

WALKING TO ABBASANTA

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The bodiless head of Antonio Gramsci floats on silkscreened posters; beneath the great globe may be a few lines of text — the phrase that became his motto: “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” or “We are living in the interregnum, when a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” These posters were once thumbtacked to walls in collectives in Berkeley or Boston, and now are matted and framed, hung on the walls of the tasteful (but still slightly funky) living rooms of these now-comfortable radicals.

These owners of these posters have become psychoanalysts or union organizers or artists or professors. If they are professors, they write papers which they preface with quotes from Gramsci (as ministers preface their sermons with verses from the Bible): “The bourgeoisie lies in ambush in the hearts of the proletariat,” or “Each human being is not only a synthesis of his existing relationships but a summary of the entire past.”

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I want to give the great mind a body: a disabled body, more than those vague allusions in asides and footnotes to his medical condition, his suffering in prison, his courage. In the introduction to one of the English editions of Gramsci’s *Letters from Prison*, he is even described as “having the appearance of being a hunchbacked dwarf.” A footnote follows, which I think will perhaps explain the difference between being a hunchbacked dwarf and merely appearing to be a hunchbacked dwarf — but alas, it does not.

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At the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, the caretaker, a cigarette dangling from between his lips, asks, *Inghlese?*

Si, americana, I answer.

He hands me a xeroxed sheet in English with letters made wavering by having been copied and recopied, the first line of which reads: “Smoking is absolutely forbidden in the cemetery.” The caretaker gestures to his left and says, *Keats, Shelley.*

E Gramsci? I ask.

Ah, Gramsci. He smiles and points in the opposite direction.

I walk away from the *parte antica*, beneath the pyramid erected in memory of Caius Cestius, praetor and tribune of Rome in the first century B.C., whose heirs joined in the craze for aping the conquered, and built an Egyptian pyramid here in Rome. In that ancient meadow, the graves of nineteenth-century foreign sculptors and poets who drowned in the Tiber are scattered in careless profusion, like the anemones, daisies, and violets that Keats was happy to hear were growing in what would be his final resting place. An angel weeps with Victorian abandon, a stone infant sleeps.

I walk along the straight rows of graves in the newer part of the cemetery until I find the stout monument with the Latin words carved on it, “*Cinera Antonii Gramscii,*” the ashes of Gramsci, “1989–1937.”

A body of words, then.

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Leonardo da Vinci drew a sketch of Vitruvian man, whose body showed the perfect geometric symmetry so prized by the ancient Greeks. The drawing superimposes two positions of the figure on top of each other, one with the body in the shape of the letter “T,” another with arms and legs spread. Put the point of a compass in his navel, and draw a perfect circle from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. With his arms stretched out, his body makes a perfect square. God is a geometer and the nondisabled body illustrates his first axiom.

Draw a figure from the body of a hunchbacked dwarf and the circle morphs into a distorted oval, the square lists to one side. God is a pregnant woman, a cripple, she is a mathematician of the queer.

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From Rome, I go to Sardinia, the island where Gramsci grew up. Every morning I am woken up in the guest house in Donighala Feghedu, by the clattering of bells at seven in the morning. I imagine a mother of giants banging a wooden spoon inside an enormous black kettle to rouse her seven lazy giant sons.

Over coffee, just-baked bread spread with marmalade made with bitter honey, I communicate telegraphically with my landlady.

— *Oggi à Ghilarza.*

— *A Casa Gramsci?*

- *Si. Casa Gramsci.*
- *El treno?*
- *No. L'autobus.*
- *Ah, l'autobus.*

I caught a ride into town with a couple of German tourists from the same guest house. Traveling made me a child again. I sat in the back seat of their BMW and stared at the ruddy-brown necks creased with white of these two grown-ups who had been methodically roasting themselves on the beach ever since they arrived on the island; a child listening to the only occasionally comprehensible speech of the mysterious adults. They dropped me near the bus station; I counted out the unfamiliar Italian money, clutching my bus fare in my hand.

The bus drove inland, pulling off the highway to let off and take on passengers at every exit from the *autostrada*, the driver's arms moving in ballerina-like arcs as he maneuvered the squat bus through narrow streets. We passed a medieval stone wall, on which someone had spray-painted, in English, SKATEBOARDING IS NOT A CRIME.

A sign indicated the exit for GHILARZA, ABBASANTA, SANTU LUSURGU, in blue and white, with a yellow-and-black sign on top of that which read RISTORANTE OK CORRAL. The bus stopped in Abbasanta; I boarded a second bus for Ghilarza. I wasn't sure where to get off that bus, or how to ask, so when I saw a yellow-and-black sign with the words CASA GRAMSCI and an arrow, I rang the bell and made my way down the aisle.

