

Stone Grammarian

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Several years ago I went to Italy to get away from a bad love affair. How bad could a year in Rome be? I took a leave of absence from my job, borrowed some money from my oldest brother, and fled.

I hoped that three years of Latin and five years of French grammar and literature would help me with Italian--which they did. Tellingly, however, the intensive lessons in conjugation with another bad (also, handsome and charming) boyfriend--this time Italian--were more effective in opening the Mediterranean idiom to me than any native talent I might have had for romance language verbs.

My new love was an actor and a translator, and before long, I found myself trying to give him *madra lingua* support in translations of Henry James' book of essays on the theatre. I think no other enterprise could have more quickly dramatized for me the differences between English, with its sloppy and richly elusive referents, and the elegant sobriety of Italian, refusing all ambiguity regarding the gender of nouns and their adjectival modifiers, or the calibrated demands of possessive forms. Words can't bleed into each other as they do in English (though the ease of rhyme and the lusciousness of fully spoken double consonants in Italian offer some compensation for these structural limitations). It always struck me that this irremediable, rigidity of reference is strange in a country famous for its love of amorous intrigue and sleight of hand—for instance, no way to glide over whether the friend you had dinner with is male or female.

In those early days in Rome, in a garret apartment with views of the quietly beautiful Collegio Romano, I struggled earnestly to give my *amico bello* a true sense of James' snaky sentences and to help stuff them respectably into the measured constraints of an Italian paraphrase. The result, to me, seemed unrecognizable as James. Though literarily unsatisfying, this foray into translation did provide me with a great, guilty pleasure in the anarchy of English, at the exact moment that I was straining to become proficient in the loveliness of Italian. I did not go on to earn my daily bread as a translator; but, over the next many years, these early syntactic lessons echoed in my head and in my work as a restorer of old Italian, stone farm houses.

Architecture and building are syntactic. Not a revelation, perhaps, but salutary, for me, for whom reading and allusion were natural in a way that geometry never was. How I got from Rome to the Umbrian countryside and from Henry James to ruined piles of stone is a different story. But, in short, the lesson I learned during the trek is that the two

undertakings—translation and building--felt continuous, projects based on ordered arrangement and transitions, in both cases dependent on the genius of materials.

I had never done any designing or building in America, though I had always loved architecture, and, indeed, it had been a compelling reason (or justification after the fact) for my rapid and desperate choice of Italy as an escape destination. On first seeing *Borromini's* broken façade at the *Oratorio* adjacent to *Chiesa Nuova*, I suddenly felt a tremendous sense of relief that my journey had been worth it, would offer actual solace, not just feckless, frivolous escape. What I found so moving was the sculptural longing--evident in the undulating surfaces of the disrupted classical façade—radically new, yet still evocative of its origins in the land of shattered Roman pillars and capitals, where mangled marble heads and torsos lie scattered about the city.

I remember the first time I had a prolonged conversation in Italian with a plumber. As he described the linking of various cisterns, tubes, pumps and filters, I realized that I was listening to the connective tissue of his speech, actually seeing the Italian nouns and verbs flowing like water and waste, to their final resting place at the end of the sentence. I was learning grammar and plumbing at the same time, just as I learned about building through Italian syntax and the fatal, ubiquitous subjunctive forms that underlie the language and the culture.

By 1990, I found myself, through a series of willful choices at the top of a hillside with southwestern views across rolling hills and mountainous terrain, squarely on the border between Umbria and Tuscany. In front of me were a series of once cultivated terraces, now blanketed in blackberries, and distant, virgin views, unchanged for generations, encircling the battered walls of a Romanesque bell tower, a few farms, and the crenellated corners of a castle keep that dates to the 9th century. Behind me, roofless, with trees growing between the floors, was the ruin of a once commanding *casa colonica* (farm house constructed by tenant farmers), brooding over a layered history still visible in building shards and cultivated plots in the near and far distance.

It was the longest day of the year. Having walked up a three kilometer gravel and mud track to reach this place, I stood very still, gazing westward with the house as the sun set for five hours into its rolling ocean of distant hills. Decision making has never been easy for me, and I am inclined to weigh all options, as if one could. But, in this moment, my conviction was quiet and absolute. I knew I was going to do what was necessary to live within this house and history. The only other time I felt such unambiguous conviction was five years later, when my husband to be, found his way, against all odds, up to the doors of this particular place, and asked me to marry him. Five weeks later, I did.

The house was called *Pancesi*, probably named for the family of tenant farmers who built it or parts of it in successive centuries. Though the word means nothing in Italian, it invokes "*pancia*"-- the word for stomach, which I took to be a good omen—food, sustenance, navels, an *omphalos*.

That first long day, alone with the house, I scrambled up the broken and collapsing outdoor staircase to a gutted porch area located in front of the entrance, whose door was still ringed with *pietra serena* stone. On the exterior wall of the house near the entrance, (and, still, there, now), was a scrawled warning: “*edificio pericolante*”. I can remember the feel of the syllables in my mouth. Unsafe building, tumbledown, collapsing structure.

When I turned westward, the view of the sinking sun and the cresting waves of hills glimmered and refracted. Jumping across the hole in the porch, I landed on the stone threshold of the house, the *limnis*. Then, one step beyond and I was inside. I adhered to the walls, trusting, and inched my way--bottom, back, and thighs to stone, palms cupping the irregular surfaces--into the ruined interior, open to the dying, cracked light.

