

BARBARA KREIGER

Gerunds and Place: After Italy

SPEAKING ITALIAN

Humility comes in all forms, and I don't claim an inside track on knowing which is best. But I do know one of the surest routes there, and that's trying to learn a new language as an adult. I have friends for whom this is hardly a problem: I knew someone who learned Portuguese in a month, another who after a year was fluent in Hungarian, another whose English is fully idiomatic after just a few years in the U.S. Other friends take it as a game. Challenge them to crack a grammar, memorize the vocabulary, and they're off and running. Not me, my musical ear notwithstanding, and this, after all, is Italian we're talking about, the lingua franca of music. I stand by the wayside while others zip by, knowing full well that for this tortoise the finish line will always be on the horizon. And I'm not talking about gaining anything close to fluency, just a modicum of ease so I can saunter through the terrain without drawing attention to myself. When someone speaks to me, if I backtrack to rehear a word I missed I can't catch up and the whole exchange drifts out of reach. "Wait for me!" I want to call out. And I stumble foolishly, making mistakes that should embarrass me into silence. In the jewelry store I asked if I could see a lamb (*agnello*) instead of a ring (*anello*). Visiting a friend's family, I pointed to a lovely tree (*albero*) and asked her mother what kind of hotel (*albergo*) it was. There were worse, I've been told, some of which it was better I didn't know.

Speaking Italian is like drawing. I stare and study and absorb the details, the contours and shadings of the medieval roof tiles across my Rome alley. I spend weeks sketching and coloring, but the translation to the page never happens. Eye doesn't speak to hand in that happy confluence that one thinks she has earned. I want my tiles to be cupped, to slide down the roof like rivulets, but they resemble an incoherent chessboard, flat and confused, checkmated. I'm still painting by numbers.

So when I speak, I hear what I want to say, even roll my Rs, can picture the conjugations I need, use the subjunctive to show I'm really with it, have

memorized the phrases I know I'll need – and then it comes out like laundry tumbling in the dryer, one sock always lost. “Can I sit here?” I asked on a bus and was stared at uncomprehendingly. What had gone wrong? “Did you enjoy the Easter holiday?” I asked Sergio, the bartender who swirls the steamed milk into a fern on my cappuccino. “Who?” he answers, confused by my use of the formal. An Italian couple stopped me on the street to ask directions. As soon as they heard me say yes, they turned away. “Wait,” I implored, hoping I got the plural imperative right. “I don't know Italian but I know Rome.” I had them on their way in no time, and felt a compensatory gratification. Compensatory: a modest balance that makes every exchange worthwhile.

I persist, because I can't stand being blocked out entirely. Before a series of trips to Russia, I studied the Cyrillic alphabet, and indeed being able to read, merely to pronounce signs and subway stops, gave me a heady illusion that I had taken a step inside. “Illusion,” the operative word for me when it comes to a new language. Before we set out for our year in Rome, my son Daniel and I studied Italian, he with a tutor, me with language tapes. I felt I was really set because with impressive fluency I could ask if you wanted a drink, using the formal pronoun. Linguistically operational, I parachuted into Rome. Alas, there was no one to whom I could offer a drink using the formal construction, and I had to start over. Daniel on the other hand was launched, and so insistent on speaking only Italian that he came home peeved one day after stopping after school for coffee. “I'm never going back there,” he asserted with fifteen-year old finality. “He spoke *English* to me!”

And yet just recently I was near the Pantheon on a busy corner about to cross when I noticed a frail old woman lingering. Her cane kept advancing, retreating, as she deliberated whether to risk stepping off the curb. “Come,” I said in Italian as I unhesitatingly stopped the traffic. “We'll go together.” She looked at me rather surprised. “Yes, together,” she replied boldly, her face brighter. For a second I belonged, and I thought that fluency itself could not have stood me in better stead.

I'm thinking of Roman pine trees, so steady from afar, so confidently formed. Stand under one, though, look up, and you find it utterly altered – hesitantly drawn, lacy, less sure of itself. I love both views. Indeed there have

been times when I felt I could peer through Italian words into some understanding of them, handle them and appreciate texture and weight. Times also when my ineptitude led me to phrase something in a way that explained a nuance. Once I even translated my “invention” back to English and found I’d said something I could hang onto. I had felt the Italian accidentally, and experienced the English anew, leaving me flustered in the conversation, but doubly enriched.