I walked in the direction of the arrows, leaning on my cane, but after a while the signs disappeared, and I asked first one passerby, then another, *Dové Casa Gramsci? Dové Casa Gramsci?*

I managed to understand the directions I was given: it's straight ahead, keep going, keep going, it's not far. *Grazie, grazie.* Here I was, not a sharp-tongued, smart disabled woman; here I was an almost-speechless, sweet crippled girl.

Brava ragazza, the people in Donighala call me: a good-hearted girl, a mensch. I know how to say, Yes. No. Please. Thank you. Where is the bathroom? How much is your cheapest room? I am an American woman. I don't speak Italian. And just in case, although I haven't had to use it yet: I am having an asthma attack. I need medical care urgently.

Almost speechless. When I used to get manual muscle tests

done (“Okay, now I’m going to try to push your leg down and you try to keep me from pushing it down,” the doctor says, and then writes down a number — 0 for no muscle function; 1 for a trace, 2 for weak, 3 for fair, 4 for good), the doctors would just check my legs.

Then they started doing my upper body, my arms. The last time, the doctor said, “Stick out your tongue; okay, same routine,” pressing against it with her finger, “move it to the left, okay now don’t let me push it back,” I wanted to cry. Even though she told me right away, “You’ve got a little bit of weakness in your neck, on the right side, but your tongue’s fine,” I could only think: “I need this mouth.” But here in Italy I get along without it. Almost.

Siesta was beginning, and the streets were more and more deserted, the houses presenting their flat, blank faces to me. I walked and walked and walked, my left knee aching. I promised myself a Tylenol with codeine as a reward when I got to Casa Gramsci.

Although polio affected both my legs, my left has always been much stronger than my right, so my body has been neatly divided in two: my left leg was good and my right leg, bad. My right leg is a flapper, swinging through life free and easy, never doing any work, just along for the ride. We could call her Claire, a bright and glittery name. A year ago, when she went through her midlife crisis, and a doctor said to me, “I can’t promise you’re not going to lose that leg,” that had seemed perfectly apt for her — she was the gal who might go out for the proverbial pack of cigarettes one night and then, one thing leading to another and then another, end up by never coming home.

But my left leg! We’ll call her Sonya. That Stakhanovite! She worked and worked and worked. I saw a movie she starred in once — I think it was at the Orson Welles in Cambridge, Mass., or maybe it was the Electric Cinema in Notting Hill Gate in London. She played a Russian soldier who took out three Nazi tanks with a rifle. It wasn’t until twenty minutes into the film, when she pulled off her cap and shook her long blonde hair loose, that the audience even realized she was female.

I saw her again just a few weeks ago, when I went to visit the city Mussolini had built south of the Tiber. She’d posed for a statue of a muscled consul of imperial Rome. This gal could wade the Tiber, she could cross the Rubicon! But a few months before I came to Sardinia, I’d gone to a doctor who’d been amazed at the amount

of lateral movement I had in my left knee (the ideal body doesn't have any). Like a child showing off his favorite toy, he rocked my femur from side to side and said to his resident, "Look! Look! Look at all that lateral play!" The next day I winced every time I stood up; the morning after that, I woke up screaming in pain.

"Labor's a ten," my friend Kathleen said.

"Eleven," I said.

Perhaps I would have a knee replacement, perhaps a brace would do: in the meantime, another doctor sent me off to Italy with a bottle of Tylenol with codeine.

The Ghilarza I was walking through was nearly a hundred years removed from the Ghilarza Gramsci had lived in. Then it would not have been so different from Tepoztlán, the town in Mexico where I spent the summer before this one. When Antonio lived here, the countryside would have been noisy with the braying of donkeys, the cluck of chickens, the plaintive cries of sheep and goats. Unspayed bitches who had given birth so often that their empty, stretched-out tits flapped obscenely against their legs must have trotted merrily along these streets. Flip-flop, flip-flop. Tit-tat. Tit-tat. But this was all wrong: I was seeing this scene through my late-twentieth-century, North American eyes: eyes which, despite my feminism, see floppy tits as obscene.

The smells of shit and animals that filled me with a queasy sadness in Mexico would to him have just been the rich, fecund smells of the country.

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In the front room of Casa Gramsci was a blown-up print of his cell in the prison at Turi, so grainy it was a form of pointillism. An anti-Seraut, teasing apart not light, but the varieties of darkness. There was a solitary guide — seeming to violate the Italian principle that every museum must be guarded by two men, one fat and one thin, a Laurel and a Hardy, an Abbott and a Costello, one of whom will look at my name and city in the visitors book and ask, "Detroit?" furrowing his brow, to which I will respond, "Detroit Pistons," and mime the action of dribbling a basketball, at which they will both smile and say, "Ah, si, si, si, Detroit Pistons." But this solo guide had heard of Detroit — it's the Turin of America.

