just looking," he responded in English, although that's not what he was doing. (Italians picked up this phrase, I later learned, from the standard American reply to a shopkeeper's offer of help.) For the most part, Italian flirts keep their hands to themselves and rely on their looks—and their lines. Most have complimented my eyes, a quite ordinary green that passes unnoticed in the United States but grabs attention on the streets of Florence. A few years ago at a festive reception in that city, two men behind me—never thinking I might understand Italian—began debating whether my eyes were the color of *giada* (jade) or *smeraldo* (emerald). When one seemed to imply that I had an artificial eye, I couldn't stay silent any longer.

"No, no, no, signora," the speaker protested, explaining that to him my eyes seemed made of porcelain, created by an artist greater even than those of his native city. "*Bellini*" ("little beauties"), he added, using one of the ubiquitous diminutives that sweeten the language like the heaps of sugar Italians add to a thimbleful of espresso.

*Vento* (wind) melts into *venticello* (a nice little breeze); *caldo* (hot) snuggles into *calduccio* (nice and warm). When an Italian stuffs cash in appreciation or anticipation of a favor into an envelope, a *busta* becomes a welcome *bustarella*. A tiny tail at the end of the word transforms the coarse *culo* into *culetto* (a sweet little baby bottom) or *culoni* (big butts), a popular nickname for Americans. The Italian physicist Enrico Fermi (1901–1954) added the term *neutrino* (little neutral one) for a particle even smaller

than the neutron, to the scientific lexicon. In music *prestissimo* means a little faster than *presto* (fast) and *andantino* not as slow as *andante* (slow).

Although endings such as *-ino*, *-otto*, or *-ello* are generally endearing, my Italian friends warn me to beware of anyone asking for a little anything, whether it's a tiny little moment of your time (*attimino*), a peck of a kiss (*bacino*), or a bit of help (*aiutino*). Bigger (indicated with *-one* as in *torrione* for big tower) isn't necessarily better. Italians mistrust a *parolone* (a big meaningless word) in the mouths of politicians and scoff at *sporaccioni* (dirty old men). Suffixes such as *-astro*, *-ucolo*, or *-accio* also spell trouble. No one wants to hire an *avvocatuccio* (small-time lawyer), read the works of a *poetucolo* (untalented poet), wear a *cappellaccio* (ugly hat), or drive on a *stradaccia* (bad road).

Just about everything that can be said has been said in Italian—then rephrased, edited, modified, synthesized, and polished to a verbal gleam. It's no wonder that a single Italian word can reveal more than an entire English paragraph. A headline in Rome captures the misadventures of Britney Spears with a nickname: *la scandalosa*. A historian's description of Machiavelli as a *mangiapreti* (priest-eater) neatly sums up the master strategist's religious views. An Italian friend winces and blames "*il colpo della strega*" (the strike of a witch, a fitting term for a back spasm). *Barcollare*—to move like a boat—perfectly conveys the swaying stride of a drunken sailor. Although I have yet to use it in a sentence, the very existence of *colombeggiare*, which means "to kiss one another like doves," makes me smile.

Italians' irrepressible wit sparkles in words like *trucco* (trick) for makeup and *bugiardino* (little liar), the term doctors

use for the patient information insert for a prescription drug. Friends encapsulate the fourteen-inch height discrepancy between my husband and me by describing us as an *il*—the combination of a short *i* and a tall *l* that translates into “the.” Neapolitans’ invention of a word for a man who painted the eyes of day-old fish in markets so they appeared fresh crystallized the ingenious survival skills of the locals. Would-be buyers of Tuscan villas might take heed of a new meaning for the word *falsificatore* to refer to a craftsman who makes new furniture look antique and sells it at exorbitant prices to gullible foreigners. “To trust is good,” says an old Italian proverb my friends like to quote. “Not to trust is better.”

A very good person, someone we might praise in English as the salt of the earth, becomes *un pezzo di pane* (a piece of bread) in Italian. Rather than having heart or guts, a brave Italian has *fegato* (liver), while a man *in gamba* (literally “on a leg”) is on top of his game. In Italian, it’s a compliment to be praised for your nose (*naso*), for intuition; hand (*mano*), for artistry; or testicles (*coglioni*), for being, well, ballsy.

