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**In Other Words**

by Jhumpa Lahiri, translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein. Knopf, 233 pp., \$26.95

**Tim Parks**

Many readers will be aware of Jhumpa Lahiri as the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), elegant, unsettling tales that invariably draw the reader into a state of anxiety for the welfare of a group of characters living for the most part between two worlds: Calcutta, where Lahiri's Bengali parents grew up, and New England, where they later moved and made a family. Her two novels—*The Namesake* (2003), *The Lowland* (2013)—and a further collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), all present lives tensed between freedom and entrapment. Typically, the immigrants, or children of immigrants, with whom we are invited to identify are simultaneously drawn to Western values of independence and individualism while fearing the loss of security provided by a patriarchal society in which decisions of career and marriage are taken very largely by the family.

Lahiri shows great resourcefulness in finding ways to dramatize the conflicting emotions that can arise in people pulled so peremptorily in opposite directions. In the fine story "Hell-Heaven" (in *Unaccustomed Earth*), the woefully homesick Pranab, recently arrived at MIT from Calcutta, accosts an Indian mother and daughter on the steps of the Widener Library and manages in very short order to charm his way into their family. The story is told, from a distance of perhaps twenty years, by the woman who had then been the young daughter. Her mother, lonely in the States, clinging to her Bengali origins, is only too willing to welcome Pranab into her secluded world where he reinforces an old sense of belonging, to the point that he is soon being known as Kaku, the Bengali word for uncle, and calling the mother Boudi, the proper way to address the wife of an older brother. He turns up every evening to eat the home-cooked, spicy Indian food that reminds him of home and that the lonely mother is delighted to prepare for him. The relationship would appear to be entirely positive.

However, the mother is marooned in an arranged marriage with a man who won his parents' approval for his emigration only on condition that he marry a Bengali woman first. He is not greatly interested in his wife. The young mother falls in love with Pranab and he seems affectionate to her, in a distracted kind of way; but for these two to move toward a relationship would mean a rejection of Bengali for Western values, something unthinkable for the mother. Eventually, Pranab starts bringing a young white American woman, Deborah, to these Bengali

dinners, and even asks his adoptive family for their blessing on his marriage to her, something his own family in Calcutta refuse to grant.

The narrator, meantime, in early adolescence, is drawn to the glamorous Deborah and embarrassed by her mother's apparent backwardness. There is much winding up of unhappy irony with Pranab actually asking to try the ring he has bought for his bride on the mother, while for her part she complains bitterly to her husband and daughter that Deborah is bound to leave Pranab and all will end in disaster. She is wrong. The new couple are soon settled and building a family while she has lost "the only pure happiness she ever felt." To make matters worse her daughter now seems irretrievably seduced by Western visions of romance.

But Lahiri never allows one culture or the other to emerge as unequivocally preferable. Many years later, it is the opportunist Pranab who will go off with a married Bengali woman, leaving Deborah distraught, while the narrator's mother now has a more affectionate and satisfying relationship with her husband, and the narrator herself, living her American life where lovers are freely chosen, is desperately unhappy after her "heart was broken by a man [she'd] hoped to marry." Ultimately, both ways of life appear equally attractive and unattractive, and above all mutually exclusive. Happiness is unattainable.

Of course, one hardly needs to be caught between Eastern and Western cultures to experience conflicts of this sort. Lahiri is aware of that and, perhaps concerned herself not to be pigeonholed as a postcolonial author, in *Unaccustomed Earth* she introduces a number of similar dilemmas that are not dependent on a cultural divide. In "A Choice of Accommodations," Amit takes his wife to the wedding of a woman he was once attracted to and finds himself drunkenly confessing to a complete stranger how suffocating his marriage has become. He needs excitement of some kind. On the other hand, he hardly seems a man to take risks:

Amit... had studied enough about the body to know its inherent fragility [and] was plagued by his daughters' vulnerability, both to illness and to accidents of all kinds.... When he read articles in the newspaper about taxis suddenly swerving onto sidewalks and killing half a dozen pedestrians, it was always himself he pictured, holding Monika and Maya [his daughters] by the hand. Or he imagined a wave at Jones Beach, where he had been taking them once a week during the summer, dragging one of them down, or a pile of sand suffocating them as he was flipping, a few feet away, through a magazine. In each of these scenarios, he saw himself surviving, the girls perishing under his supervision. Megan would

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blame him, naturally, and then she would divorce him, and all of it, his life with her and the girls, would end. A brief glance in the wrong direction, he knew, could toss his existence over a cliff.

