

Teach Yourself Italian

For a writer, a foreign language is a new kind of adventure.

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By [Jhumpa Lahiri](#) November 29, 2015

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 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 write it, or even read 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.

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.

In graduate school, 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 first trip to Italy, 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 wakeup 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 meagre 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.

Marco and Claudia 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 impeccable Italian.

The director of the institute greets me. I tell him, in Italian, that 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 the spring of 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 an infatuation. That I cherish 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 second child, 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.

At the festival in Rome I manage to exchange three, four, maybe five sentences with someone. After that I stop; it's impossible to do more. I count the sentences, as if they were strokes in a tennis game, as if they were strokes when you're learning to swim.

In spite of the conversations, the language remains elusive, evanescent. It appears only with the teacher. She brings it into my house for an hour, then takes it away. It seems concrete, palpable, only when I'm with her.

My daughter is born, and four more years go by. I finish another book. After its publication, in 2008, I receive another invitation to Italy, to promote it. In preparation I find a new teacher. An enthusiastic, attentive young woman from Bergamo. She, too, comes to my house once a week. We sit next to each other on the couch and talk. We become friends. My

comprehension improves sporadically. The teacher is very encouraging, she says I speak the language well, she says I'll do fine in Italy. But it's not true. When I go to Milan, when I try to speak intelligently, fluently, I am always aware of the mistakes that hamper me, that confuse me, and I feel more discouraged than ever.

In 2009, I start studying with my third private teacher, a Venetian woman who moved to Brooklyn more than thirty years ago, who brought up her children in America. She's a widow, and lives in a house surrounded by wisteria, near the Verrazano Bridge, with a gentle dog that's always at her feet. It takes me nearly an hour to get there. I ride the subway to the edge of Brooklyn, almost to the end of the line.

I love this trip. I go out of the house, leaving behind the rest of my life. I don't think about my writing. I forget, for several hours, the other languages I know. Each time, it seems like a small flight. Awaiting me is a place where only Italian matters. A shelter from which a new reality bursts forth.

I am very fond of my teacher. Although for four years we use the formal *lei*, we have a close, informal relationship. We sit on a wooden bench at a small table in the kitchen. I see the books on her shelves, the photographs of her grandchildren.

Magnificent brass pots hang on the walls. At her house, I start again, from the beginning: conditional clauses, indirect discourse, the use of the passive. With her my project seems more possible than impossible. With her my strange devotion to the language seems more a vocation than a folly.

We talk about our lives, about the state of the world. We do an avalanche of exercises, arid but necessary. The teacher corrects me constantly. As I listen to her, I take notes in a diary. After each lesson I feel both exhausted and ready for the next. After saying goodbye, after closing the gate behind me, I can't wait to return.

At a certain point the lessons with the Venetian teacher become my favorite activity. As I study with her, the next, inevitable step in this odd linguistic journey becomes clear. At a certain point, I decide to move to Italy.

THE RENUNCIATION

I choose Rome. A city that has fascinated me since I was a child, that conquered me immediately. The first time I was there, in 2003, I felt a sense of rapture, an affinity. I seemed to know it already. After only a few days, I was sure that I was fated to live there.

I have no friends yet in Rome. But I'm not going there to visit someone. I'm going in order to change course, and to reach the Italian language. In Rome, Italian can be with me every day, every minute. It will always be present, relevant. It will stop being a light switch to turn on occasionally, and then turn off.

In preparation, I decide, six months before our departure, not to read in English anymore. From now on, I pledge to read only in Italian. It seems right, to detach myself from my principal language. I consider it an official renunciation. I'm about to become a linguistic pilgrim to Rome. I believe I have to leave behind something familiar, essential.

Suddenly, none of my books are useful. They seem like ordinary objects. The anchor of my creative life disappears, the stars that guided me recede. I see before me a new room, empty.

Whenever I can—in my study, on the subway, in bed before going to sleep—I immerse myself in Italian. I enter another land, unexplored, murky. A kind of voluntary exile. Although I'm still in America, I already feel elsewhere. Reading, I feel like a guest, happy but disoriented. Reading, I no longer feel at home.

I read Moravia's "Gli Indifferenti" ("Time of Indifference") and "La Noia" ("The Empty Canvas"). Pavese's "La Luna e i Falò" ("The Moon and the Bonfires"). The poetry of Quasimodo, of Saba. I manage to understand and at the same time I don't understand. I renounce expertise to challenge myself. I trade certainty for uncertainty.

