

## A Long-Standing Love for Italy

Emily Dellheim (March 23, 2016)



It is important to believe in destiny and it is important to have mentors and heroes that provide an example of living the best version of yourself. I say this based on the important role that Jhumpa Lahiri's latest book, "In Altre Parole", has in my own story of moving from New York to Rome.

I say this in relation to my belief that being open to signs and serendipities aides in self-actualization, and speaks to the importance of paying attention to people you admire that can help you recognize qualities you want to cultivate within yourself.

Like Lahiri, I have a long-standing love for Italy, the Italian language and Italian culture. Ever since visiting Europe for the first time at age 13, when my German emigrant grandfather took me on a "roots tour," it became my dream to one day live in Italy. However, despite my enduring



appreciation for all things Italian, my acquisition of the Italian language has always been a tenacious struggle.

As someone who excels in the humanities and the creative tendencies of the right-brain, I find the rules associated with learning grammar more akin to left-brain subjects like math and science, where there is a right and a wrong answer. In college and graduate school I studied Italian art, literature and language, and I found that my language classes tended to be my greatest challenge of the semester. But sometimes being confronted with your own deficiencies makes you want something even more. Never feeling in command of the language made my desire to learn it even fiercer. After studying abroad in Florence, I tried to maintain a life in New York with as much of an Italian influence as possible.

My lasting friends from college are all women I met while studying in Italy and I made an effort to tap into the Italian network of the city: I made Italian friends, I frequented events at NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, I became a regular at restaurants with an all-Italian staff, I took professional opportunities to work in the Italian art sector. Thanks to my grandfather's German heritage I was able to obtain dual US/EU citizenship, an advantage that only fueled my interest in someday moving to Italy.

At a certain point, I found myself in a long-term relationship that I thought would last forever, and given the perceived unlikelihood of my American partner finding meaningful work in Italy and my desire to preserve our relationship, I slowly and secretly began to concede my dream of living in Italy. In 2014, the sudden collapse of this relationship caused an upheaval of my domestic and professional life, and after over nine years in New York, I unexpectedly needed to put distance between myself, and the memories I created with this person in this city. As a result, my dream to live in Italy once again seemed obtainable, but I knew I had to act quickly, I had to pursue this dream now, before potential career or familial obligations could possibly prevent me from taking the leap. I returned to Italy last year on a one-way ticket. Even though I knew I intended to stay as long as possible, I did not have a solid plan, so I told my friends and family that I would be back in a few months, and there were no official or serious "goodbyes."

My first job in Rome was at a famous costume shop, an opportunity arranged thanks to an Italian friend in New York. Accustomed to the New York hustle, I started working immediately, barely over my jetlag but completely stimulated and at the same time exhausted by my sudden switch from English. Unlike Lahiri, I did not prepare myself in advance for the language shift. I arrived for my first day of work thinking that my rusty Italian was strong enough to fit in.

Instead, I was immediately bombarded with foreign sounds, technical words relevant to a tailor shop that I would never have a prayer of learning in the context of an Italian class in America. Over the next few days, I began to make a list of all of the words I did not know: orlo, grembiuli, zagane, ago, gancio, stampella, fodera, spieco, aggiustare, districare, piegare (hem, aprons, trim, needle, hanger, hanger in Roman, lining, to adjust, to detangle, to fold) these slowly gave way to sopraffatto, sopravissuto, sollievo, immedesimarsi, sconvolto, deluso (overwhelmed, survived, relief, empathize, upset, disappointed). The list goes on and on, a sort of linguistic roadmap of how my brain was trying to digest and communicate the Italian language. After my first week, my direct supervisor, Valentina, informed me she was going on vacation for the next two weeks, leaving me by myself to assist everyone. She must have noticed the terror on my face, because she laughed, assured me that I would be ok, and said to me in parting, "Whatever you do, just remember to smile. Smiling will always help you." It was, and is true.

Over the next few months, I experienced a seemingly constant state of elation; at the same time my American community felt ignored. I fell behind on responding to emails, and I did not call my family as often as I should, because subconsciously I did not want to answer the persistent inquiries into when I was coming "home," and I did not want to speak English, I did not want any interruptions to immersing myself in Italian. After a day at work trying to decipher and absorb Italian, a difficult but highly rewarding process, the last thing I wanted to do was switch over to English, fearful that this language would take up precious space that I needed to give over to Italian, that I needed to dedicate to my current survival.

I returned to the States to visit my family around Christmastime. A few weeks before, an excerpt of Lahiri's *In Altre Parole* appeared in *The New Yorker*, a copy of which my maternal grandmother saved me. I was unfamiliar with the work, but my grandmother had enjoyed reading it, and as a result, for



the first time, she expressed a little bit of support for my passion for Italy. It seemed through Lahiri's words, she was finally emitting a sliver of understanding of why I moved to Rome, instead of her usual inquiry into how long I was planning on being away and when we would see each other next. I put the magazine clipping in my purse without having the chance to read it until the following day when I visited my paternal grandmother. This grandmother, "Ga" as I call her, happened to be reading Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*, and enthusiastically recommended the book to me. "That's funny! Just yesterday Grandma Vivian gave me an article to read by the same author." I immediately read the excerpt from the *New Yorker*, and I was completely struck by what Lahiri wrote for *In Altre Parole*; her experience seemed in many ways as if in a parallel universe. If I had her same gift of using language, I could have written the text describing my own journey. Touched by the article, I discussed it with Ga, who also has a tendency to ask when I'm coming back to the East Coast, and this time she excitedly exclaimed, "You're having the time of your life. It's wonderful! Enjoy it!"