In sharp contrast to this phobic cast of mind, Pam, the woman whose wedding Amit has been invited to, has always been entirely confident, enjoying any number of affairs and feeling generally comfortable with life, someone to be envied from a distance, and raised to near-mythical status. Indeed, on the one occasion, long ago, when Amit, again in a drunken state, "had worked up the nerve to make a pass at Pam," she had very kindly let him understand that he was not in her league.

Lahiri's stories are full of such contrasting pairs, figures who seem related in some way (Amit is fascinated that the last two letters of Pam's name are the first two of his) yet utterly different. In the novel *The Lowland* two Indian brothers born only eighteen months apart are at opposite ends of the fear/courage spectrum. Charismatic and rash, Udayan joins a Maoist insurgency fighting for the rights of tribal peoples while the cautious and dutiful Subhash conforms to his parents' wishes, setting off to the US to study. In the earlier novel, *The Namesake*, the same qualities are brought together in the conflicted young Gogol, son of Bengali parents in the US, who oscillates between American license and Bengali hierarchies. As always, some middle position that might allow a character to feel at once independent yet comfortably protected remains elusive.

All this by way of introduction to Lahiri's most recent book, which to some readers will seem an extraordinary departure. In *Other Words* is a first-person memoir telling the story of the author's relationship with the Italian language, her decision, in her mid-forties, to go to live in Italy for a couple of years, and her struggle to write a book, this book, in Italian. In fact, the American edition presents itself as a parallel text, with the original Italian on the left-hand side and Ann Goldstein's translation on the right, as if it were important that the reader see the actual words Lahiri wrote in Italian, the other world she has learned to move in.

The book opens with an extended metaphor that immediately brings into play the familiar themes of fear, courage, and independence:

I want to cross a small lake. It really is small, and yet the other shore seems too far away, beyond my abilities. I'm aware that the lake is very deep in the middle and even though I know how to swim I'm afraid of being alone in the water, without any support.

Lahiri tells us how for a month she

swims around the edge of the lake, careful never to go out of her depth, rather than directly across it, until, dissatisfied with this cautious approach, she eventually sets out, with two friends for protection, and swims across. Looking back at her husband and children on the other shore, she is "charged with energy" and "elated" by her achievement. She goes on:

For twenty years I studied Italian as if I were swimming along the edge of that lake. Always next to my dominant language, English. Always hugging that shore. It was good exercise. Beneficial for the muscles, for the brain, but not very exciting. If you study a foreign language that way, you won't drown. The other language is always there to support you, to save you. But you can't float without the possibility of drowning, of sinking. To know a new language, to immerse yourself, you have to leave the shore. Without a life vest. Without depending on solid ground.

Lahiri's love affair with Italian begins in her twenties in the Uffizi museum. Using a pocket dictionary, she manages to convey to a guard that her sister has lost her hat. The hat is recovered. There is a sense of accomplishment, of having ventured successfully into the unknown, and also of gratitude toward the dictionary:

It guides me, protects me, explains everything. . . . It becomes a kind of authoritative parent, without whom I can't go out. I consider it a sacred text, full of secrets, of revelations.

The role of the loyal protector is a constant in Lahiri's world. Later she will speak of the protectors who helped her get her book into correct Italian.

But like one's parents, the dictionary must at last be left behind. Twenty years later, living in Rome, Lahiri finally starts facing the Italian streets without this lexical life vest and comments, "I'm aware of a turning point. A sense of freedom and, at the same time, of loss. Of having grown up, at least a little." This is the tone of Lahiri's memoir throughout, a constant, earnest attempt to convey the profound importance to her of her discovery of Italian:

I feel a connection and at the same time a detachment. A closeness and at the same time a distance. What I feel is something physical, inexplicable. It stirs an indiscreet, absurd longing. An exquisite tension. Love at first sight.

The sense of effort is everywhere apparent: the effort to write in Italian, which has stripped down Lahiri's otherwise artfully meandering, bric-a-brac-rich sentences to the bare es-

sentials, and then the perhaps even greater effort to keep us interested and impressed, often by simply insisting on the intensity of her feelings. It is rather as if we were exploring the emotions of a romantic affair, but without the concrete circumstances:

When you're in love, you want to live forever. You want the emotion, the excitement you feel to last. Reading in Italian arouses a similar longing in me. I don't want to die, because my death would mean the end of my discovery of the language. Because every day there will be a new word to learn. Thus true love can represent eternity.

Sometimes the strategy leads Lahiri to draw some remarkable parallels:

My relationship with Italian takes place in exile, in a state of separation. . . . I think of Dante, who waited for nine years before speaking to Beatrice. I think of Ovid, exiled from Rome to a remote place. To a linguistic outpost, surrounded by alien sounds.

