1
Diverse Italies

FRACTURED GEOGRAPHY

Italy, complained Napoleon, is too long. It is indeed very long, the longest country in Europe outside Scandinavia and the Ukraine. It is also one of the thinnest, its peninsula about as narrow as Portugal and the Netherlands, broader only than Albania and Luxembourg. Ugo La Malfa, a republican politician of the twentieth century, liked to picture the country as a man with his feet in Africa and his hands clutching the Alps, trying to pull himself up into the middle of Europe.[1]

We think of Italy as a country with a north and a south, but actually its 720 miles run diagonally through different climatic and vegetation zones from the town of Aosta in the north-west, where French is an official language, to the Salentine Peninsula in the Apulian south-east, where Greek is still spoken. On the battlements of the Castle of Otranto you feel you are in the Balkans, and in a sense you are: you can see the mountains of Greece and Albania across the water; you are closer to Istanbul and the Ukraine than you are to Aosta; the Black Sea is nearer than the west coast of Sardinia. When Apulia joined the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, the new state's capital was Turin, a city so far away that Otranto is today closer to seventeen foreign capitals than it is to Turin. No wonder you sometimes hear Apulians refer to themselves as Greeks or Levantines. Sometimes they pretend that they are not also Italians.

In 1847 the Austrian chancellor, Prince Metternich, dismissed Italy as '*une expression géographique*', a remark that has subsequently succeeded in annoying many people, especially Italians and historians. At the time Italy may have been more than a geographical expression – though

it was still divided into eight independent states – but Metternich was repeating a view widely held for more than 2,000 years: Italy, like Iberia, may have been a geographical unit with natural borders but it had not been united since Roman times and did not seem to require political unity now or in the future.

Italy seems to begin with the myth of Hercules, the Greek hero who rescued a stray calf that had wandered across southern Italy and swum the Straits of Messina. The land the animal crossed duly became known as Italia, from the word *ouitoulos* or bull-calf, a word that has also bequeathed us, via Oscan and Latin, the word *vitello* or veal. A related theory, recorded by the Greek historian Timaeus, held that the ancient Greeks had been so impressed by the cattle in Italy that they had rewarded the land with the same name.

This may be the explanation for the origin of the name 'Italia', but it does not seem quite convincing. For centuries northern visitors have been scathing about the skinny appearance of Italian cows, especially the small, white, wide-horned ones bred mainly for pulling carts and drawing ploughs. The arid south of the peninsula, bereft of pasture and hay fields, can hardly have seemed a herdsman's paradise even for the Greeks: the great Murge Plateau in Apulia cannot support cattle because it does not have streams. Italy today has to import more than half the milk it consumes and, if we associate the south with any kind of cattle now, it is with water buffaloes, producers of the milk used in making the soft white cheese, *mozzarella di bùfala*. Yet the buffaloes are of Asian origin and were brought to Italy for ploughing in the early Middle Ages; later they went wild, roaming over Campania and the Pontine Marshes before they were domesticated once more in the eighteenth century. Used as draught animals rather than for milk and meat, the herds seemed to be dying out in the first half of the twentieth century. Their famous product did not become either famous or fashionable until the 1980s.

In the fifth century BC the word 'Italia' applied only to the Calabrian toe of the Italian 'boot', which was inhabited by a people known as the Bruttians. Later it was extended to Lucania and Campania, and later still the term spread northwards to describe Rome's conquests in the peninsula. The Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides did not regard the land beyond the River Po as a part of Italy, and indeed

geographically the Po Valley belongs to the continental land-mass not the peninsula. But after the Romans had subdued its Gallic tribes and reached the Alps, that area too was added to Italia. By the second century BC another Greek historian, Polybius, confirmed that almost the whole of modern Italy was then Italia, though Roman poets of a later age sometimes called it by other names such as Hesperia, Ausonia, Saturnia terra and (appropriately for what is now the largest wine producer in the world) Oenotria, 'the land of wine'.

There was one sharp check to this progress. In 91 BC some of Rome's *socii* (subservient allies) rebelled and set up a state in the central Apennines called Italia, with a capital Corfinium (renamed Italica), administered by praetors, a senate and two consuls. The insurgents even produced coins showing the bull of Italia goring and about to rape the Roman wolf. They were defeated, however, in the ensuing Social War by Rome's traditional tactic of brutality plus concessions, and no further attempt was made to set up a state called Italy for many centuries to come.

Within a century of the war, the earlier version of Italia was organized as an administrative unit by Augustus, the first Roman emperor, who divided it into eleven districts; the Istrian Peninsula, which was joined to Venetia, was the only part that does not belong to the modern state of Italy.* A later emperor, Diocletian, expanded Italia to include Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and Raetia, a district that contained parts of what are now Switzerland, Bavaria and the Tyrol.

Augustan Italy, lauded by Virgil and his fellow poets, remained an inspiration to the poets of the Middle Ages, to Petrarch who sang of 'the fair land / That the Apennines divide and the sea and the Alps surround',[2] and to many others later on. Yet until the end of the eighteenth century Italy remained a literary idea, an abstract concept, an imaginary homeland or simply a sentimental urge. If at times people used it to express resentment at foreign occupation, its independence and unity were not political aspirations. And for a large majority of the population it meant nothing at all. Even in 1861, at the time of unification, some Sicilians thought L'Italia – or rather la Talia – was their new queen. A full century later, the social reformer Danilo Dolci

* See above map 3.

encountered Sicilians who had never heard of Italy and asked him what it was.[3]

The geography we imbibe from school textbooks and atlases makes us think that Italy is peculiarly blessed in its position. According to the revolutionary patriot Giuseppe Mazzini, God had given Italians 'the most clearly demarcated fatherland in Europe'.[4] There it lies in the centre of the Mediterranean, protected in the north by its Alpine ramparts and everywhere else by its seas.

Italy is actually extremely unfortunate in its position, which has made it one of the most easily and frequently invaded places in the world. The Alps may look impressive but they have been penetrated without difficulty since the Bronze Age. In the twelfth century BC traders were bringing amber from the Baltic across the Alps to Etruria and Sardinia; by the Roman era seventeen of the twenty-three Alpine passes were being used. Few ramparts have been so consistently surmounted down the centuries. Hannibal brought his Carthaginian army over the Western Alps, while Alaric's Goths and Attila's Huns came from the east through the lower Julian and Carnic Alps. In 1796 General Bonaparte, as he then was, marched through the Maritime Alps between Nice and Genoa – allowing him to boast to his soldiers, '*Annibal a forcé les Alpes – nous, nous les avons tournés*' – but four years later, now as first consul, he descended on Italy through five more northerly passes. Afterwards he had himself painted riding a white charger through the snows of the Great St Bernard, though in fact he had been led through them on a little grey mule.

Many other aggressors have emulated these invaders of Italy. Once they had got through the passes and on to the plain, they could speed up across the Po Valley, which was flat, inviting and difficult to defend, unless they were attacking from the west, in which case they were hindered by tributaries of the Po flowing southwards in parallel from the northern lakes: Milan was simple to capture, and those other 'gateways' to Italy, Turin and Verona, were not much harder. One reason why the eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) lasted for a thousand years longer than its western counterpart was that it was much easier to defend. The Goths and Huns might rampage around the Balkans but they were halted at Constantinople by the city walls and a fleet

that prevented then from crossing the Bosphorus and ravaging Asia Minor. Later the Byzantines performed a similar feat in reverse, blocking the Arabs in the seventh century and thus preventing them from pouring into eastern Europe, reaching Italy and doubtless islamicizing Rome. At a time, a century before Charlemagne, when Europe was militarily weak, Byzantium saved it and made possible its later rise to dominance. Apart from the French Riviera, the Italian peninsula has the only Mediterranean coasts that (except around Bari) have never been Muslim.