It was a major relief to return to Italy knowing that I had the first signs of support from my family regarding this move abroad. A few weeks later, I had a meeting with the wonderful Lucia Pasqualini, who had been helping me get established in Rome, teaching me the Italian way of presenting myself professionally, and reminding me not to lose my American courage. During this particular chat, we spoke a bit about languages and about the differences between "fluency" and "mother tongue." My Italian struggled a bit throughout our conversation as I was painfully aware of my American accent that I felt was butchering her language; meanwhile I saw Lucia flow seemingly effortlessly between Italian, English and German, speaking my mother tongue with an English accent I found much more elegant than my own. The following week, the bilingual version of *In Altre Parole* was released, and I instantly knew that Lucia would appreciate this book as much as me.

On the day that I purchased *In Altre Parole*, I also experienced both the most frustrating and the most inspiring Italian lessons of the intensive Italian language course I was attending. I explained to one of my teachers that when I find myself under pressure I let fear unnerve me and my Italian goes out the window. I spit the words out as fast as possible, I lose control of my tongue and I hear only mistakes that I can't stop from spewing out. Seeing that I was overwhelmed and discouraged, she recommended that I record myself speaking Italian and that I breathe and speak slower so that I do not "eat the words." I returned home and started recording myself as I read *In Altre Parole* aloud. My voice trembled and tears clouded my vision as I read Lahiri's metaphor about crossing a lake. The realization sunk in that my own feelings, until now abandoned, unrecognized, unnamed by my language, had been matched to words thanks to Lahiri's text. Immediately, this book entered into my heart.

The day after Lucia received the bilingual edition from me, she was invited to moderate Lahiri's presentation of *In Altre Parole* in Rome at the Center for American Studies. Talk about serendipity! I attended the event and was excited and inspired to behold these two strong women on the same stage. These are two women whom I admire very much, who, in different ways provide me an example of courage, grace and intelligence. These are two women who, in ways unbeknownst to them, have been helping me find my path in a foreign country and have been helping me define my relationship with Italian; as a result, they have been helping me find myself.

Reading *In Altre Parole* coincides with an important period in which I have been questioning my relationship with the Italian language and what I am seeking from it. I am a perfectionist, and I am my own toughest critic. My struggle with Italian, despite the years I have studied it, despite my continued efforts to learn this language, confronts me with the limits of my capabilities, serves as proof of my deficiency. Pondering the implications of my speaking Italian leads me to realize that even in English I feel like my voice has always failed me. That the thoughts and feelings that I want to convey get lost somewhere between my diaphragm and my throat, and are vocalized as other—as lesser—than what I intended. Italian, studying another language, is as Lahiri says, a chance at a second life. It is my chance, my sincere hope, to express myself the way my internal monologue sounds. Being in Italy is a way to find my path, but also, to find my voice. And for this reason, I find it heartbreaking when I fail at Italian. It is as though I am being confronted with the limits of my self, of my being. At the same time, when speaking in Italian I can justify my weakness because I'm still learning; Italian is a way of communicating that is forgivable because it is not my native language, while my disappointment in myself in English is something more severe. I imagine that I am not alone in this quandary of trying to claim my power by finding my voice. I imagine this is something particularly relevant to women my age.

Language is identity, and language equals accessibility. Through the acquisition of the Italian language, I am simultaneously searching to find myself and access a culture and a place, a place



that I feel is “my” place, which I want to call home. For me, speaking Italian is me metaphorically saying “I am here!” It is the validation that this life I am trying to construct actually exists. And thus I have created pretty high stakes. As though to say that if I make mistakes, if I hit the wall and run out of words that I know, I am again in exile, uprooted. Knowing the language will tether me, will let me plant my feet on the ground, will let me continue on this path in which I have never felt happier or more alive.

Even if I confront many unknowns in my attempt to speak Italian and live in Italy, this event dedicated to In Altre Parole was a huge sign that I am in the right place and that I need to endure. After the presentation, I spoke to Lahiri in private, wanting to thank her for the impact of this book. As she signed my copy, listening to what I felt was a jumble of Italian words haphazardly escaping my mouth, she half-smiled, and understandingly, wrote me a reminder of the two most important words: Vai Avanti! (Just keep going!)

And so that is what I am doing. Sure, there will be more moments when I feel like I cannot communicate, when in a self-fulfilling prophecy, my brain will shut down, the words will be trapped. But more importantly, there are moments in which I am learning to be kinder to myself, to smile, laugh and marvel at the intricacy of language and the subtle changes in spelling that render huge differences in meaning.

Thank you Lucia Pasqualini and thank you Jhumpa for helping me in the pursuit to find my voice, for leading through example on being persistent and committed to learning other languages, on the importance of not getting discouraged by the difficulties of learning another language. You radiate the rewards of understanding another culture by understanding its language.

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#### **Links**

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