She is referring here to the experience of being back in America, in whose language she is entirely proficient, living with her husband and two children, and wishing she could hear the words of a language she at this point barely knows. Ovid was banished from the only world he knew to a settlement on the Black Sea in an era without phones, radio, Internet, or affordable intercontinental travel.

Essentially, in going to Italy and writing in Italian, Lahiri induces a state of vulnerability—linguistic vulnerability—so that she can savor the initial loss of security, gradually overcome her disorientation, and finally enjoy the same elation of achievement she described on crossing that lake. So we hear about the first time Lahiri appeared at an Italian literary festival without an interpreter, of her hard work learning new vocabulary and keeping a diary in Italian, then her frustration when the results are not altogether satisfying, or worse still when a shop assistant replies to her Italian in English, failing to register her profound attachment to the language and all the labor of love it has cost her.

Once settled in Italy, everywhere she goes, Lahiri finds not so much Italy, as images of her own daunting enterprise.

Visiting Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli, with its extensive underground passages, she understands

the nature of my Italian project. Like visitors to the villa today, like Hadrian almost two millennia ago, I walk on the surface, the accessible part. But I know, as a writer, that language exists in the bones, in the marrow. That the true life of the language, the substance, is there.

This underground bone marrow of Italian remains elusive to Lahiri. But then "without a sense of marvel at things, without wonder, one can't create anything."

Visiting Venice she again discovers "a new way to understand my relationship with Italian":

In Venice I can't go anywhere without crossing countless pedestrian bridges. At first, having to cross a bridge every few minutes is exhausting. . . . In the middle of every bridge I find myself suspended, neither here nor there. Writing in another language resembles a journey of this sort.

My writing in Italian is, just like a bridge, something constructed, fragile. It might collapse at any moment, leaving me in danger. English flows under my feet.

Of course the bridges of Venice have been with us for some centuries now, while for a more or less native speaker a plunge into the dark waters of English might not be such a terrible thing. Later Lahiri will compare herself to Daphne, who fled from Apollo and was transformed into a laurel tree:

As I said before, I think my writing in Italian is a flight. Dissecting my linguistic metamorphosis, I realize that I'm trying to get away from something, to free myself. I've been writing in Italian for almost two years, and I feel that I've been transformed, almost reborn. But the change, this new opening, is costly; like Daphne, I, too, find myself confined. I can't move as I did before, the way I was used to moving in English. Now a new language, Italian, covers me like a kind of bark. I remain inside, renewed, trapped, relieved, uncomfortable.

Daphne, we recall, was not trapped inside the tree; she became the tree. There was no flight back home.

Later still, Lahiri compares her Italian endeavors to Matisse's decision in his seventies to switch from painting to collage, or more precisely decoupage. Matisse felt "the need to change course." "I thought of my writing in Italian: a similarly intricate process, a similarly rudimentary result compared with my work in English."

With all this effort to clarify, magnify, dramatize, and romanticize the decision to write in Italian, there is simply no room for Italy or the Italians. I can think of no other book set in Italy that has less of the color and drama of Italy in it. Not a single figure emerges. Not a dialogue of any note. Not a single situation characteristic of Italy. Even the language is there only as a challenge. There is no reflection on its construction, its lexical makeup, the distinctive mind-set and behavior patterns it sus-

tains. In a chapter entitled "The Imperfect," Lahiri talks about her problems with Italian past tenses and confesses that after twenty years of studying the language, she still has no idea how to choose between the imperfect and what the Italians call the *passato prossimo*:

Searching for clues, I note that with the adverbs *sempre* (always) and *mai* (never) one often uses the simple past: *Sono stata sempre confusa* (I've always been confused), for example. Or, *Non sono mai stata capace di assorbire questa cosa* (I've never been able to grasp this thing). I think I've discovered an important key, maybe a rule. Then, reading *È stato così* (*It Has Been Like That* [*The Dry Heart*]), by Natalia Ginzburg—a novel whose title provides another example of this theme—I read, "*Non mi diceva mai che era innamorato di me... Francesca aveva sempre tante cose da raccontare... Aspettavo sempre la posta*" (He never told me he was in love with me... Francesca always had lots of stories to tell... I was always waiting for the mail). No rule, only more confusion.

What a muddle this is. The simple past is an English tense—I went, I worked, I did. It has no direct equivalent in Italian. "I have always been confused" is an example of the present perfect, not the simple past. Confused indeed. The mistake is made repeatedly throughout the chapter. Goldstein then translates each example of the Italian *passato prossimo* directly with an English present perfect (*È stato così*—"It Has Been Like That"), thus making it impossible for the reader to appreciate Lahiri's problem: that English and Italian tenses don't follow the same rules or divide time in the same way. A more faithful rendering of *È stato così* would be "It Was Like This," or, to do a little justice to Ginzburg's title: "How It Was."