Its seas made Italy even more vulnerable than its mountains. With 4,500 miles of coastline, the peninsula and its islands are almost impossible to patrol. They can be attacked from all directions by predators from three continents.

Boats were man's first means of transport, and by 5000 BC these had become sufficiently sturdy to undertake long sea voyages. In the fifth century BC Herodotus observed that a boat could sail 75 miles in twenty-four hours, a statistic suggesting that invaders of Italy from the Albanian shore could cross the 45 miles of the Strait of Otranto in summer daylight. The Adriatic was thus always a threat. To safeguard the Italian shore, one had to control the eastern shore with its useful harbours as well as Corfu, the island guarding the entrance to the strait. Venice could never have pretended to be the Queen (or Bride) of the Adriatic or the Lion of the Sea – let alone la Serenissima – if it had not bullied the Dalmatian city of Zara (now Zadar), if Trieste had become a serious rival or if Ragusa (later Dubrovnik) had developed a naval strength commensurate with its commercial power. During the great centuries of its republic, Venice was forced to construct its own integrated, protective world in the Adriatic, much of whose population was not Italian. No wonder that cartographers so often referred to the sea as the Gulf of Venice.

The islands were still more of a liability than the mainland coast. Despite its closeness to Tuscany, Elba in the sixteenth century was so frequently attacked by invaders from Africa (who were once known as the Barbary corsairs) that its inhabitants abandoned their homes along the shore and went to live in the hills. The same danger depopulated the coasts of Sardinia, whose forts and watchtowers did little to deter raiders questing for slaves; the island had already been an

easy prey for invading Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs and Aragonese, as well as for more commercial colonialists in the form of Pisans and Genoese. Sicily had a similar problem on a grander scale, its position making it impossible for its inhabitants to control their destiny for the last two and a half thousand years. Syracuse's defeat of the Athenians during the Peloponnesian War in the fifth century BC was the island's most recent successful resistance against a serious invader. Since then, it has been too small and weak to defend itself, yet too large, too strategically important and (until the later Middle Ages) too fertile to escape invasions. It thus became a sort of prize for the dominant power in the western Mediterranean.

This Sicilian fate was in a less concentrated and continuous form the fate of the whole of Italy. Until the advent of Great Power diplomacy in the mid-nineteenth century, geography determined that for most of its history Italy had to conquer or be dominated by others. Its destinies could be either those of an imperial power or a type of colony but not those of a nation-state. A comparison with England, whose seas and navies have protected it, is illuminating. The Normans invaded Sicily in 1060 and England in 1066 and in both places established flourishing kingdoms, the Sicilian one being much the richer of the two. Over the subsequent millennium several English claimants crossed the Channel and seized the throne, but there has been only one successful invasion of England by a foreign army, the Dutch force in 1688, an event which was neither entirely foreign nor a typical invasion because William of Orange had been invited by powerful English politicians to overthrow the unpopular James II, his uncle and father-in-law. During the same nine centuries Italy was successfully invaded by Angevins, Aragonese, Germans (several times), French (many times), Spanish, Turks (briefly), Austrians (frequently), Russians, British and Americans.† None of them, however, was able to control the whole of the peninsula.

Whereas for England the North Sea is an obvious advantage, both

† An inexhaustive list of victorious invaders before 1060 would include Sicans, Elymians, Sicels, Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Celts, Cimbri, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Alans, Huns, Lombards, Byzantines, Franks, Magyars, Vikings and Arabs.

economic and military, the virtues of the Mediterranean are less apparent to Italy. In fact the relationship of land and water around the peninsula is a complicated one. Despite its extensive coastline, Italy has only a few satisfactory ports, Genoa, La Spezia and Naples on the Tyrrhenian Sea, Taranto on the Ionian, Ancona, Brindisi and Venice in the Adriatic. Amalfi, which somehow managed to become a maritime power in the ninth century, has a very short beach and no proper harbour; it survived as a republic mainly by assisting Arab raiders attacking other parts of the Italian coast.‡ It did, however, have the advantages of Campanian hemp and flax for ropes and access to forests for building ships. Timber shortages in much of the rest of Italy hampered the construction of great navies. Although there were fine forests near the sea, especially in Tuscany and the Gargano Peninsula, the Mediterranean climate ensured that, once they had been cut down and the topsoil had been washed away, they did not regenerate properly, particularly in the south, where herds of goats roamed among the saplings. Much of the Sardinian coastline was thus covered by *màcchia*, the aromatic Mediterranean scrub that is good for the senses and perhaps for the soul but not for human welfare or the ecology of the zone.

The timber available in the peninsula was adequate during classical times, when deforestation had only just started, but it was not sufficient for Italians later on to compete with the Atlantic navies of England and Holland, which had access to Baltic forests, or the imperial fleets of Spain and Portugal. The shortage of oak, considered vital for ships' hulls, was a perennial problem. The Venetians felled the forests of Dalmatia for their vessels, for the millions of stakes required for the foundations of their buildings and for the thousands of *bricole*, the posts strapped together in wigwam shape that mark the navigable channels of the lagoon. Naturally the forests could not suffice for very long. In the epoch of its triumph against the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto (1571), Venice was having to buy not only hulls but whole ships made in Holland.

A popular recollection of Naples today is of its restaurants on the

‡ The flag of the Italian navy retains the blue ensign of Amalfi quartered with the red ensigns of the three other 'maritime republics', Venice, Genoa and Pisa.

seafront and its people merrily eating *frutti di mare*. Yet Italians have never been great fish-eaters, especially in the north, where they have usually preferred freshwater fish to the saltwater varieties. In classical times Roman plutocrats enjoyed the luxury of personal fishponds, while in the Middle Ages the people of Ferrara disdained the nearby Adriatic in favour of rivers and lakes where they could catch pike, tench and carp; the famous 'merchant of Prato', Francesco di Marco Datini, imported eels from the lagoons of Comacchio, near the sea north of Ravenna, bringing them over the Apennines to Tuscany.[5] After the economic boom of the 1960s, when the poor were able to afford food other than bread, polenta, pasta and home-made soup, they preferred to buy meat rather than fish. Between 1960 and 1975 they multiplied their carnivorous intake by a factor of three, a trend encouraged by the Vatican's relaxation of its rule forbidding meat to be eaten on Fridays. By the end of the century Italians were eating more meat than the British and less fish than the European average.

Fishing off the Italian coast has always been a seasonal and unpredictable occupation. Large numbers of tuna were traditionally slaughtered each year off Sardinia (as well as Sicily), but the 'fishing' (that is, channelling the victims into vast curtain nets) and the subsequent slaughter could only begin after the fish had swum into Sardinian waters in May, and could last for only a few weeks. A more general problem – though difficult to appreciate if you visit the thriving fish market in even a small port like Trani – is the scarcity of fish to catch: the only abundant species apart from tuna have been anchovies and sardines. In the mid-twentieth century – before the days of quotas – Italy had the largest fishing industry of those countries with a purely Mediterranean coastline, catching twenty times the tonnage of its nearest rival, Greece. Yet its total catch was only a sixth of that brought home by Britain's fishing fleet.