One night, dressed *di tutto punto* (to the nines) at an informal wine-tasting with friends on the roof of Rome’s Hassler Hotel, we found ourselves in a linguistic barnyard, with the waiters chiming in with examples of bestial metaphors. Italians, although quite foxy, have no word to say so. Yet Italian corrals animals of every sort to describe a person who eats like an ox (*bue*), sings like a nightingale (*usignolo*), cries like a calf (*vitello*), fights like a lion (*leone*), hops like a cricket (*grillo*), or sleeps like a dormouse (*ghiro*). As in English, a *testa dura* (hard head) can be as stubborn as a mule (*mulo*), but an Italian also may be as silent

as a fish (*pesce*), crazy as a horse (*cavallo*), or mischievous as a monkey (*scimmia*). And without clothes, an Italian is—proudly, I would venture—*nudo come un verme* (naked as a worm). “*In bocca al lupo!*” “In the mouth of the wolf!” Italians say to wish someone luck (“*buona fortuna*” is considered unlucky). The correct response: “*Crepi il lupo!*” (“Let the wolf die!”)

Just as in Italy’s cars, clothes, and countryside, there is nothing happenstance about the language. English speakers blurt, spitting out words without a moment’s thought. Italians, skilled in the art of *sistemarsi* (organizing a life), assemble a sentence as meticulously as they construct tiramisu. “*Tutto a posto e niente in disordine,*” my friend Cinzia Fanciulli, manager of the Borgo San Felice resort in Chianti, likes to say as she surveys her gleaming realm, every flower bed manicured, every tabletop shining. “Everything is in order, and nothing is disorganized.” Romans, scanning the city even they describe as *caotica* (chaotic), prefer to joke, “*Niente a posto, e tutto in disordine*” (“Nothing is in order, and everything is disorganized”).

Italian devotes an entire tense, the elusive *congiuntivo*, similar to English’s little-used subjunctive mood, to desires, doubts, wishes, dreams, and opinions. My friend and teacher Francesca Gaspari considers it the sexiest of verb forms because of its ambiguities; for this very reason, I never use it without trepidation. Thankfully, you can often dodge this tricky tense by prefacing a subjective comment with “*secondo me,*” “according to me,” and using the just-the-facts declarative.

Italy’s long past requires four tenses (not counting the subjunctive’s past forms): *passato prossimo*, *trapassato prossimo*, *passato remoto*, and the *imperfetto*, or imperfect—“the most Italian of

tenses,” one of my teachers contends—for unfinished business. Business can remain unfinished a long time in Italy. A researcher tells of requesting a book from the catalog of the Vatican Library only to receive a notice stating, “Missing since 1530.”

Northern Italians relegate the musty *passato remoto* to historical events such as Dante’s birth. Southern Italians, with a telescoped sense of time, use it to recount what they had for breakfast. In literary Italian (though not daily conversation) memories of times past can be summoned up in three words and ways—*rammentare* (with the mind, for facts), *ricordare* (with the heart, for feelings), and *rimembrare* (with the body, for physical sensations).

What Italian doesn’t say also is revealing. Italian has no words that precisely translate *lonely* (unthinkable for its gregarious speakers), *privacy* (equally unthinkable in an Italian family), *spelling* (since words generally look as they sound—to Italians, that is), or *dating* (although it begins before puberty). Yet some of the most tantalizing Italian words, such as *garbo*, a pitch-perfect combination of style and grace, and *agio*, a sense of comfort and ease, don’t translate into English.

Even when foreigners learn Italian words, they often miss their hidden meanings. Only after years of visiting Italy did I realize that that Italians admire rather than disdain a *furbo*, someone cunning enough to pull off a clever deception. A young *furbetto* shifts the blame for a childish prank to his little brother. A shrewd *furbacchione* obtains a coveted building permit for a rectangular, cement-lined hole in his backyard by describing it not as a swimming pool (prohibited by law) but as a storage vat for water that local firefighters might need to douse a

blaze. A more deceitful *furbastro* somehow manages to make money in the process, while a wheeler-dealer *furbone* reaps big profits by negotiating permits for an entire village.