Floundering with her tenses, Lahiri grabs for the life vest of analogy:

Needless to say, this obstacle makes me feel, in fact, very imperfect. Although it's frustrating, it seems fated. I identify with the imperfect because a sense of imperfection has marked my life.

After which we need not wait long for the grand statement:

In a certain sense writing is an extended homage to imperfection.

There are times when it seems Lahiri is fatally seduced by the impression that she is saying something profound in her new language:

What does a word mean? And a life? In the end, it seems to me the same thing. Just as a word can have many dimensions, many nu-

ances, great complexity, so, too, can a person, a life. Language is the mirror, the principal metaphor. Because ultimately the meaning of a word, like that of a person, is boundless, ineffable.

Lahiri tells us that she chose not to translate the book into English because she did not want to be tempted to change or polish it, but have its strangeness in Italian come across to the English reader. However, its strangeness in Italian is exactly that of a person still unfamiliar with the language, often imposing English syntax and choosing cognates of English words. When translated this strangeness disappears, since such structures and word choices are standard in English. Instead, where Lahiri has deployed Italian idioms and rhetorical strategies, Goldstein follows her usual habit of bringing them more or less word for word into English, so that the strangeness of the English text is that of so many translations where what was ordinary in the original becomes quaint and off-key in translation. "I see the cottage, until now distant, just steps from me." "I'm in love, but what I love remains indifferent." "She didn't think of the future or of the traces of her life." "I wonder if I'm going against the current." Etc., etc.

Is there anything to be salvaged from this humorless book? Yes. A few fascinating pages on the dynamics in Lahiri's family when she was growing up in New England, some interesting quotations from Cesare Pavese's correspondence with Rosa Calzecchi Onesti on her translations of Homer, and above all two stories, two brief moments when instead of talking about writing Italian, Lahiri gets on with the job and does it. Immediately she is persuasive and engaging.

In "The Exchange," a woman in a state of crisis leaves her family to live alone in some anonymous town. One day she is invited from the street into a fashion designer's apartment where women are trying on the designer's clothes. She undresses and tries on various things but nothing suits her. Looking for her own clothes again, she can't find her sweater. A sweater is found that looks like hers, but she is convinced it is not. As in a nightmare, her intense anxiety over the issue—is this or is this not my sweater?—is urgent and convincing. Back home she has the impression that life is both dully the same and utterly changed.

In the second story, "Half-Light," toward the end of the book, a man dreams he is being driven by his wife in a car that is falling to pieces; there is no floor beneath their feet, yet his wife drives on obliviously. Waking, the man goes downstairs where the remnants of yesterday evening's party have yet to be cleared up. They were celebrating his reluctant return from a long, happy absence in a foreign land. Finding some-

dry bread in the toaster, he imagines that perhaps his wife, who doesn't eat bread, has had a lover while he was away, then dismisses the idea. Finally, he decides that the sense of the dream is that his twenty-year-long marriage was always simultaneously routine and precarious, on the edge of an abyss, and realizes that he has no desire to talk to his wife about this.

In her closing words to the book, Lahiri insists that both these stories are autobiographical: she had the experience in the designer's apartment; she, and not a man, had the dream of sitting beside her spouse in the disintegrating car. Interpreting the first story, she decides that the sweater is the language she has changed. Readers may suspect that much else is at stake; two urgent imperatives, for change and excitement on the one hand, for continuity and protection on the other, are at loggerheads, with no middle path. Which brings us to the curious position of Lahiri's husband and children in this book. When Lahiri swims across the lake, they remain on "the known shore." When she chooses to live in Rome, they are there beside her, but remain absolutely peripheral figures, not part of the Italian adventure, brought in only fleetingly to express her indignation when a shop assistant thinks her husband's Italian is better than hers.

Lahiri insists on her complete and utter immersion in Italian, a situation that must be extremely hard to achieve in a family of English speakers. In the final pages she mentions the possibility of her continuing to write in Italian. Yet she also announces, as if the matter were entirely beyond her control, that she now has to return to America. Amid so much apparent candor, the reader has the impression that crucial facts are being withheld and that the challenge of a new language may have been no more than a temporary diversion from other issues whose emotional urgency spills confusingly into discussions of past tenses and word choices. In any event, her two fine, courageous stories make clear that the problem is not what language to write in, but what to write about. □