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Making It Strange: Learning Italian from Paolo and Francesca

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I fell in love with the Italian language on my honeymoon, a package holiday (Joe Walsh Tours of blessed memory) to Rimini in July 1979. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say I fell in love with Italian through the story of Paolo and Francesca as recounted in Canto V of the *Inferno,* which I first heard about at that time, the story of another less fortunate couple – the young Francesca given in marriage to the crippled Prince Malatesta, lord of Rimini, and her lover Paolo, Malatesta's brother. They were caught in the act by Malatesta and slain on the spot. Dante meets them blown on a terrible wind around the second circle and gives Francesca some of the most beautiful poetry in the *Inferno,* in particular about the pain of loving someone and seeing them suffer. "Love", she says, "has conducted us to one death".

It was fortuitous that the *Inferno* was the only book in Italian we could find on our return to Cork – a parallel text, a Temple Classics edition originally published in 1805 by J.M. Dent and translated by Henry Francis Cary, a clergyman who also translated Aristophanes and much else. It was a piece of good fortune because a love for Dante has remained with me ever since and permeated much of my writing in both prose and poetry. I subsequently discovered that Borges had used the same edition which gave me considerable satisfaction.

The style of the translation is very much of its time, a bit awkward by our lights, a bit stilted, but faithful to the original; and in many ways it is useful for learning purposes to have to work with a version that is not in contemporary vernacular. The danger is that an easy fluid translation makes it all seem too natural, not strange enough, not challenging, whereas in fact Dante is not a contemporary in any sense and it takes an enormous effort to inhabit even a fraction of his thought processes, even for someone born into an Irish Catholic background where Hell and its pains were threatened daily. It *should* be strange to read him with today's world at our back.

And this is probably the most fundamental thing about learning a language, that its strangeness casts our own worldview

into a sharper light. Everyone accepts that learning a new language is to enter a new world, even to become a different person in that language. But we also learn about ourselves in the reflections, in the shadows cast by how a different syntax processes our reality, in the actual impossibility of being the same in different words. A new language makes us strange to ourselves in an interesting and productive sense.

Of course, Italian was not my first learned language. Almost all Irish people study Irish from four or five years of age and experts say the acquisition of a third language is easier than a second. The neural pathways exist, though at times they need rerouting, and syntax and vocabulary search each other out. Or so it seems to me. When I came to learn Italian I found myself constantly making links – with Irish grammar, with English vocabulary from Early Modern to the present day and, to a lesser extent, with the Latin I learned at school.

That said, I have learned Italian imperfectly and will probably never fully master what seems to come naturally to Italians, things like the gender of nouns or the various usages of 'ci'. Perhaps this is inevitable or perhaps it's my fault. But one memory sustained me from the very beginning. That first time in Rimini forty-six years ago our entire knowledge of Italian came from a Berlitz phrase book; we were a walking linguistic disaster but the generosity and openness of people like the local bar owner, the man who rented the pedalòs or the stall holders in the market convinced us that Italian was a language that welcomed learners, that pardoned mistakes, that led to human interactions and ultimately that would lead us into a new reality. I suppose we fell in love with Italians first, then with Italian poetry and finally with Italian itself.