I read slowly, painstakingly. With difficulty. Every page seems to have a light covering of mist. The obstacles stimulate me. Every new construction seems a marvel, every unknown word a jewel.

I make a list of terms to look up, to learn. *Imbambolato, sbilenco, incrinatura, capezzale* (dazed, lopsided, crack, bedside or bolster). *Sgangherato, scorbutico, barcollare, bisticciare* (unhinged, crabby, sway, bicker). After I finish a book, I'm thrilled. It seems like a feat. I find the process demanding yet satisfying, almost miraculous. I can't take for granted my ability to accomplish it. I read as I did when I was a girl. Thus, as an adult, as a writer, I rediscover the pleasure of reading.

In this period I feel like a divided person. My writing is nothing but a reaction, a response to reading. In other words, a kind of dialogue. The two things are closely bound, interdependent.

Now, however, I write in one language and read exclusively in another. I am about to finish a novel, so I'm necessarily immersed in the text. It's impossible to abandon English. Yet my stronger language already seems behind me.

I think of two-faced Janus. Two faces that look at the past and the future at once. The ancient god of the threshold, of beginnings and endings. He represents a moment of transition. He watches over gates, over doors, a god who is only Roman, who protects the city. A remarkable image that I am about to meet everywhere.

THE DIARY

I arrive in Rome with my family a few days before the mid-August holiday. We aren't familiar with this custom of leaving town en masse. The moment when nearly everyone is fleeing, when almost the entire city has come to a halt, we try to start a new chapter of our life.

We rent an apartment on Via Giulia, a very elegant street that is deserted in mid-August. The heat is fierce, unbearable. When we go out shopping, we look for the momentary relief of shade every few steps.

The second night, a Saturday, we come home and the door won't open. Before, it opened without any problem. Now, no matter how I try, the key doesn't turn in the lock. There is no one in the building but us. We have no

papers, are still without a functioning telephone, without any Roman friend or acquaintance. I ask for help at the hotel across the street from our building, but two hotel employees can't open the door, either. Our landlords are on vacation in Calabria. My children, upset, hungry, are crying, saying that they want to go back to America immediately.

Finally a locksmith arrives and gets the door open in a couple of minutes. We give him more than two hundred euros, without a receipt, for the job.

This trauma seems to me a trial by fire, a sort of baptism. And there are many other obstacles, small but annoying. We don't know where to take the recycling, how to buy a subway and bus pass, where the bus stops are. Everything has to be learned from zero. When we ask for help from three Romans, each of the three gives a different answer. I feel unnerved, often crushed. In spite of my great enthusiasm for living in Rome, everything seems impossible, indecipherable, impenetrable.

A week after arriving, the Saturday after the unforgettable night, I open my diary to describe our misadventures. That Saturday, I do something strange, unexpected. I write my diary in Italian. I do it almost automatically, spontaneously. I do it because when I take the pen in my hand I no longer hear English in my brain. During this period when everything confuses me, everything unsettles me, I change the language I write in. I begin to relate, in the most exacting way, everything that is testing me.

I write in a terrible, embarrassing Italian, full of mistakes. Without correcting, without a dictionary, by instinct alone. I grope my way, like a child, like a semiliterate. I am ashamed of writing like this. I don't understand this mysterious impulse, which emerges out of nowhere. I can't stop.

It's as if I were writing with my left hand, my weak hand, the one I'm not supposed to write with. It seems a transgression, a rebellion, an act of stupidity.

During the first months in Rome, my clandestine Italian diary is the only thing that consoles me, that gives me stability. Often, awake and restless in the middle of the night, I go to the desk to compose some paragraphs in Italian. It's an absolutely secret project. No one suspects, no one knows.

I don't recognize the person who is writing in this diary, in this new, approximate language. But I know that it's the most genuine, most vulnerable part of me.

Before I moved to Rome, I seldom wrote in Italian. I tried to compose some letters to an Italian friend who lives in Madrid, some e-mails to my teacher. They were like formal, artificial exercises. The voice didn't seem to be mine. In America it wasn't.

In Rome, however, writing in Italian is the only way to feel myself present here—maybe to have a connection, especially as a writer, with Italy. The new diary, although imperfect, although riddled with mistakes, mirrors my disorientation clearly. It reflects a radical transition, a state of complete bewilderment.