My husband, transformed from Bob to Roberto in Italy, cannot resist a little linguistic *furberia*. When he casually drops well-rehearsed Italian witticisms into conversations as if he were fluent, Italians invariably applaud his facility with their language. Giustina, who looks after the villa we rent in Tuscany, praises Professor Roberto for improving his pronunciation every year while dismissing my Italian as *un po' arrugginito* (a little rusty). However, a bit of *furberia* also lurks in my soul. The very first aphorism I taught Bob—and encouraged him to say on every occasion—was *Mia moglie ha sempre ragione*. (My wife is always right.)

I snatched other sage sayings from hand-painted ceramic ashtrays, the sort you find at kitschy souvenir stores next to aprons decorated with pasta shapes or the chubby cherubs with mischievous grins that decorated Renaissance ceilings. Several years ago, during Bob's academic sabbatical in Italy, we rented the thousand-year-old *castello* at Monte Vibiano Vecchio in Umbria, with a stone watchtower dating back yet another millennium, a Renaissance maze, an amphitheater, a chapel, and a peacock that strutted majestically around the grounds. Adjacent to its grand formal rooms, with fireplaces so big that we posed for photographs standing inside them, there was a smallish alcove for cards and other games. Hundreds of hand-painted ceramic ashtrays, each with a different saying, covered the walls with pithy words of wisdom.

The whimsical wall treatment inspired me to select a few

choice phrases to teach Bob on our daily hikes through the postcard-perfect countryside. “*Il padrone sono io,*” he would repeat, and repeat, and repeat (rapid language acquisition is not one of Bob’s many natural gifts), “*ma chi comanda è mia moglie.*” “I’m the head of the house but the one in charge is my wife.”

I cribbed the words from another ashtray for a *brindisi*, or toast—one thing I do better in Italian than English—for a final dinner with the *castello*’s owners, with whom we’d become friends. “*Chi trova un amico trova un tesoro*” (“Whoever finds a friend finds a treasure”), I said. “*E qui, in questa bella casa antica, abbiamo davvero trovato un tesoro.*” (“And here in this beautiful ancient home, we have found treasure indeed.”)

An Italian expressing such sentiments would have inserted a word or two in dialect that would have brought other Italians to tears or laughter. For foreigners, dialect words simply add to the dizzying complexity of the language. Depending on where you are in Italy, you might sit on a *sedia*, *seggiola*, or *seggia*; blow your nose into a *fazzoletto*, *pezzuolo*, or *moccichino*; and wear *calzini*, *calzette*, *calze*, *calzettoni*, *calzettini*, or *pedalini* with your shoes. A thousand years ago Italian Jews fashioned a dialect of their own mixed with Hebrew, now called Italkian, which is still spoken by about four thousand natives. A Venetian translated Shakespeare’s plays into his dialect because he felt that Italian was insufficient to transmit their emotional complexity.

Even metaphors vary by region. Florentines call a blowsy lady an “unmade bed” and an aging cavalier a “tired horse.” The long-impooverished Calabrians lament their plight with sayings like “Dogs only bite the poor.” When bored, Romans complain that they are “dying of pinches.” A *Romano de Roma* (dialect for

a Roman whose family has lived in the city for several generations) describes a local politician as “the best cat in the Colosseum” (which is overrun by feral felines), the figure who comes off best in a difficult situation.

“To remain like Father Falcuccio,” another Romanesco idiom, refers to a hypothetical priest who, having lost his clothes, had to cover his naked private parts with “one hand in front and another one behind.” A Roman ends up in this hapless predicament when, for instance, he wrecks his car before paying off the loan or his wife finds him with his mistress and both women dump him.

Death too takes different forms in dialects. Romans call it “the skinny woman.” When Italians in other regions die, they “go to the pointed trees” (cypresses, often found in Tuscan cemeteries), “make soil for chick peas” (a common vegetable), “stretch their legs,” “wear the other trousers” (the good ones saved for special occasions), or, oddly, “pull the robin’s dick.”