Fernand Braudel, the great French historian, has been criticized for the allegedly 'meaningless evolutionist terms' he used in describing the Mediterranean water as 'geologically too old' and 'biologically exhausted'. Yet he was right to stress the poverty of the Mediterranean compared to the Atlantic and to observe that 'the much-vaunted *frutti di mare* are only moderately abundant'.[6] The Mediterranean's narrow coastal shelf and its lack of real tides restrict the growth of

nutrients for fish. By contrast, warm Atlantic currents from the Gulf of Mexico reaching the waters and continental shelf of western Europe provide a dense mass of plankton for vast shoals to feed on around Britain, Iceland and Newfoundland. One historical consequence of Italy's shortage of fish and fishermen was a shortage also of sailors. Venice had long been finding its crews in Dalmatia, and at the end of the sixteenth century Mediterranean states were recruiting sailors from northern Europe: following the failure of his Spanish Armada in 1588, Philip II apparently even tried to entice sailors from England.[7]

While Italy's frontier geography has done little to impede people trying to enter the peninsula, its interior has hindered invaders as well as inhabitants from moving around very easily. The Alps have several advantages over the Apennines, Italy's backbone which stretches in an arc for 870 miles down the peninsula and across to Sicily and the Egadi Islands. The northern mountains have rich summer pastures above the tree-line for sheep and cattle, their vegetation flourishes at a much higher altitude, and they have rivers and lakes that assist transport and commerce. They also contain the passes through which Italians can claim to have exported banking and capitalism to northern Europe in the Middle Ages. A mass of villages existed to supply their trade with guides and carts throughout the year: even in midwinter people and goods could come over the passes in sledges. While Milanese merchants of the thirteenth century built a route through the St Gotthard, from which they could penetrate Germany and the Low Countries via the Rhine, the Venetians preferred the Brenner, the lowest of the passes, which took them up to Innsbruck and thence to Nuremberg and Frankfurt. The size of the Transalpine trade – chiefly in fabrics, wine and spices – can be appreciated today by viewing the dimensions of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, the vast square building by the Rialto on the Grand Canal (until recently the central post office), where the German merchants had to live and work when they were in Venice.

The Apennines, by contrast, are a multi-layered barrier of mountains, torrents and ravines that are difficult to traverse; neighbouring villages in the Calabrian Sila traditionally knew little about each other because they were separated by deep chasms. There were numerous paths across the northern mountains in the Middle Ages, but these

were mostly suitable only for mules: you could not transport wagon-loads of wine over them as you could up the Brenner; as late as 1750 there were only two tracts adequate for carts across the whole of the Tuscan-Emilian range. The Apennines have thus created an east–west divide in Italy that has been historically almost as significant as that between north and south. Communications across them were so bad before railways and tunnels that travellers between Rome and Ancona found it easier and cheaper to go all the way by boat – across the Tyrrhenian, Ionian and Adriatic Seas – rather than go straight across the interior.

These mountains do have a few advantages for their inhabitants. Their height – the Gran Sasso in the Abruzzi reaches 9,554 feet – enables them to preserve ice and snow even in summer, a prerequisite for developing local skills in making ice creams and sorbets. This accounts for the otherwise surprising fact that in the middle of August 1860, just after they had conquered Sicily, Garibaldi's soldiers were seen climbing Aspromonte in the Calabrian toe to fetch snow for their refreshments.

A further advantage is the obstacles the mountainous interior has created for invading armies, which during the Second World War so benefited the Germans that British and American forces, despite their command of the air, took twenty-one months to fight their way from one end of Italy to the other. Mountains helped people retain their autonomy, as anyone who tried to rule the rugged interior of the Abruzzi soon learned. They also helped to preserve – and even create – cultural identities and variations for societies living only a couple of valleys apart. This again may seem a blessing to many of us: how fortunate we are to be able to contrast the Pisan-Lucchese Romanesque, dense and exquisite though internally sombre, with the sense of space and light in the Romanesque cathedrals of Bari and Trani. Yet a landscape which encourages cultural diversity is almost bound to promote political disunity. In the case of Italy it has done so since before Romulus founded Rome.

Few blessings, cultural or otherwise, come from the country's two great volcanoes, Etna in Sicily – the largest active volcano in Europe – and Vesuvius looming over Naples. Yet lethal though volcanic eruptions have often been, earthquakes are a more frequent danger.

There is scarcely a town in eastern Sicily or in the south-west of the peninsula that has not been devastated by them at least once. Since 1976 about 4,000 Italians have been killed in earthquakes in Friuli, Campania and Basilicata, Umbria and the Marches, Molise and Apulia, and in 2009 in the Abruzzi. In earlier periods the death toll was even higher. Three of the greatest southern writers of the twentieth century lost their closest relations in earthquakes: the novelist Ignazio Silone lost his mother in the Abruzzi in 1915, the philosopher Benedetto Croce lost his parents and only sister on Ischia in 1883, and the historian Gaetano Salvemini lost his wife, his sister and all five of his children at Messina in 1908, when an earthquake and the tsunami that followed it killed 70,000 people.

Rivers may be less destructive but, in the catalogue of geographical disadvantages that Italians must endure, they rank near the top. As classical writers attest, navigability in antiquity was better than it is now but it was never very good. In the first century BC the geographer Strabo wrote of the 'harmonious arrangement' of the rivers in France, which are today navigable for 4,000 miles. The navigable mileage of rivers in Italy is in the mid-hundreds: none of them has contributed to the growth in trade, industry and human movement comparable to that of the great rivers of northern Europe such as the Seine, the Rhône, the Rhine and the Elbe.

What benefits rivers bring to Italy are predictably in the north, which also enjoys summer rain, abundant springs and snow-fed Alpine streams. The Po is the only river in the country that is navigable for more than a fraction of its length; the waters of its delta contain high levels of plankton which support substantial numbers of fish; and together with its tributaries the river has created its great alluvial plain, Italy's largest and most fertile expanse of arable land. Human ingenuity in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also rearranged the area's waters for economic use. By building one canal from the Ticino to Milan and another to Milan from the River Adda, the wealthy capital of Lombardy was linked to the waters of Lakes Como and Maggiore as well as to the tributaries of the Po.

Even so, the river is only relatively useful. It does not serve the north of Italy as the Marne, the Seine and the Oise serve northern

France. Only one of its fourteen mouths on the Adriatic, the Po della Pila, can be used by boats. Although the Po itself is navigable for 300 miles, at least for small craft, seasonal fluctuations disrupt its flow; so does the enormous quantity of silt it carries to the sea. Some of its tributaries provide hydroelectricity and water for irrigation, as do the Piave and Adige rivers in the north-east. Yet none of them is navigable for more than a few miles – and even then only sporadically. The lower Adige is hampered by sandbanks at its mouth and in summer and early autumn it becomes, like the lower Piave, a small stream trickling between islands of dry pebbles.

The most hallowed river is Virgil's 'gentle Tiber', the second-longest in the country, whose relationship with Rome is as famous as that of the Seine flowing through Paris or the Thames progressing through London. The founders of the Eternal City chose their site well: it had defensible hills, the salt plains of Ostia and a water supply adequate for its needs until it became a great city requiring aqueducts. Yet perhaps they over-estimated the value of its river. Until the late nineteenth century the Tiber was anything but gentle and so prone to flooding that no other city had been built on it in antiquity. As late as 1875, in the last quixotic venture of his life, Giuseppe Garibaldi tried to have the river diverted to prevent it from flooding the capital.

Another problem, inevitably, was navigability. In classical times boats could ply between the port of Ostia and Rome and continue upstream for about 20 miles further. Now the Tiber is navigable only within the city itself. By contrast boats can go up the Thames to Lechlade – barely a dozen miles from its source – while the Seine, which flows slowly and majestically for nearly 500 miles, is so welcoming to vessels that it boasts a great port (Rouen) 75 miles from the sea.

The other rivers of the Apennines are no more useful than the Tiber. Even in the Middle Ages the Arno was either a torrent or a trickle, and transporting Carrara marble from Pisa to Florence sometimes required winching boats to trees along the river bank. Many rivers are virtually useless: while they cascade in winter, in summer they are too dry for irrigation; in Apulia some of them even fail to reach the sea. Torrents are the main agent of erosion in the Apennines, rushing down the mountain sides and bringing large quantities of silt and stones with them; on reaching the plain, some rivers merely replenish the coastal

marshes. Deforestation has made the situation worse, hastening soil erosion and leading to floods, silting and the formation of malarial marshland. In the south this tree-clearing dates from classical times, even before the Romans reached the area, and has continued ever since, a process accelerated by the requirements of goats, dockyards, railway sleepers and telegraph poles. Sicily was once a land of forests, of hardwoods as well as pines, but by the late twentieth century less than 5 per cent of the island was covered by trees.