In the months before coming to Italy, I was looking for another direction for my writing. I wanted a new approach. I didn't know that the language I had studied slowly for many years in America would, finally, give me the direction.

I use up one notebook, I start another. A second metaphor comes to mind: it's as if, poorly equipped, I were climbing a mountain. It's a sort of literary act of survival. I don't have many words to express myself—rather, the opposite. I'm aware of a state of deprivation. And yet, at the same time, I feel free, light. I rediscover the reason that I write, the joy as well as the need. I find again the pleasure I've felt since I was a child: putting words in a notebook that no one will read.

In Italian I write without style, in a primitive way. I'm always uncertain. My sole intention, along with a blind but sincere faith, is to be understood, and to understand myself.

THE METAMORPHOSIS

Shortly before I began to write these reflections, I received an e-mail from a friend in Rome, the writer Domenico Starnone. I had been in Rome for a year. Referring to my desire to appropriate Italian, he wrote, "A new

language is almost a new life, grammar and syntax recast you, you slip into another logic and another sensibility.” How much those words reassured me. They contained all my yearning, all my disorientation. Reading this message, I understood better the impulse to express myself in a new language: to subject myself, as a writer, to a metamorphosis.

Around the same time that I received this note, I was asked, during an interview, what my favorite book was. I was in London, on a stage with five other writers. It’s a question that I usually find annoying; no book has been definitive for me, so I never know how to answer. This time, though, I was able to respond without any hesitation that my favorite book was the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. It’s a majestic work, a poem that concerns everything, that reflects everything. I read it for the first time twenty-five years ago, in Latin, as a university student. It was an unforgettable encounter, maybe the most satisfying reading of my life. To understand this poem I had to be persistent, translating every word. I had to devote myself to an ancient and demanding foreign language. And yet Ovid’s writing won me over: I was enchanted by it. I discovered a sublime work, a living, enthralling language. I believe that reading in a foreign language is the most intimate way of reading.

I remember vividly the moment when the nymph Daphne is transformed into a laurel tree. She is fleeing Apollo, the love-struck god who pursues her. She would like to remain alone, chaste, dedicated to the forest and the hunt, like the virgin Diana. Exhausted, the nymph, unable to outstrip the god, begs her father, Peneus, a river divinity, to help her. Ovid writes, “She has just ended this prayer when a heaviness pervades her limbs, her tender breast is bound in a thin bark, her hair grows into leaves, her arms into branches; her foot, a moment before so swift, remains fixed by sluggish roots, her face vanishes into a treetop.” When Apollo places his hand on the trunk of this tree “he feels the breast still trembling under the new bark.”

Metamorphosis is a process that is both violent and regenerative, a death and a birth. It’s not clear where the nymph ends and the tree begins; the beauty of this scene is that it portrays the fusion of two elements, of both beings. The words that describe Daphne and the tree are right next to each other (in the Latin text, *frondem/crines, ramos/bracchia, cortice/pectus*;

leaves/hair, branches/arms, bark/breast). The contiguity of these words, their literal juxtaposition, reinforces the state of contradiction, of entanglement. It gives us a double impression, throwing us off. It expresses in the mythical, I would say primordial, sense the meaning of being two things at the same time. Of being something undefined, ambiguous. Of having a dual identity.

Until she is transformed, Daphne is running for her life. Now she is stopped; she can no longer move. Apollo can touch her, but he can't possess her. Though cruel, the metamorphosis is her salvation. On the one hand, she loses her independence. On the other, as a tree, she remains forever in the wood, her place, where she has a different sort of freedom.

As I said before, I think that my writing in Italian is a flight. Dissecting my linguistic metamorphosis, I realize that I'm trying to get away from something, to free myself. I've been writing in Italian for almost two years, and I feel that I've been transformed, almost reborn. But the change, this new opening, is costly; like Daphne, I, too, find myself confined. I can't move as I did before, the way I was used to moving in English. A new language, Italian, covers me like a kind of bark. I remain inside: renewed, trapped, relieved, uncomfortable.

Why am I fleeing? What is pursuing me? Who wants to restrain me?