All about me were collapsed oak beams, 30 centimeters and more in diameter, lying on a bed of wood-fired terra cotta tiles, which had cascaded like a mortar water-fall from ceiling and roof. At the far end of the room was an enormous fireplace with hand hewn stone supports, and cross piece wooden mantle, notched to fit the stone. I had stumbled into someone’s kitchen. Rubbing my way along the wall, I could now glimpse the back of the house, a kind of stone garden, pierced by trees growing out of the rubble of the ground floor, thrusting into bedrooms, where remnants of pastel painted lime plaster still covered the hard, grey reality of stone with promise of a softer, gayer life.

Finally, I left the house as I had come— inching backwards, still trusting, leaping from an island of support here and there. When I got back to the collapsing front porch, the sun was just a memory of light with color spraying upwards from the darkening hills. It occurred to me that it is seldom true that we live inside a day, fully; but, that day, is inside me still, a tissue of changing light on surfaces-- the start of a thirty year apprenticeship to stone and cooked earth buildings.

There was no architect involved, just rectangular line drawings, submitted to the *Comune* (township) for building permits by a *geometra* (one who measures, a surveyor). I loved those line drawings and traced hundreds of my own over the years, as I played with the opening, closing and flowing of spaces, layouts of kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms— trying always to find a house’s secret syntax. It is hard to describe the excitement I felt and still feel in the designing, which, for me always involved imagining the life I would live within these buildings. Over twenty years, I built myself over 15 houses, and lived, intimately, in each of them for a time, as I brought them into being.

Certainly, part of my early and lingering obsession with these houses was linked to a hunger for domesticity too long deferred by adventure, work, and an unerring instinct for bad boyfriends. My first Italian love presciently described me as “*focolare*”—drawn to hearth and home, in spite of all external signs to the contrary. And, it was always true that I designed my stone houses from a fireplace core outwards. This decision, if it can be called that, is an example of personal inclination latching on to the inherent grammar of these buildings, in which the fireplace had been the navel of the house, source of heat, food, and congregation, in the way of peasant architecture through all of time.

I was far more interested in reading the existing structures than creating new forms. What compelled me was restoration, not building from scratch. It was the limitations of the structures and of the enterprise in general that drew me—strict Italian building laws; scarcity of ancient materials, with their human signatures still intact; the way the sun moved across the sky, illuminating and darkening spaces; little money—just to name a few of the restrictions that anchored me to the original rectangular forms and volumes.

Many people, including, even, my husband, accused me of being downwardly mobile. I suppose I was. But, it would have been hard to replace the raw excitement and daily discoveries of this work, whose tools—plumb bobs and chisels—had changed not at all for millennia.

The *geometra* who had pulled the permits for *Pancesi* was in his twenties, intelligent, sweet, and inexperienced--still, today, a friend and a collaborator. Rather than asking him to put together a crew, I spent six weeks, in the American way, soliciting a number of estimates from different builders. For days, I struggled to get their *preventivi* (estimates) to line up in a neat apples to apples analysis. Then, suddenly, in a blinding fit of frustration and intuition for which I have always been grateful, I threw these would-be spreadsheets across the room and decided to make my selection based on character rather than numbers. I chose a short, powerfully built man in his late fifties named *Guerriero*—*Warrior*—as the head stone mason. He was not the cheapest, nor the easiest, but, he was immediately recognizable to me.

The line drawing plans for restoring *Pancesi*, and all the structures that came afterwards, bore some relation to the gross dimensions of the collapsing structures. But, the real dimensions emerged once the debris was cleared away, once the snakes were wheedled out of their shards of terracotta and vegetal intruders of all kinds were uprooted from the old stalls and pig pens of the ground floor. Only then, could we start to evaluate...to parse centimeters...to scan the floors for iambic pentameter poems, gleaning beauty. And, we stood there in the freezing cold in rubber boots caked with cement, and in the heat, arguing over dimensions, proportions, drawing our ideas on the stone floors with stones, stone on stone.

I learned to argue, dramatically, fluently, shamelessly in Italian. The flourish and the vocabulary came to me as a kind of mental telepathy, looking *Guerriero* square in the eyes and daring him to explain, justify, refute, concede. It was voice to voice combat, as we balanced on beams, selected stones, hunted down rare pre-war terra cotta bricks, fired by hand before industrialization took over, along with the Allied troops. Leaping into *Guerriero*'s truck on a Monday morning very early, I would engage him in reconnaissance missions, scouring the countryside for ancient materials, like starving war survivors, though we never failed to stop for lunch at some country trattoria for *tagliatelle ai funghi porcini*, or whatever the stringent rules of the season dictated.

In this way, I learned Italian and, together, we put my life and *Guerriero*'s, into the buildings that we coaxed into being. In 2002, he died suddenly from a brain hemorrhage, issuing in a season of death from which I am still trying to recover. Until his radical

disappearance, he was my daily companion, ferocious, well-armed foe, co-conspirator—my stone grammarian.

Over the years, I was asked many times what my training was to do the work I do. Was I trained as an architect? No, I am a reader, studied English and American literature, with some art history thrown in. And I looked and looked, and listened to rhythms of speech, imagined things misconstrued and unsaid. As training goes, it seemed adequate to the task.