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ITALY

Don Dunstan.

Italy is that country, more than any other, with which the English traveller has fallen in love, and conducted a long and rewarding love affair. For she is a mistress of constant fascination and infinite variety.

The prime source of inspiration and attraction was, of course, that Italy was the home of much of Greek civilisation and of the Roman Empire. Latin was the lingua franca of Europe for much of its history, and the basis of education for the literate English until well into this century. All English scholars grew to know the structure of their own language through the laborious hours they had spent on Latin grammar, and few were the English poets essayists or speech-makers whose works did not include "classical" references - to the literature of Rome.

Drawn by what Italy had been, the English traveller was then entranced by what it had become- an extraordinary mixture of races cultures and outlooks. living in towns set in a picturesque landscape, and where each site has so much of historical importance that years of exploring the past do not exhaust the possibilities of continuing interest and fascination even within one small region.

For Italian architecture is still dominated by the majority of buildings, which celebrate the past. To the uninitiate Italian towns have a constant appearance of decay. In Spoleto, the very beautiful site of Gian-Sarlo Menotti's Festival of Two Worlds, I came upon a house whose walls had been newly rendered and painted. It looked not only incongruous but ugly. The houses where some stucco had peeled, where the walls were discoloured, where the pink or ochre or chrome had become mottled and striated by the weather had come to look correct and lovely to an eye by then adjusted to the Italian townscape.

The discoloured, and at times seemingly crumbling walls form a layer of what Italy, for the curious, must always be - a palimpsest. Get behind that layer a new vision, a further historical reference, another facet of a process or topic will appear. Wandering with Shirley Hazzard through Napoli, we stopped in a little piazza. "That," said Shirley, pointing to a little building angled in the corner, "is where Tasso lived and wrote, but if we explore the cellars and foundations underneath we will find the remains of the theatre where Nero sang." Seated with her and her husband Francis Speegmuller on the Monter San Michele in Capri, I had them tell over for me what had happened there. Owned by the Lennox-Boyd family this hillock in the centre of Capri is now laid out in terraced garden walks where we gathered wild cyclamen, and where the terraces were formed in Roman times under the directions of astrologers - probably those of Tiberius. It is crowned by the remains of fortifications, not yet excavated by archeologists, and where there were forts in medieval times and under the Normans and Spanish and French, all on the site of a Roman villa of importance. On Francis' birthday we sat in the little ristorante near the Arco Naturale - a natural arch of rock high on the southern cliffs of Capri - after inspecting the kitchen in the cave behind hung with mementoes of Norman Douglas, whose favourite eating place it had been. We could eat well and look across the straits to Amalfi, watching the Neapolitan smugglers plying their ancient trade. And these scenes constantly repeat. Eating pasta with my Professoressa of Italian on the terrace of her lovely house above Tuoro, whence one has a wide view over Lake Trasimeno, she pointed out that the rise behind the house is called

"Hannibal's Tent" and was where Hannibal had his command post for the battle which destroyed the Roman army. He had encamped on rising ground to the north of the lake, concealed by mist, and when the Romans, unaware of his exact whereabouts, marched along the shore he caught them between two arms of hills which run down to the lake, cut off both advance and retreat, and used the shock of his attack down the hillside to push the enemy into the lake where thousands were drowned.

But while the original attraction for the English in the past has been to the roots of Latin culture Italy becomes instantly attractive because of the vividness, colour and variety of its subsequent history - of its constantly changing warring states and dynasties; as the seat of ^{the} Renaissance/learning after the intellectual waste of the middle ages, as the centre of trade in Venice, of learning and art in Firenze and of the papacy and its temporal power in Rome.

And again, culturally, one finds the quality of the palimpsest in Italy. For with all the overlap of different dominant groups and cultures, underneath the original population retains its habits and customs, often only paying lip service to imposed forms. Carlo Levi wrote one of the most enthralling works of modern Italian literature "Cristo Si E Fermato A Eboli" ("Christ stopped at Eboli.") Levi an anti-fascist and obviously of Jewish descent, was a painter and author with a degree in medicine, and was sent, under Mussolini, to a tiny southern Italian town where he was confined, not allowed to leave and required to report daily to the Carabinieri. His book is an account of his life there and recounts the stubborn, patient life of the southerners, ~~imprisoned~~ impoverished for centuries,

of their retention of and dominance by pre-Christian superstition and animism and that Greek and Roman, Goth, Lombard, Norman Spaniard Moor, Austrian and French, and now northern Italian overlordship had made no difference to the essential life belief and habit of the locals. Christ, and any other purveyor of new doctrine, had stopped at Eboli - a town some distance away, and had never conquered the minds of these people. Brigandage remained a strong force because it was against the authorities whose forms had to be given token obedience.

In the south generally one can see the influence of the fact that on the coast at least, this was Magna Grecia - the greater Greece where today one can find at Paestum enormous Greek temples in a better state of preservation (and of much earlier date,) than those on the acropolis in Athens. In little Trattoria in Napoli I said to my son "Have you ever seen that youth before?" "Yes," he said "on the frieze in Paestum. He's an exact copy."

But it's not only in the south that the old ways ~~remain~~ remain. In Gubbio, a little medieval town famous for its puppetry, the annual ceremony of the Ceri has been celebrated since Etruscan, pre-Roman times. The Romans were there & theatre in the summer draws large crowds at Gubbio's Roman theatre - but made no difference to the ceremony of obviously Priapic origin. Three teams carry large wooden phallic symbols on heavy frames in a race through the narrow streets of the town and up the mountainside. They cannot pass - the race is decided by the final distance between them. Today the ceremony is nominally a Christian one - it has no significance in Christian doctrine but the Church has sanctified it by ~~putting~~ naming the

teams after saints and putting the image of the appropriate saint atop each phallus!