Garibaldi's campaign to divert the Tiber was motivated by the desire to prevent not only floods but also malaria. Rivers from the Volscian and Alban hills, to the east of Rome, poured so much water on to the coastal plain that they formed the Pontine Marshes, a long, stagnant expanse producing perfect conditions for the diffusion of malaria. Further north the Tuscan Maremma was a similar hazard; few people lived there until it was successfully drained in the 1950s. Only after Garibaldi's death were mosquitoes identified as the cause of malaria, which each year killed 15,000 people and debilitated many times that number. It was not until 1962 that Italy was officially declared a malaria-free country.

Stressing Italy's physical disadvantages helps explain the difficulties they have created for the cause of national unity. It is also useful to clarify why the country is not as rich as foreigners have often supposed it to be. There are many fertile parts of Italy, not just the Po Valley with its fields of maize and wheat but areas such as the lower Arno, the high Valtellina, the Capuan Plain (now controlled by the Camorra), the lemon groves of Palermo (recently destroyed by the Mafia) and the vineyards and olive groves of the Salentine Peninsula. Wine is grown in most areas except northern Veneto, western Piedmont, central Sicily and the Po Valley. Yet much of the peninsula is covered by mountains, which many Italians detest, seeing them as a cause of poverty and a waste of space. They are also an impediment to access and construction and in consequence encourage the building of endless *periferìa* over easier terrain. It sometimes seems there is barely a plain or a valley that has not been deemed a suitable site for development. Between 1950 and 2005 the Italian countryside lost to asphalt and concrete a total of 3.66 million hectares, a figure larger than the combined size of Tuscany and Umbria.[8]

Many foreigners, like me, have had the good fortune to sit watching the fireflies under a Tuscan pergola, drinking Chianti wine, pouring Lucchese olive oil over our rocket salads and feeling that the material life does not have much more to offer. There seems to be an abundance of good things, of *funghi porcini* and *bistecca fiorentina*, of figs and pulses and roasted vegetables, of hams hanging in the *cantina* awaiting the next visit. Tuscany enjoys a better climate, more fertile land and richer minerals than other parts of Italy; its share-cropping peasants, the ballad-singing *contadini*, were historically better off than agricultural workers elsewhere, and their traditional soup, *ribollita*, was a good deal more nutritious than polenta, the dismal and unhealthy staple of the north.

Yet even here, in one of the happiest and most civilized regions of the world, the land is not very productive. Even when Florence was the artistic and banking centre of the world, it was unable to survive on produce from its countryside for more than five months a year: in the four centuries after 1375 it experienced on average a famine in every fourth year, and in the sixteenth century the Medici grand duke had to import grain from as far away as England, Poland and Flanders. When Vernon Bartlett, a distinguished English journalist, settled in Tuscany after the Second World War, some of his neighbours, who had been prisoners in Britain, talked 'with envious affection of the rich English soil'.[9] Postcards and prosciutto, Capri and Chianti, gondolas and gorgonzola – such associations tell us and remind us of the Italy we want to remember.

ITALIAN PEOPLES

If you look through the telephone directory of Bari in Apulia you will be struck by the quantity of Italian surnames that indicate a foreign ancestry. There are some people named Greco, a good number called Spagnolo or Spagnuolo, and a great many with the name Albano or Albanese – not recent immigrants from Albania but people whose ancestors fled before the Turkish advances to the Adriatic in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The names testify to what Italy has been for most of its history since the fall of Rome: a land of desire for

settlers, immigrants and foreign conquerors. Its accessibility and wealth – in parts – still make it a goal for migrants, though these now come from somewhat further away. By 2009 Italy contained more than 600,000 migrants from a single country, Romania, as well as substantial numbers of Moroccans, Albanians, Chinese, South Americans and sub-Saharan Africans. The Tuscan town of Prato officially has 10,000 Chinese residents and unofficially double that number.[10] Perhaps it is their presence that has encouraged the arrival of a new type of immigrant, Manchurian prostitutes, who have annoyed their predecessors in the trade, mainly Brazilians and Africans, by charging less, working harder and doing their job in car-parks, alleyways and public conveniences. Many immigrants enter Italy illegally not because they have relations or good prospects there but because it is easier to reach than other countries.

If we agree with the French historian Lucien Febvre that the concept of prehistory is absurd, we should first acknowledge the Mesolithic people who were living in the Italian peninsula around 10,000 BC at the end of the Ice Age's last freezing spell. They were nomads who hunted and gathered fruit and moved north as the earth warmed up.

Around 7000 BC, before Britain became an island, another people, now known as Neolithic, began to arrive in Europe from south-west Asia. They penetrated Italy by sea and by land through the Balkans, absorbing their more primitive predecessors as they moved west. By 6000 BC they were in Apulia; soon afterwards they reached Calabria and Sicily; and from there they sent fresh expeditions to Corsica and Sardinia. They seem to have had a compulsion to go west, like Tennyson's Ulysses, 'to sail beyond the sunset and . . . may be . . . touch the Happy Isles'. Reflecting on their pioneering spirit, the archaeologist Barry Cunliffe suggests they had 'a desire to see what lies beyond, drawn on westwards, perhaps, by the fascination of the setting sun'.[11]

There was little diversity among the Neolithic people, who had reached and settled in northern Europe by 4000 BC. They cleared land with stone axes, they grew wheat and barley, kept sheep, cattle and pigs, and built themselves homes instead of living in caves. The differences that emerged among them were fashioned by climate, vegetation and resources. The inhabitants of Britain and Ireland could

not have initiated what we call the Bronze Age without a supply of copper and tin needed for the alloy. Along the Mediterranean coasts people used olive oil for their food and their lamps; further north, where olives did not grow, they relied on animal fats for nourishment and tallow candles.

This north–south European divergence was replicated in Italy – and still is, as anyone who has compared Neapolitan cooking with butter-based Piedmontese dishes will know. While chestnuts, which have a nutritional value comparable to wheat, have hardly featured in southern diets, they have been an important resource in the north-west, where they grow well and where bread baked with their flour became a staple diet during the famished years after the Second World War. Yet the land is not simply divided between north and south or indeed between east and west but also partitioned, minutely and extensively, by the rugged limestone ridges of the Apennines. From the beginning, the Neolithic settlers lived in isolated territories, a segregation that fostered the development of distinctive languages, cultures and local customs.

Around 700 BC different groups were recognized as distinct entities and were later classified as such by Greek and Roman writers. In the north were the Ligurians, the Taurini (the 'bull-like' people of Turin) and the Veneti (who were famous, a thousand years before the foundation of Venice or the invention of gondolas, as warriors, feasters and breeders of chariot-horses); the central Apennines were inhabited by Umbrians, Sabines, Volscians and Samnites, and further south the mountains contained Lucanians and the Calabrian Bruttians; the Adriatic coast was divided south of Veneti territory among Picenes, Daunians, Peucetians and Messapians, while along the Tyrrhenian lived Etruscans, Latins, Faliscans and Campanians; the most recent arrivals were Greek colonists in the south. It was all very unlike Greece, whose inhabitants resembled each other, talked the same language and already thought of themselves as Greek. In Italy the population spoke about forty languages and did not consider themselves the same people, let alone as Italians.

Apart from the Greeks, the most distinctive and advanced people were the Etruscans, who were based in Etruria, where they built hill-top towns such as Volterra, and from where they spread north to the

Po Valley and south to the Bay of Naples. In his *Lays of Ancient Rome*, which drew on the work of the classical historian Livy, Thomas Babington Macaulay described the Roman hero Horatius Cocles holding a bridge over 'Father Tiber' and defying a mighty Etruscan army led by Lars Porsena of Clusium, who 'by the nine gods' had sworn to capture Rome and avenge its exiled dynasty. In fact the Etruscan leader probably did capture the city, some of whose kings had actually been Etruscans. At this stage, the middle of the first millennium BC, Rome had little identity separate from its Etruscan and Latin neighbours. Eventually Etruria was defeated and absorbed by the Romans, but by then its power had already been reduced by challenges from Gauls, Greeks, Phoenicians and the peoples of the interior.

