

By BEATRICE TAUSS

OMAGGIO to the Italians—not, this time, for palazzo, piazza or Foro Romano; not this time for Botticelli. Homage to these graceful people, bearers of civilization, from whom we learn, even now, amid the crumbling, in this raucous moment, the meaning of *gentilezza*. Generous, they continue to scatter favors. Here is a collection of instances, recently gathered:

It is a long drive in Sicily from Syracuse to Piazza Armerina, with its recently excavated third-century Roman imperial villa noteworthy for remarkably vivid polychrome mosaics of hunting scenes, flora, fauna, girls in "bikinis." In the middle of June the ride is hard and hot, even for indefatigable American tourists. The terrain is a curious blend of the sere and lush: tawny fields, olive and almond and fig trees, vineyards, cactus, oleander.

On the road is a great stream of humanity: we in our rented Fiat; old men on burros bearing bulging woven saddlebags or huge humping bundles of hay; whole families of shy-eyed children, withdrawn women, wary men, carried in yellow carts painted with scenes of heroic Orlando (Roland) at Roncesvalles. There is a great swarming of diesel trucks, herds of sheep, nuns on bicycles, Fiat 500's, tour buses, wagons, Lambrettas, burros.

Marble Coolness

The sun is high, and now only tourists push on. Parched, travel-weary, we draw up at a roadside coffee bar, pass through hanging beads to get out of the scorching sun into the coolness of marble floor and marble tables. Pastries, candies and a garden of ice cream are displayed with casual Italian dash; the coffee machine glints, and the air is rich with espresso. Behind the counter, in charge, is a young boy, perhaps 14. He has, doubtless, been there all day and will be there till late at night. He was there yesterday and will be there tomorrow. He will never tour America. He surveys us coolly, taking in our Blue Guide, our crumpled map, our large sunglasses, straw hats, wash 'n wear, our hesitancy, even trepidation. He reads our alarm at the heat, the alien land. His knowing black eyes record all. I start negotiations in halting Italian for *acqua minerale* to save us from dehydration, if not despair.

Could you, I venture, put a piece of lemon in it? He is softened at once by my efforts in Italian. "But, certainly," he says, raising between thumb and forefinger a large lemon from the full bowl in front of him. "And why not? Lemons, lemons, we do not lack here. Of lemons we have an abundance." His repetition is wry—masterly—as with quick, expert movements he slices the lemon, but his eyes continue to say, also wryly, what his tone had made so clear to these tourists from the land of industrial plenty: "We are, as you see, backward. The land is barren, unwilling."

"But," I offer, "a lemon is a beautiful thing. And delicious, too."

BEATRICE TAUSS is an assistant professor of literature and drama at the Juilliard School.



Henry Markowitz

A Lemon, a Pear, A Sprig of Thyme —The Little Things Really Count in Italy

He is entirely pleased. He has understood the clumsy effort. He is won. His eyes flash genuine gaiety. With a sudden graceful movement he chooses a large and beautiful lemon, washes it under the tap and with a courtly flourish hands it to me. "I present it to you—in omaggio." He holds it close to my nose. "It's perfumed."

The exchange, his swift response and

that 'incomparable omaggio—it is all grace. It is Italian.

Circling leisurely one afternoon among the back roads of Tuscany, reveling in olive groves and vineyards, in cypress and pine, we find ourselves suddenly lost. We are heading for Arezzo but the way is not clear.

A country woman, dressed in black,

with a basket of eggs on her arm, comes along. We pull up. To go to Arezzo—"come si fa?" ("How is it done?") Her old face lights up; she smiles an enchanting smile as she leans toward me in the car. There is not a tooth in her head. Oh! We are indeed making a mistake. This is not the road to Arezzo. We must turn around and go back to the intersection then "*sempre diritto*" ("straight ahead") till—.The directions become complicated. She leans closer, looking deep in my eyes with motherly concern to see whether I am really understanding. She repeats the directions from the beginning, slowly, with great clarity. Then she pats my arm and assures me that the road is easy and straight—you can do it with your eyes closed — impossible to get lost. "Have you understood?" Convinced, she pats my arm again and says, "*Buon viaggio*," as though we were related. In that brief encounter, we make connections. She sends us on our way with what amounts to a blessing. A pat, a look, a sweet human assurance—the Italians are always giving you things. The old woman waves to us till we disappear toward Arezzo, carrying her touch, her smile, her *gentilezza*.

Under a dazzling morning sun, we pull up to the Castle of Euryalus. Here, the story goes, Archimedes brilliantly arranged his mirrors and lenses and set the Roman fleet on fire. "One of the greatest fortresses of the Greek era," says the Michelin Guide. "The most complete and important Greek military work extant," says the Blue Guide. In spite of limited interest in fortifications we drive the 11 miles from Syracuse to see it. The spot, acres of rubble, overlooking a great sweep of sparkling Ionian Sea, is empty.

The custodian, a wispy-haired stocky middle-aged man, approaches. He is bronzed except around the eyes where deep wrinkles radiate out in white whiskery lines. He looks us over. His practiced eye must decide whether we are serious or want the quick tour-bus treatment. We exchange a few words in Italian and, his decision made, he begins briskly his great *spiegazione* (explanation) of this historic spot where he was born and has always lived. He has studied and pondered the place for a lifetime. He cherishes its stones; its forms, battered as they are by time, seem still, to him, perfect. He is the *genius loci*. His castle is a place of wonder and inexhaustible riches. He is proud of his knowledge of it. Sadly, few people know about it. "They drive up, turn their heads a little, see nothing, understand nothing, then look at their watches and start the car." We must spread the word, he says: "*Fare propaganda*."