Yes, though Italian generally holds me at arm’s length, it also offers a tantalizing invitation. And when I enter, even if just for a quick peek, I find a lavish hall and a welcoming crowd.

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TRAVELING

I like short-distance travel, especially abroad, where going and coming share a day, and the familiar and the new offer concurrent sensations. One of the great pleasures in travel is leaving a newly made home, and then returning. A place that still considers you a stranger has become the familiar port, and you get off the train with a certain smugness. I took many short trips when I was living in Rome, and on each return I disembarked with a proprietary feeling that I readily confess was unearned but nonetheless very pleasant.

The train from Rome to Arezzo, two hours north, is worth taking for the views alone. In April yellow-green to bluish stretches of winter wheat and tobacco extended up the slopes of the distant Apennine foothills, and newly plowed and raked fields were deep bright brown after a morning shower. In very early spring the train from Bologna to Parma glided effortlessly through vast stretches of richly tilled earth that unrolled to the horizon, where you couldn’t tell if you were looking at clouds or the snow-tipped Apennines. I love this collateral pleasure of travel, seeing how farming and gardening are practiced elsewhere. Cities and monuments teach something explicit about a culture, but the countryside, unassuming, quietly tells of people’s attachment to their landscape, and by extension their past. At the edge of Umbria, each farmhouse had a vineyard, uniformly bordered by odd-looking trees. The twisted trunks were topped by knob-like clusters of leaf buds that seemed

ready to burst with tendrils, a latent arboreal version of my New Hampshire vegetable garden's pole beans. The result was a slightly silly, naked tree, with upper branches trained horizontally to support the grape vines. Elm trees, I learned, admiring the commensal pairing. The fruit of this time-honored union is a bountiful annual harvest, with farmers serving as midwives.

I like approaching villages and towns by train because you coast along behind them. It's like entering a house through the back door; you're immediately in the heart of things. While the front is manicured, presentable, arranged for viewing, it doesn't record time. Wherever I go I love looking at houses – building materials, design, situation. I love sloped roofs, angled lines and gables. I love windows, even pictures of windows, the inside/out so temptingly available. I love back yards because they offer the truest views. The back yard is the garden, the sandbox, the toys, the shed, the tools, the laden clothesline that tells you people live there at this very moment. Once I saw a woman hanging laundry. The train passed so close and slow, and I watched her carefully pin a sheet to the line, pulling it taut. At that instant, I marveled, a woman was hanging out a sheet. All over the world, at that moment, women were hanging out sheets, the common gesture a beautiful link among them. When I hang sheets, I feel close to women whose clotheslines I'll never see.

When a train passes a small town, the back of a neighborhood is displayed, and I'm glad to be trusted with this vantage point, the intimate lee of the house. Every time I traveled outside Rome – to Tarquinia or Cerveteri to see Etruscan tombs, to Orvieto, Chiusi, or Florence – I felt this contentment of the inside view. Only once did I experiment and take a bus from a small Tuscan town rather than have my friends drive me to the railroad station in Siena. I didn't regret saving them the trip, but I counted the hours as I never do on a train. The bus took the highway, and though the scenery was pretty, it was a generic vista. There was none of the detail that individualizes a moment and brings you into touch with life, when small houses and backyards pass languidly as a train glides into the station.

Then there's the homecoming – hopping off the train in Rome and knowing the way. Oh yes, and the delight of the small bag, which adds to the happy weightless feeling you have as you bound onto the street. Spring rains are heavy, but at that moment you can't mind. Your sentiments are with Edith

Wharton, who appreciated the surprise “of vehement circling showers with a golden heart of sunlight.” Train travel does that, performs an alchemy that transmutes rain into sun. It’s especially so on short trips, where you have hardly gone any distance, and have the simultaneous pleasures of going away and coming home again.

Travel is like walking – simple motion unattached to quest or need. While tourism defines the edges of experience, travel sees the edges melt away, and you move through space unconscious of any border between external and internal sensations. Travel releases you into a state of being that brings clarity to what is hard to define at rest. It’s like revisitation, as Jan Morris reflected, which has its own special quality: “... in those moments of sudden stillness I am not simply re-visiting the place, I am re-examining myself too.”

Travel, like walking, doesn’t create joy, but offers recognition of it. Unrelated to people or experiences, disconnected from “cause,” it is experienced as pure feeling. Intangible always, it is more so now, and it enlivens the senses with a happy lack of purpose. Joy, one learns, is nothing more than the capacity for it, and you bring the news home fully grateful even when the sensation has subsided.