Greek colonies appeared in Italy as early as the middle of the eighth century BC. Euboeans founded Cumae on the western promontory of the Bay of Naples, Achaeans settled in south-east Italy (where they seem to have made the connection between Italia and the bull-calf), Ionians went for south-west Italy and north-east Sicily, Dorians sailed for southern Sicily, and Spartans established a colony at Taranto, the best port south of Naples. They all set up city-states – an autonomous *polis*, consisting of a city and its hinterland – which were prosperous, cultured and toughly governed by rulers who have gone down in history as the original 'tyrants' – somewhat unfairly because the Greek *turannos* merely means autocrat. These colonies, precursors of the city-states of medieval Italy, nurtured Archimedes and Pythagoras but few democrats and no rulers capable of uniting them against threats from outside.

The classification of the other peoples of the peninsula is less scientific, partly because they spoke languages related to each other within the Italic group.[§] The tribes of Apulia were supposedly divided into Daunians, Peucetians and Messapians in the heel, but these names come from Greek writers and were adopted by Roman ones; perhaps the people themselves did not recognize such distinctions. As for the Samnites, highland tribes from Molise and the centre, they cannot rigorously be separated from the Lucanians and Bruttians whose ancestors they were.

[§] See below p. 30.

The mountain communities, however separate and secure in their mountain enclaves, were not of course stationary. Since nowhere in the peninsula is more than seventy miles from a sea, their members were bound to meet the inhabitants of the coast – and to envy their prosperity. From the fifth century BC large numbers of Samnites migrated from the Apennines to Campania, where they ended Etruscan rule, and further south to the Ionian and Tyrrhenian coasts, the area known as Magna Graecia, where they clashed with the Greek colonies. Equally large changes were simultaneously taking place in the north. Huge waves of Gauls (also known as Celts) came from southern France across the Alps, their tribes settling in the Po Valley and ejecting the Etruscans who were living there. After founding Mediolanum (Milan), they surged south through Umbria and Etruria to Rome, which they sacked in 390 BC, forcing the priestesses known as the Vestal Virgins to flee from their temple; legend has it that the Capitoline Hill was saved by its sacred geese, who cackled at the approach of the Gallic infiltrators and woke up the guards. Eventually the invaders were paid an early form of danegeld to go away. Rome was not captured again for 800 years.

The so-called 'Romanization' of Italy** was carried out at an increasing pace in the final centuries BC. It imposed a political and a cultural identity on the peninsula but not an ethnic one; the Romans had no ethnic identity to impose. The satirist Juvenal even complained that the capital itself was multiracial because it had so many Greeks and Syrians living in it. During the imperial centuries millions of people travelled the great roads to settle or be stationed in provinces far from their birthplace. Yet there were no enormous changes to the ethnic composition of Italy in this long period except for a constant influx of foreign slaves: the great transformations took place before Rome's rise and after its collapse.

The barbarian invasions that had a significant impact on Italy's ethnic blending were those of the Ostrogoths, the first rulers after the last emperor had been deposed in AD 476, and the *langobardi*, another German people, who came over the eastern Alps in the following century. For two centuries the *langobardi* ('long-beards', later Lombards)

** See below p. 43–4.

ruled in most of Italy before succumbing to the Frankish army of the future Emperor Charlemagne.

By the ninth century AD Italy was inhabited by many people whose origins were in west Asia, north Africa, and northern and eastern Europe. Most northerners were Lombards and Romanized Italians. But in the south there were also Arabs, who established a brief emirate at Bari and ruled Sicily until they were displaced by the Normans; Greeks, some of them descendants from the colonies of Magna Graecia, others who had arrived more recently to administer Byzantium's territorial conquests of the sixth century; and a sizable Jewish population together with smaller numbers of Slavs, Armenians and Berbers.

All subsequent conquerors of areas of Italy brought people who settled in the country, mainly soldiers, merchants and officials. Yet none arrived in great numbers. More significant was the immigration of Albanians who in the later Middle Ages built themselves villages along the Adriatic coast and in the mountains of the Calabrian Sila, where towards the end of the twentieth century the inhabitants still spoke *arbëresh*, which they regarded as the purest form of Albanian.[12] They also settled in Sicily, where the town of Piana degli Albanesi south of Palermo still celebrates an Albanian Epiphany, commemorating the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem with flamboyant costumes and Greek Orthodox rites. Renowned as fighters, they served in the armies of Naples and Rome and also Venice, which was the most 'multicultural' and cosmopolitan of Italian cities. Apart from its Albanian minority, St Mark's lion presided over communities of Greeks, Jews, Turks, Germans, Persians, Armenians and Slavs. The last, who were mostly from Dalmatia, gave their name to the Riva degli Schiavoni (the long quayside outside the Doge's Palace) and to their Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, which houses Carpaccio's most appealing paintings, episodes in the lives of St Jerome, St George and St Augustine.

The lengthy ethnic hybridization that produced modern Italians did not of course mean that they all now look similar. No one denies that Sardinians are easily recognizable or that the inhabitants of Parma do not resemble those of Palermo. Yet, however noticeable physical differences may often be, race has never been a serious factor in Italian history: there is no Italian race and there never has been one.

The arguments of those who claim otherwise, usually fascists or extreme nationalists, are ludicrous. So is the more recent boast by a leader of the Venetian League that, while Lombards are upstarts descended from the Gauls, his own people have a pure ethnic pedigree.[13] The truth was recognized long ago by the Risorgimento liberal Cesare Balbo, who observed that Italy was 'a multiracial community composed of successive waves of immigrants'; it had 'one of the most mixed bloodlines, one of the most eclectic civilizations and cultures which there has ever been'.[14]

The French president Charles de Gaulle famously asked how he could be expected to govern a country that had 246 different kinds of cheese. Italians may have fewer cheeses than the French but in other spheres of human accomplishment and behaviour there are more varieties in diverse and diffuse Italy than in highly centralized France. Both countries retain a predilection for stereotypes. In France Gascons are passionate, Bretons are hard-headed, Normans are stolid and sensible, while the male population of Perpignan has traditionally been ridiculed by other Frenchmen as people who do nothing apart from sitting in floppy berets sipping pastis or playing bowls and arguing under the plane trees.[15] Italians are also given eternal characteristics: the Tuscan temperament, for example, is apparently a blend of shrewdness, scepticism, individualism, enterprise, frugality, honesty, common sense and moderation in all things, especially religion, politics and pleasure.[16]

Italians have suffered from stereotyping both by foreigners and by their compatriots. In Renaissance Europe Italian merchants living abroad were often envied and despised by northerners, particularly Poles, who regarded them as feeble and effeminate, weedy lute-players who preferred wine and salads to beer and roast meat. Italians also acquired a reputation for being Europe's worst soldiers, a reputation that endured. When the Stuart pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie, turned to flee at the Battle of Culloden, his subordinate Lord Elcho chose to remember not the prince's Scottish ancestors or his Polish mother but his Roman childhood and Modenese grandmother when he allegedly shouted after him, 'Run then, you damned cowardly Italian!' Yet while the image of Italians was unmanly, it was often also violent and treacherous, linked to the stiletto, the stab in the back, or

the craftily administered poison, especially in Elizabethan drama: in John Webster's tragedies *The White Divel* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, Italian characters find four different means of poisoning their victims.[17] Two centuries later, one of Walter Scott's characters is accused of behaving 'like a cowardly Italian' when he draws his 'fatal stiletto' and kills 'the man whom he dared not meet in manly encounter'.[18]