The most obvious answer is the English language. But I think it's not so much English in itself as everything the language has symbolized for me. For practically my whole life, English has represented a consuming struggle, a wrenching conflict, a continuous sense of failure that is the source of almost all my anxiety. It has represented a culture that had to be mastered, interpreted. I was afraid that it meant a break between me and my parents. English denotes a heavy, burdensome aspect of my past. I'm tired of it.

And yet I was in love with it. I became a writer in English. And then, rather precipitously, I became a famous writer. I received a prize that I was sure I did not deserve, that seemed to me a mistake. Although it was an honor, I remained suspicious of it. I couldn't connect myself to that recognition, and yet it changed my life. Since then, I've been considered a successful author, so I've stopped feeling like an unknown, almost anonymous apprentice. All my writing comes from a place where I feel

invisible, inaccessible. But a year after my first book was published I lost my anonymity.

By writing in Italian, I think I am escaping both my failures with regard to English and my success. Italian offers me a very different literary path. As a writer I can demolish myself, I can reconstruct myself. I can join words together and work on sentences without ever being considered an expert. I'm bound to fail when I write in Italian, but, unlike my sense of failure in the past, this doesn't torment or grieve me.

If I mention that I'm writing in a new language these days, many people react negatively. In the United States, some advise me not to do it. They say they don't want to read me translated from a foreign tongue. They don't want me to change. In Italy, even though many have encouraged me to take this step, many support me, I'm still asked why I have a desire to write in a language that is much less widely read in the world than English. Some say that my renunciation of English could be disastrous, that my escape could lead me into a trap. They don't understand why I want to take such a risk.

These reactions don't surprise me. A transformation, especially one that is deliberately sought, is often perceived as something disloyal, threatening. I am the daughter of a mother who would never change. In the United States, she continued, as far as possible, to dress, behave, eat, think, live as if she had never left India, Calcutta. The refusal to modify her aspect, her habits, her attitudes was her strategy for resisting American culture, for fighting it, for maintaining her identity. Becoming or even resembling an American would have meant total defeat. When my mother returns to Calcutta, she is proud of the fact that, in spite of almost fifty years away from India, she seems like a woman who never left.

I am the opposite. While the refusal to change was my mother's rebellion, the insistence on transforming myself is mine. "There was a woman, a translator, who wanted to be another person": it's no accident that "The Exchange," the first story I wrote in Italian, begins with that sentence. All my life I've tried to get away from the void of my origin. It was the void that distressed me, that I was fleeing. That's why I was never happy with myself. Change seemed the only solution. Writing, I discovered a way of

hiding in my characters, of escaping myself. Of undergoing one mutation after another.

One could say that the mechanism of metamorphosis is the only element of life that never changes. The journey of every individual, every country, every historical epoch—of the entire universe and all it contains—is nothing but a series of changes, at times subtle, at times deep, without which we would stand still. The moments of transition, in which something changes, constitute the backbone of all of us. Whether they are a salvation or a loss, they are moments that we tend to remember. They give a structure to our existence. Almost all the rest is oblivion.

I think that the power of art is the power to wake us up, strike us to our depths, change us. What are we searching for when we read a novel, see a film, listen to a piece of music? We are searching, through a work of art, for something that alters us, that we weren't aware of before. We want to transform ourselves, just as Ovid's masterwork transformed me.

In the animal world metamorphosis is expected, natural. It means a biological passage, including various specific phases that lead, ultimately, to complete development. When a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly it's no longer a caterpillar but a butterfly. The effect of the metamorphosis is radical, permanent. The creature has lost its old form and gained a new, almost unrecognizable one. It has new physical features, a new beauty, new capacities.

A total metamorphosis isn't possible in my case. I can write in Italian, but I can't become an Italian writer. Despite the fact that I'm writing this sentence in Italian, the part of me conditioned to write in English endures. I think of Fernando Pessoa, a writer who invented four versions of himself: four separate, distinct writers, thanks to which he was able to go beyond the confines of himself. Maybe what I'm doing, by means of Italian, resembles his tactic. It's not possible to become another writer, but it might be possible to become two.

Oddly, I feel more protected when I write in Italian, even though I'm also more exposed. It's true that a new language covers me, but unlike Daphne I have a permeable covering—I'm almost without a skin. And

although I don't have a thick bark, I am, in Italian, a tougher, freer writer,
who, taking root again, grows in a different way. ♦

(Translated, from the Italian, by Ann Goldstein.)

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