In Italy it is less regional than parochial loyalties which are basis of community strengths. Beneath the distinctions between northerners and southerners, (who tend to regard one another as being of different nations and peoples) lie a whole series of differences in custom and language as between small localities within the same province.

In Napoli most bookshops display dictionaries of Neapolitan to Italian and vice-versa, and Australians of Sicilian descent who spoke what

they considered Italian at home had great difficulties in learning standard Italian at the University for Foreigners in Perugia. And at that University professors were puzzled to translate a sign I

reported to them as displayed outside a food shop in the main piazza of Norcia, also an Umbrian town "Arrivatu lo pangiu frescu" which

turned out to be local patois for "E arrivato il pane fesco" - "fresh bread has come."

For most Italism the Venetian dialect is completely unintelligible containing as it does an x which does not exist in standard Italian at all, and even the Tuscans, (for Tuscany is to Italian what Oxford is to English,) confuse others by

frequently substituting an aspirate in place an initial hard c - so "casa" becomes "hasa."

So the unwary traveller, with his few phrases carefully learnt from his guid-book can find himself at sea and unable to communicate. What is more, the intial impression that

many gain that Italian is an easy language is quite false. Let me deatil just a few problems. The Italians rarely use the second

person; "tu" is used only for close family, very close friends, and small children. Otherwise one uses for "you" the third person

singular feminine form which is treated as a "formal" second person.

So if you go into a shop to ask whether they sell postcards you must say (literally) "Does she sell postcards here?" When you add to these little quirks of polite custom that in Italian the subjunctive mood is alive and well, that the tense system of the verbs is much more complex than are English tenses and that prepositions do not have the reasonably precise meanings which they have in Latin or other Latin-derived languages but merely indicate a relationship between words so that you have to learn their use in any particular case largely by experience, you begin to get the picture. For instance "da" is a preposition usually implying agency or method. (It has also, in context, the same meaning as the French "chez", and at other times means "from" e.g. he is from Perugia - one says "da Perugia,") But when I said to a maid in a hotel to whom I was handing laundry "Si deve lavare questa roba da mano" "One must wash these things by hand" she smiled politely and said "Scusi signore - a mano." In that context one uses "a" (generally implying "to" or "at".) And don't make the assumption that because a word is of Latin derivation it will have the same meaning in Italian as its counterpart in English. "Educatore" does not mean "educated" in our sense - it means "well brought up, properly reared." "Occasione" means "bargain" and "incidente" means "accident." And a young friend of mine wishing to tell his companion that she had seemed despondent was in great trouble when he said "Mi sembrava tanto disponibile" which means "You seemed to me so available."

And if the language seems confusing it is nothing to one's encounters with officialdom. The Italians have made of bureaucratic red tape and inefficiency a high-art form, probably not excelled anywhere in

Although Italians are masters of ~~modern~~ machinery design and their banks are well equipped, the human systems do not match the machinery. It took two hours to get onto my accountant from Italy and get him to transmit funds by telex to Rome. But it was another ten days before the bank would disgorge the funds in Rome. The Italian public service is acknowledged to contain a number of "enti unutili" - "useless institutions." They were set up years ago to perform some useful service which is now either not needed or performed by some other agency. Their only purpose is to employ those on the staff and to fill vacancies when they occur. When they are attacked they are vigorously defended as at least providing some employment. And a high manpower use can be ensured by the grand ~~old~~ old Italian custom of not having printed forms for most of the applications to be made to Government departments. Where do you get forms? At the tobacconist's - where else?" You must get a form with an impressed stamp on it, add some postage stamps to increase the value because of inflation, (stamps are also sold at the tobacconist) and then take the form to the relevant department where it is written out by hand and where you will make your "dichiarazione" - declaration. And you will find many rules made with no seeming purpose. You cannot register your car in advance. When I tried, a week before the registration had expired, to pay the next year's registration I was told that was not possible the disc had not expired and until it had they couldn't take my money. And at concert halls and theatres there are frequently no sales of tickets or advance bookings - you must get there on the night and struggle with some 600 or more other people to get a ticket before the show starts. The system seems devised to provide

the maximum possible discomfort for patrons, but Italians calmly submit-"pazienza" is an attribute essential to existence in Italy. As is nimbleness of foot - many cinemas simply sell tickets to as many patrons as come to their door -regardless of the number of seats within.You can easily find yourself standing at the back of a crowded theatre, one eye on the screen and another on anyone who may leave a seat so that you can make a dash to get it before there is some other bum on it.

And to those of us from a country where the effect of strikes is still regarded as an unusual and unlooked-for disruption of the supply of goods and services, Italy can be a revelation. There scioperi - strikes- are a natural part of the pattern of everyday life. This week the post - next week the garbage men, the week after the railway and petrol-station attendants. Ma pazienza, sempre la pazienza.

All the difficulties help to accustom you to a pace of life where you may enjoy the community gathering at eventide - the passeggiata where all parade, meet, show off, admire, and watch everyone else. And that is a prelude to eating in a buon ristorante the Italian food which can be of excellent quality but for which originality ceased some 200 years ago. It is curious that the explosion of interest in new food resources and cooking methods and styles which has occurred in most western countries has left Italy untouched. The cooking of ancient Rome or of medieval Italy has mostly been forgotten, and herbs and spices once common in Italy are now to be found no more. (I once scoured Perugia for ginger unsuccessfully. In Italian the word is zenzaro - most people had never heard of it.) But while it is not these days inventive and can be predictable,

Italian food can be delicious and satisfying, washed down with draughts of the light Italian wine.

For me visits to Italy are one of the great joys of life - and I look forward to many more of them.