“We have *campanilismo* in everything,” says my tutor Alessandra Cattani, referring to Italian’s allegiance to all that lies within view of the local bell tower. This attitude treats even folks on the next hilltop as out-of-towners to be viewed with a certain amount of suspicion—and sometimes derision. Northerners scoff at southerners as *terroni* (peasants who work the land). Southerners snipe at northerners as *polentoni* (big eaters of polenta, once standard fare for the *popolo magro*—the skinny or poor people). “*Non fare il genovese*” (“Don’t act like someone from Genoa!”), I’ve heard one friend chide another—in other words, don’t be cheap. “*Fare alla romana*” translates into going Dutch. And every time we’ve headed for Pisa, someone has intoned,

“Meglio un morto in casa che un pisano all’uscio” (“Better a corpse in the house than a Pisan at the door!”). The Pisans’ response: “Che dio t’accon tenti!” (May God grant your wish!)

Perhaps because of this Babel of dialects, Italians cultivated an alternative language: gestures. In Italy, the shrug of a shoulder, the flip of a wrist, or the lift of an eyebrow says more than a *sacco di parole* (sack of words). A clenched fist signifies rage, irritation, anger, or threat; fingers bunched together indicate complexity or confusion. A tug at the corner of an eye means “Watch out!” A tap on the head indicates comprehension, intuition, or idiocy.

After a few hours of careful observation in a piazza, anyone can become fluent in this wordless variant of Italian. Need a favor? Clasp your palms together with fingers extended as if in prayer and press them in front of your chest. Don’t give a damn? Slide your fingers upward from your neck past the tip of your chin. Was the dinner or day absolute perfection? Draw a straight horizontal line in the air. A Neapolitan waiter showed us how he signals the best-tasting dishes on the menu—by corkscrewing an index finger into his cheek, a gesture Italian men repeat on the street when a tasty-looking girl walks by.

Such silent entertainment is one of the pleasures of Italy that come, as Luigi Barzini observed in *The Italians*, from living in a world “made by man, for man, to the measure of man.” The pleasure of Italian’s man-made language, he noted, comes from teaching “that things don’t have to be exactly what they look like, reality does not have to be dull and ugly.”

With words alone, Italians have developed simple, life-

affirming ways to transform dreary days into delightful ones and mundane chores into memorable events. Bob and I have entered wineshops looking only for a nice bottle to drink with dinner and emerged hours later after having toured a subterranean vault, sampled several vintages, and listened to a tutorial on the differences between Sangiovese, the pride of Tuscany, and Nebbiolo, the Piedmont wine with a name (little fog) that describes the region's typical weather.

In the process, we invariably acquire a new word or two. Any connoisseur may appreciate a fine wine, we've learned, but Italians prefer to *approfondire* (go deeper) and *assaporare*—surrender themselves to the slow discovery of its fullness. The very last drop from a bottle of wine (*la scolatura*) always goes to the *belli di natura*—to the greatest natural beauties, male or female. Italians so appreciate the final sips of wine that the Roman dialect poet Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli once celebrated the delights of *sgocchetto*, savoring these last drops, in verse.

Like the pleasure of such terms, words for pleasure take tantalizing forms. A nation of inspired cooks and enthusiastic eaters has, of course, coined a specific word for a lust for a food—*goloso* (from *gola* for “throat”), which goes beyond mere appetite, craving, or hunger. Friends readily, even proudly confess to being *golosi* for *cioccolata*, *sfogliatelle* (stuffed pastries), or *suppli* (melt-in-your-mouth rice and cheese balls).

One evening I regaled a conversation group with a tale about an article called “Twenty-four Hours in the Life of a Medical Student” that I had written as a young reporter. “I had no idea that I was spending the night with the future surgeon gen-

eral,” I said in Italian, “and I enjoyed it.” The teacher, a worldly sophisticate who speaks four languages, leaned close to whisper that the term I had used referred only to sex.

An Italian *amante* (lover) may be *amoroso* (amorous), *amabile* (lovable), *amato* (beloved), or all three. Many an Italian man is an *amatore* (a lover of, say, wine, women, or song). An Italian woman may be an *amatrice* (a lover, perhaps, of the fine things in life). There is no English word that quite captures the sensation of *innamoramento*, crazy head-over-heels love, deeper than infatuation, way beyond bewitched, bothered, and bewildered. But that’s what I am—an *innamorata*, enchanted by Italian, fascinated by its story and its stories, tantalized by its adventures, addicted to its sound, and ever eager to spend more time in its company.