In Italy even books of high scholarship reinforce regional stereotypes. People are routinely referred to as 'typically Florentine' or 'typically Sicilian' in a way that perplexes those who would never write of someone as 'typically Lancastrian' or a 'typical Aberdonian'. In the introduction to one of his books, the distinguished Torinese philosopher Norberto Bobbio is described as 'typically Piedmontese', while in the book he himself used a similar technique to classify others. Writing of the historian Gaetano Salvemini and the economist Luigi Einaudi, two of the great figures of modern Italy, he described the second as 'the image of the reserved Piedmontese, a man of much good sense and few words, never eloquent, apparently cold, almost arid, precise as a clock', while the first became the archetypal southerner, 'the portrait of the combative southern Italian, generous and impetuous, incisive in his speech and penetrating in his gaze, inhabited by the demon of sincerity to the point of rudeness'.[19]

When intellectuals accept stereotypes, it is not surprising that other people do the same. I have several times heard Pisans disparaging the citizens of Lucca, alleging that the Lucchesi are narrow-minded and backward, although the latter like to think of themselves as reflective, religious, mild, acute, tenacious, ironic and creative[20] – a people understandably proud of their beautiful city and the independence that it maintained for so long. Yet despisers are often despised in turn: I have also witnessed astonished Pisans being told by Livornesi that they, citizens of a comparatively modern, cosmopolitan port, are more progressive and broad-minded than the guardians of the Leaning Tower.

Milan and Turin are great cities of the north-west with many things in common, including industry and southern immigrants who came north in the 1950s and 1960s to work in their factories. Yet citizens of one city often speak of the inhabitants of the other as if they were foreigners with characteristics peculiar to themselves. The Torinese

may be honest but he is austere and aloof and too careful with his money; the Milanese may be generous but he is noisy and materialistic, obsessed about work and food and having a warm overcoat for winter. Italians sometimes claim they can distinguish between the two sets of citizens without hearing them speak. Taking an example of stereotyping nearer home, I have heard that the Genoese are supposed to be as stubborn as the Scots, have read that Sicilians are as taciturn as the Scots, and have listened to a Sardinian admiral telling me, without explication, that his fellow islanders are the Scots of Italy – possibly because both have remote highlands. Perhaps somebody somewhere has complained that the Torinese are as thrifty as the Picts.

We frown now on stereotypes, especially those that contain a tinge of truth. Yet all over Italy cities tenaciously conserve qualities and quirks that distinguish them from their neighbours in a fashion unimaginable to someone setting out to compare Nottingham with Northampton. Many of the ideas about rival places, 'the people over there', are nonsense, and few Italians really believe in them. Yet if you go to the Venetian lagoon, you might meet a man from the island of Murano who says the inhabitants of nearby Burano are savages, and if you go to Crema in Lombardy you might be told that the Cremonese, the residents of a neighbouring town, are untrustworthy because they supported the German emperor against the Lombard cities in the Middle Ages. All the same, real differences do exist, and, if you want to see for yourself, you could spend a day in Naples, with eyes, ears and nostrils open, followed by a night on the Palermo ferry and the next morning among Sicilians.

LINGUISTIC ITALY

In the spring of 2008 I was walking in the Apulian city of Bari with a friend, a film director from Lecce, a beautiful Baroque town of pale-yellow limestone some 90 miles to the south-east. After passing a group of young men talking loudly on the pavement, I told him I couldn't understand what they were saying, to which he replied that he couldn't either, adding only half in jest that the Leccesi were traditionally cultured and aristocratic while the Baresi were crafty and

materialistic. A native of Apulia, a man who speaks both Italian and the *leccese* dialect of the Salentine Peninsula, he was defeated by the phonetic sounds and inflections of *barese*. Though the same foreign influences – mainly French and Spanish – have affected both cities, their dialects are spoken so differently that speakers of one find the language of the other almost incomprehensible. While today *barese* sounds similar to the dialects of Naples and Basilicata, *leccese* is more like Sicilian and Calabrian, even though Messina and Reggio are much further from Lecce than Bari.

Similar situations are found in other parts of Italy. Carrara is a town in north-west Tuscany whose inhabitants do not easily understand what other Tuscans are saying because their area once belonged to Modena – it was that duchy's 'outlet to the sea' – and they continue to speak in the *modenese* dialect. In fact they feel themselves to be psychologically so unTuscan that, when they go outside their town, they talk about 'going to Tuscany'.†† In the same way inhabitants of the Giudecca talk about 'going to Venice' when they cross the half mile of water that separates them from the Doge's Palace. Even in provinces where everyone speaks in the local dialect, a person's geographical upbringing can be located from accent, vocabulary and manner of speaking; the same is true of islands in the Venetian lagoon. A Tuscan *contadino* who taught me some of the *lucchese* dialect in the 1970s used to demonstrate how he could identify a man's village by the way he spoke. He also taught me words that were unintelligible beyond Lucca: when I used them recently in Lucca itself, I was told that my friends must have been very old peasants. Dialects, the most prominent manifestation of Italian diversity, have been so prevalent in the history of the peninsula that many people did not hear standard Italian being spoken until they first listened to the wireless.

Most of the tongues spoken in ancient Italy belonged to the Indo-European group of languages, whose precursors were brought thousands of years ago by Neolithic migrants from south-west Asia. Like the people themselves, two groups of these languages were soon

†† In Tuscan-Italian 'The crow had stolen a piece of cheese from a window' is *il corvo aveva rubato da una finestra un pezzo di formaggio*, while in carrarese it is '*i corv i avev robat da 'na fnè 'n toc d'formai*.

formed, one going north, the other entering Italy from the Balkans and spreading west through the Mediterranean; two notable peoples who resisted the advance were the Basques and the Etruscans. Different Indo-European languages were spoken in Italy by Gauls in the north, Messapians in the Salento and Greeks on the coast, who introduced the alphabet to Europe and thereby encouraged everyone to start carving inscriptions. Most people, however, spoke one of the Indo-European languages that later became known as 'Italic'. Closely related forms of this were Oscan and Umbrian, used by the peoples of the interior and along the Adriatic; the populations of the west coast spoke more distant varieties such as Latin and Faliscan. The language of the Latins, who had their own cultural and linguistic identity by the sixth century BC, was used and later diffused across Italia by the Romans. In consequence, all the other languages, except Greek but including Etruscan, had died out in their written form by the time of Augustus; some may still have been spoken for a time but they were no longer used for inscriptions or other writing, which were now done in Latin. Most Sicilians remained Greek-speakers until the Arab conquest, though after the arrival of the Normans in the eleventh century both Greek and Arabic went into decline.

Modern Italian is derived from the spoken form of classical Latin, later known as 'vulgar' Latin, *volgare latino*, perhaps more happily translated as 'vernacular'. During its gradual evolution it accepted colloquialisms seldom found in literature together with diminutives, which allowed *frater* and *soror*, for example, to metamorphose into *fratello* and *sorella*. Yet the development of the language was hampered for centuries by the continued supremacy of Latin, the language of prose, of culture and of the Church. Apart from in Greek outposts in the south, Latin was the only written language until the thirteenth century and was used in schools for much longer. Italian was spoken in the vernacular with regional variations from the eighth century but was not written for another 500 years and then only occasionally, for poetry, in the Hohenstaufen court at Palermo and at Lucca and Pisa in western Tuscany. Poets writing in Italian had to contend not only with the dominance of Latin but also with the troubadours of Provence, who inspired writers in the north and whose language the Venetians briefly adopted for their literature.