But, today, he was glowing. He gave all—a complete tour, of the outer walls and underground passages, flashlight in hand to guide us through appallingly dark tunnels and secret passageways and cunningly devised defenses. And he never stopped talking; he was a one-man *son et lumière*. The old fortress came to life through his little scenes and playlets.

"You are the Greeks and I am the Carthaginians." He stationed us in a particularly treacherous corner where the enemy was obliged to enter single file, their visibility limited by the ingenious cut of the staircase before them.

As each soldier passed through, he was cut down by us, licensed to kill by the excited man in front of us reliving the victorious moment. We feel like Samson, smiting them "hip and thigh with a great slaughter." Our guide clutches his side as we "spear" him, twists his body in mock pain and falls. He jumps up. "Pincer—pincer," he says, pressing thumb and forefinger together, "that is the secret." He is drunk with the genius of this fortification. The Kaiser himself, he says, and modern military strategists even from the United States have come to study this military marvel with its unsurpassed pincer strategy. He points out the remarkable thickness of the walls, the brilliant placement of the entrances and exits, insuring the impregnability of the castle. He indicates the living quarters and the worn niches along the walls in dark

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tunnels where horses were secretly tethered. He explains how the designers of the fort had managed to build in a form of temperature control. "Air-conditioning," I translated to my husband. The guide suddenly beamed, seized my hand and bowing over it, kissed it. "Brava, brava—I needed 50 words to tell you and you have translated it in two." At once everything is clear—it is not fortifications he admires so much. The man is a lover of perfection; his pleasure is in the elegant play of the human mind.

When, at last, having scrambled over boulders and crept through deep, secret passages and climbed over high walls, we emerged, exhausted, the tireless man was still talking. But now it was his mournful duty to tell how, in the end, one black day, the fort was taken. Not, mind you, by force, never—it is impossible—but only through the treachery of a soldier bought off. He is beneath contempt! A traitor—it is too bitter to remember his infamy!

We return to the guide's home. There is a small archeological museum containing bits of sculpture, fragments of pottery and weapons, even a lion's-head gargoyle. We are overwhelmed by the man's intensity, his energy, his love. At last, we step outside. There stands a full and fragrant gelsomino bush. He quickly breaks two or three branches of the lovely white flowers, surrounding them with green leaves, and hurrying toward us, ablaze, he again bows to me and offers me the bouquet—a prize, he says, for all my work at translating his *spiegazione*. I have clearly earned it, he says, and such work must be acknowledged. The intoxicating white blossoms are mine—in omaggio.

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Manghisi, outside Noto in the barren heart of Verga country, the grim Sicilian region that is the scene of the harsh and bitter struggle for life portrayed in his "Mastro Don Gesualdo" and "I Malavoglia."

Almost alone, we are served on the wide veranda of this country inn with the whole sere landscape before us. The "waiter" is a gentle, amiable young man. We learn that here in summer at his aunt's place he earns some money for his studies at the University of Messina. We speak of Giovanni Verga, and he is surprised that we share an admiration for this "remote" region's chronicler. We have a bond.

Literature is his first love but—an Italian shrug—"I am studying physics." He helps us order a country meal—*casalingo* ("homemade")—and invites us to tour the cottage, into the kitchen to see the homemade pasta, the bread, the cheeses. We eat delicate roasted baby lamb and drink the local wine from a pottery jug. For dessert, there is his aunt's specialty, honey and almond-filled cakes. We are full of praise.

After lunch he takes us to a nearby stream marked with a plaque commemorating the beguiling spot where Mascagni was said to have conceived his music for "Cavalleria Rusticana," that passionate opera based on Verga's tale. The young man speaks sadly of the grim truth of Verga's work; of the life of the region: still too hard, still too cruel.

We return to the tavern and reluctantly, even sadly, recognize that it is time to go. He excuses himself, runs inside and reappears a few moments later with a package carefully, prettily wrapped and tied. He holds it out and says simply, "I present you with these almond cakes—in *omaggio*."

There is a special sweetness in this Italian making of offerings. The Italians are always giving something—something beautiful, of the *paese*, what they have. The graciousness of their gifts melts the heart.

A maid in a *penstone* in Rome notices that I am pale and have scarcely touched the evening meal. As I leave, she slips a large ripe pear into my hand. "For later," she says, "you will be hungry."

In Palazzolo Acreide, in Sicily, a guide shows us the remains of a Greek theater, takes us through nearby caves to see the sarcophagi of great antiquity, points out where the Byzantines made burial niches in the Greek walls. We see great Greek Cybeles housed (among salamanders) in wooden huts that protect against further defacement. His small son has insisted on accompanying us, clambering among the ruins, disappearing and reappearing among the ancient caves and tombs, sometimes worrying his father with delayed returns. They are very close. The guide asks me if I have any children. "No." His eyes are full of sympathy at once. "*Male [bad]*," he says. His tone implies there is surely a tragedy here. As we return to the car, he picks a sprig of oregano and a sprig of wild thyme growing underfoot. "A memento," he says as he hands me the deliciously fragrant bouquet. I think it is a consolation prize.

That's how it is with so many Italians—they are always giving and we are always taking away. Praise them.