The posthumous role of Dante Alighieri in the development of Italian has long been treated with reverence and solemnity. The great Florentine poet was, according to one scholar, not only 'the father of the Italian language' but also 'the father of the nation and the symbol of national greatness through the centuries'.[21] It is doubtful that Dante would have thought the second part of the description applicable to him, especially as he believed Italy should be part of the Holy Roman Empire and not a nation by itself. Yet he did write *The Divine Comedy* (or, as he himself called it, simply *La Commedia*) in Italian and extolled the virtues of the vernacular, the 'new sun' that would put Latin in the shade, in *De vulgari eloquentia*, a book he wrote in Latin.

The works of Dante, like those of his younger fellow Tuscans Petrarch and Boccaccio, advanced the cause of the Florentine vernacular in the later Middle Ages, even though Petrarch usually wrote in Latin and Dante thought *bolognese* a more beautiful language. By the sixteenth century it was widely felt that the peninsula's literary language should be close to theirs, a feeling which suggests that, if the great trio had been born in Sicily, the island's dialect would have been adopted as Italian, which foreigners would have had great difficulty in understanding.[‡‡] Pietro Bembo, the Venetian scholar and cardinal, argued that, if writers in Latin imitated Cicero and Virgil, then writers in the vernacular should model themselves on Petrarch and Boccaccio. Although some people hoped for a more modern form of Tuscan, Bembo's arguments were persuasive, and several writers of the age decided to 'Tuscanize' their work. Latin scholars who scorned the vernacular as common and brutish – 'a language of the plebs is a plebeian language' – were defeated. There was even a sixteenth-century fashion for foreigners to study Tuscan in Italy in order to further their careers in diplomacy and commerce or sometimes simply to appreciate Dante and Ariosto.[22] Later, around 1600, another towering Tuscan, the Pisan astronomer Galileo, demanded that scientific work also should be conducted in the vernacular, arguing that more people

[‡‡] The islanders' propensity to omit important consonants is reflected in the title of Giuseppe Tornatore's recent film *Baarìa*, which is how its citizens pronounce the name of their home town Bagheria.

would then be able to understand his work – an argument which the papacy failed to appreciate.

Tuscan had several advantages in its quest to become the Italian language: apart from its literary beauty, the spoken and written languages were similar, and its sounds as well as its grammatical rules made it closer to Latin than other dialects – the Latin *sanctus* and *bello* becoming Tuscan *santo* and *bello* but Sicilian *sando* and *beddu*. Furthermore, while in the rest of Italy Latin was the language of education until the eighteenth century, it had been replaced by the vernacular in Tuscany two centuries earlier. Florence is still regarded as the best place to learn Italian, though it is often claimed that in Siena (where people like to say *opara* instead of *opera*) the pronunciation is better. The inhabitants of Lucca are equally proud of the way they talk, though they tend to leave out the hard 'c' at the beginning of a word so that *mi casa* – my house – sounds like *mi hasa*. The Tuscan Count Sforza, who managed to be Italy's foreign minister before as well as after Mussolini, claimed that 'perfect pronunciation' would be 'Tuscan speech in a Roman mouth',[23] a slightly smug remark that unintentionally drew attention to the problem that in Italy the political and literary capitals were different.

Five centuries after Dante, Alessandro Manzoni, whose first language was *milanese* and his second French, promoted Tuscan as the language of Italian resurgence, even to the extent of studying in Florence so that he could write a new edition of his immense novel *The Betrothed* in the Tuscan vernacular, a process he called 'rinsing' his story in the Arno. Yet the attempts of Manzoni and others to impose a language spoken in only one region on a whole country were perhaps arrogant and certainly naive. How could you have a national language that was spoken in only one of the nation's chief cities? Nearly everyone outside Tuscany conducted their private and professional lives in dialect; for them literary Italian was a dead language or at best an official one, which sounded strange and artificial when they tried to speak it; moreover, unlike English and French, it had been scarcely enriched since the Middle Ages. This unsatisfactory state produced particular conundrums for literary folk. In the eighteenth century the Venetian Carlo Goldoni wrote his plays in three different languages – Venetian dialect, Tuscan and eventually French, the lan-

guage of his memoirs. Two centuries later, Ignazio Silone wanted the peasants in his novel *Fontamara* to speak their own language – a dialect of the Abruzzi – but realized he had to make them speak a language they didn't know (Italian) so that his readership would understand what they were saying.

In any case the attempted imposition only partially and tardily succeeded. In 1861, the year the Kingdom of Italy was born, it has been calculated that one Italian in forty (2.5 per cent of the population of the peninsula) spoke Italian: just over 630,000 people – mainly Tuscans speaking what was after all their own dialect – out of a total of 25 million.[24] Even if we add others who had some familiarity with the language, such as those who had read it at secondary school, it is difficult to push the figure beyond 10 per cent. For the 80 per cent of the population classified as illiterate, Italian was a foreign language, not only in the south, where it was largely incomprehensible, but even in Venice, where lawyers and judges still talked in Venetian. Decades earlier, Byron had to speak dialect in Venice so as to be understood, and the friend who observed that it was like talking to an Irishman in brogue was quite wrong.[25]

Such problems were not unique to Italy in that era. Spain had four languages and a host of dialects; in France most of the south-western communes did not speak French, and few Parisians could understand what people were saying south of Lyon. Yet the situation was more critical in Italy. Over half the population spoke Castilian in Spain or French in France, and both languages had long been in use for administration and literature. In Italy nearly everyone spoke in dialect, not just peasants and artisans and the urban poor, but merchants, aristocrats and even monarchs. The Neapolitan King Ferdinand II spoke in Neapolitan, and so did his court. The Piedmontese King Victor Emanuel II (later King of Italy) spoke Piedmontese when he wasn't speaking French; so did his heirs, even after three generations of living in Rome. Most of the early statesmen of united Italy came from Piedmont and had to learn Italian as a new language: the best of them, Camillo Cavour, was happier speaking French and was so ignorant of how people talked in the south that he thought Sicilians still spoke Arabic. Francesco Crispi, a Sicilian who twice became prime minister, had an unusual linguistic ordeal to come through. Albanian was the

language of his family, Greek the language of his church (he was baptized a Greek Orthodox) and Sicilian the language of his youth; in certain situations Italian may have been his fourth language.[26]

After unification Italian became more extensively spoken. Governments assisted the process with bureaucracy, school textbooks and the decision to enter the First World War, when millions of men drafted from all over the country were stationed together on the banks of the Isonzo River in Friuli. Yet there were other factors over which they had no control such as demographic movements and newspapers that wanted readers beyond the confines of their local town. Another instrument of dissemination was the country's favourite children's book, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, whose author had family in the Tuscan village that gave him his pseudonym, Collodi.

Italians use an English word to describe these developments: they have been *standardizzando* their language for decades, and it is now more or less '*standard*'. English words have been infiltrating Italian for over a century: 'week-end' appeared in Panzini's *Dizionario moderno* in 1905 and was followed by 'pullover', 'smoking' (for dinner jacket) and similar novelties. *Va bene*, gentle and ubiquitous in the 1970s, has now been largely driven out by OK. English is increasingly used in journalism, even when the Italian equivalents are just as appropriate: companies do 'outsourcing', people are 'politically correct' (or more usually aren't), there is a ministry for 'Welfare' (though not yet a Treasury), and Silvio Berlusconi calls himself the '*recordman della persecuzione*', meaning he is more victimized than anyone else – which he isn't. Even a serious magazine like *L'Espresso* prefers 'Bye Bye' to *Addio* in giant lettering on its cover, while inside it will employ the words 'bluff', 'blackout', 'privacy', 'dynasty' and 'killer' all in the headlines of a single issue. The ugliest and most recent anglicism is the use of 'big' as a noun so that the leading figures of a political party, once referred to as *i leader*, are now known as *i big*.

Modern Italian has many foreign influences besides English. The Ostrogoths donated a few dozen words, usually rather ugly ones such as *stecca* (a stick) and *strappare* (to wrench). The Lombards were more generous, though theirs too are not beautiful: *gruccia* (a crutch), *guancia* (a cheek), *spaccare* (to cleave) and *schernire* (to sneer). Many words in dialects were introduced by the Arabs, who also furnished

Italian with much of its maritime vocabulary, for example *ammiraglio*, *arsenale*, *tariffa* and *dogana* (customs). Catalan and Castilian influenced certain dialects during the periods of Spain's political dominance, but they were superseded in importance at the end of the seventeenth century by French, whose partisans regarded it as the true heir of Latin, a masculine language of logic and clarity in contrast with Italian, which they deemed feminine and emotional, suitable for opera and musical instructions.[§§] French remained fashionable during the first half of the twentieth century, with *ragoût* taking a long time to become *ragù*. Until the Second World War foreign names were routinely pronounced in a French way, Churchill as Scürscill and Chamberlain as Sciamberlèn.[27]

However *standardizzato* Italian now is, the country retains its dialects as well as certain areas where foreign languages are spoken and protected. In the Val d'Aosta French has parity with Italian, as German has in the Alto Adige (the South Tyrol), where it is the mother tongue of most people and where churches celebrate mass alternately in both official languages. Italy's second language is *sardo*, which is spoken by a million people, though I have met Sardinians who have lived on the island for decades and have never understood a word of it. It has no literature except folk verse and it is subdivided into so many dialects that there are seven ways of saying Friday in *sardo*. Sounding more like Spanish than Italian, it has taken *rio* for river (*riu* in *sardo*) instead of *fiume*; in some areas it also retains Latin words such as *domus* for house instead of *casa*. On the island's west coast at Alghero people speak Catalan because they are of Catalan descent, settled there by a king of Aragon after he had expelled the local Sardinian population in the fourteenth century. Further south, on the little island of San Pietro, descendants of eighteenth-century settlers from the north talk in an old-fashioned form of the Piedmontese dialect.

Elsewhere Greek is still spoken in parts of Apulia and Calabria, Slovene is common in Udine, and pockets of Albanian survive in the provinces of Foggia, Taranto, Potenza, Cosenza, Catanzaro and also

[§§] Charles V, the Habsburg emperor, is alleged to have said that he spoke French to men and Italian to women; he also revealed that he conversed with God in Spanish and with his horse in German.

in Sicily. In the Dolomites a few thousand people speak Ladin, a Rhaetian dialect close to Swiss Romansh, which in some Alpine valleys is taught in schools alongside German and Italian. Further east along the mountains, in the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, *friulano* (another Rhaetian dialect) is now an official language (thus joining Italian, Slovene and German in notices in government buildings), but most inhabitants of the regional capital, Trieste, do not speak it and stick to their own dialect, *triestino*.

The use of dialect is decreasing in most places but it does so slowly, partly because parents are usually proud of their roots and like to pass their ancestral speech on to another generation. The region of Emilia still has a dozen dialects, among them *modenese*, *ferrarese*, *bolognese* and *parmigiano*; many people in the Lombard town of Bergamo still refuse to speak anything other than *bergamasco*. As late as 1974 more than half the population of Italy spoke only in dialect within the family. Before the turn of the century that proportion had dropped, but still two-thirds of them either spoke solely in dialect or else in a mixture of dialect and Italian when at home; for them dialect is the maternal tongue, Italian the second language, the one they learn at school as what the Venetian actor, Lino Toffolo, calls 'our first foreign language'.[28]

If dialect is now spoken mainly by Venetians, southerners and the old, it will continue to decline, but there are and have been plenty of people on the alert to obstruct the process. After the Second World War the writer and film director Pier Paolo Pasolini set up the Academy for the Friulian Language despite the fact that he was born and educated in Bologna; he wrote his first volume of poetry in *friulano*, used the Roman dialect for his fiction and towards the end of his life denounced television as the destroyer of Italy's rich heritage of dialects. In the commune of Como, on the southern shore of the homonymous lake, people can now get married in *lumbard* rather than Italian; the newspaper *La Padania* recently appeared in Venetian; and at the festival of the Northern League speeches are simultaneously translated into the Milanese dialect known as *meneghino*. In much of the country Italians are eager to study their local dialect, and many people in Bologna enroll in a course called *Caurs ed Bulgnais*.[29]

The idea that a language is purer than a dialect is common but

untrue: the relationship between the two is simply that of winner and loser. We talk of the Italian language and the Venetian dialect as if the second is a sort of deviant of the first whereas it is in fact much older, evolving from Latin centuries before the birth of Dante. Fortunately Venetian remains alive and is being constantly replenished: in the port of Marghera people today use four distinct types of slang. Over the years the language has given English (as well as Italian) essential words from its vocabulary, including ghetto, casino, lagoon, marzipan, quarantine and scampi. Outsiders, even Italians who have settled in Venice, find the dialect strange and hard to understand, partly because of the 'vanishing L' which means, for instance, that the pronoun 'he' (*lui* in Italian, *lu* in Venetian) is pronounced *yu*.[30]

A foreigner in Italy who walks about and eats in restaurants will quickly notice how extensively variations of language have been preserved. In Venice he will find that squares are called fields (*campi*) rather than *piazze*; the city has two *piazzette* next to its one *piazza*, San Marco. Meals and menus will invariably be a puzzle, even if he has a pocket dictionary. If he wants breakfast in Rome he should ask for *colazione* but if he uses the word in Turin or Milan he will get lunch; similarly *pranzo* in Rome is the midday meal while in the north it often means dinner, which elsewhere is *cena*. His phrasebook may tell him that *solo per il pranzo* means 'only open for lunch' but, if he sees the sign on a restaurant door in Vicenza, it will mean 'only open for dinner'. Even if he gets the word right, he has to be careful when ordering his breakfast: in the north a croissant is, confusingly, a *brioche*, while in Rome, even more confusingly, it is a *cornetto*, which can also be a musical instrument, a string-bean and a type of ice-cream.

When he goes out for his *pranzo/cena*, the tourist's confusion will increase. If he wants to start with anchovies, he would have to ask for *acciughe* when he is in the north and *alici* when he travels south; should he want to eat them with *focaccia*, it would be fine to ask for this in Tuscany and Liguria, but further north the word is *gnocco* and to the east in Modena it becomes *stria*; in Venice the word *focaccia* exists but means something different: a sweet cake rather than a savoury bread. The travelling carnivore is in a state of permanent confusion: lamb is *abbacchio* in Rome but *agnello* in Tuscany; a *bistecca* in Milan is a boneless slice of meat, but in Florence it is a giant T-bone

steak, which the Milanese call a *bracciola al osso*. Yet the vegetarian too has a multitude of problems. Pasta is mysteriously transformed into *minestra* in the north, while *lattuga* (lettuce) becomes *insalata romana* in the capital. The Roman *carciofo* becomes *arcicioffo* and *arciciocco* in the north, *ardigioco* in Genoa and thence *artichaut* in France and artichoke in Britain. If a melon is desired at the end of dinner, the water variety (*cocomero*) is *melone d'acqua* in Naples and the ordinary *melone* becomes a *popone* in Tuscany.

Perhaps the restaurateur's son will offer to help the customer in his bewilderment. If he is still a boy, he is a *ragazzo* in Italian and a *ragasol* in *modenese*, but in most dialects he is something linguistically unrelated. Merely to take words for boy beginning with the letter 'p', he might be a *putel* in the Trentino, a *pischello* in Rome, a *putlet* in Mantua, a *piliso* in Piedmont, a *picciottu* or *picciutteddu* in Sicily, a *pizzinnu* or *piccioccu* in Sardinia, and a *picciriddu* in the Salento. Were he to travel across the north from Genoa to Friuli, he could be metamorphosed, not very mellifluously, from *garsùn* to *fànte*, *magatel*, *bagalt*, *redesòot*, *toso*, *butèl*, *mulo*, *fioo* and *frut*.