He kept talking and talking to me; I could understand every

third or fourth word he said. One room was filled with books, with brown paper covering the windows to keep the sun from fading them. The guide told me these were all books by and about Gramsci, translations of his work into Japanese, English, Chinese.

We climbed the narrow stairs without a railing. The guide took my arm; I didn't know how to say in Italian: No, thank you, that just makes it harder for me to walk, so I said nothing. The house-transformed-into-a-museum had the serene lack of clutter that houses of the well-to-do can muster. I filled it up with the sounds of the seven Gramsci children, the smells of diapers and of oranges stewing with bitter honey for marmalade; I imagined rooms so crammed with furniture that he had to crawl across a bed to reach a dresser.

Back downstairs, I saw the thing I had come all this way to see. In Mexico, it was not the visit to the house of Frida Kahlo, where I'd expected to be moved, walking through the rooms I had seen so often in photographs that I could say, yes, there are the miniature cups on the kitchen wall, there's her painted plaster body cast; it wasn't there, but at the haphazard visit to Casa Trotsky, because it was just a few blocks away, and I thought I might as well. And there it wasn't the room where Trotsky was murdered, but the sight of the shoes of his companion, Natalya Sedova that astonished me. They sat on the floor of the half-closet in their bedroom, those shoes for feet so tiny they seemed to have come from another species, a cousin to my gross, overfed race. Shoes for the feet of a Russian peasant who had grown up hungry, hungry, always hungry. Shoes for stunted feet; tiny, black bird shoes that had been soled and re-soled, mended; shoes that had shaped themselves to her misshapen feet; those shoes that she had worn for twenty, maybe thirty years. It was those shoes, heroic and pathetic, that I had come to see.

Standing in front of the glassed-in display case at Casa Gramsci, I saw the bronzed death mask and the cast of his dead right hand: what I had come to Sardinia, without knowing it, to see.

Comrade, I wanted you to be a gaunt Donatello.

I wanted the years in the fascist prison to have burned you clean of the boy-revolutionary look with which you glare out at the camera in the photograph on the cover of the Notebooks.

(You wrote in one letter from prison: *Now I have eleven teeth left, and all of them are loose* and listed the foods that made you sick.) I thought your dying would have made you thin and saintly. I didn't

expect you to look like a Mafia don, puffy and gross, triple-chinned, to look like one of those men who had tumbled into middle age in his early thirties, slid in on thick slathers of butter and glugs of olive oil. Gramsci's body was like one of the abandoned houses I used to drive by in Detroit. I'd look at them and try to figure out what happened to make them spiral down like that, hollow-eyed, battered: what makes the spirit go out of a place?

The guide pointed out the two stone balls that Gramsci exercised with. *Gobetto*, he said, hunchback. *Si, si*. I know, I know he was a hunchback. That's what brought me here.

"I am a very short man, but he was much shorter than me," the guide said, holding his hand at the level of his shoulder.

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And then, only twenty or twenty-five minutes after I got there, I left. I had promised myself a cab from Ghilarza to Abassanta, but there were none around, and so I walked and walked and walked. I tried to keep myself in the sliver of shade cast by the houses that abutted the narrow sidewalk. I stopped, not so much to draw a deep breath as to press my hand against my hard-beating heart, to feel the sweat that had collected on my chest, mottled my silk blouse. Like a high fever registered on a thermometer, it was outer confirmation of an inner state. Yes, you are working hard, old girl.

A woman standing in the doorway of a house opposite stared frankly and openly at me, as she had been doing ever since I entered her field of vision. She stared at me, as I passed her, and, although I did not look back, I am sure she stared at me until I disappeared — this strange limping foreigner, in this place far inland, where few tourists come.

I started to walk again, feeling proud of myself for making this difficult journey, walking from Ghilarza to Abassanta, making my way alone through the Sardinian countryside, a hardy soul who would do my New England ancestors proud, living on less than 20,000 lire (about \$13) a day, on good country *pane*, espresso, oranges, cherries, latte, *formaggio*, and *acqua minerale* — and Tylenol III, which perhaps my New England ancestors wouldn't approve of so heartily; getting along without a car, when even my rough-and-ready budget guidebook says that *this* is the place where you need a car; feeling lonely (counting the days — eighteen — until my friend Cecilia would arrive); feeling the sense of absorption in my own

world into which the dislocation of travel thrusts me; aware of my own foolishness (why, when I had schlepped all the way to the bus station yesterday, didn't I at least write down the times when the bus passed through Abbasanta, instead of merely confirming for myself that I could get back in the late afternoon, so that now I was hurrying to the station when perhaps I didn't have to hurry or perhaps I should have been in even more of a hurry); at that moment when I straightened myself up and began again my walk toward the train I saw that boy, trudging this same path nearly 100 years before.

A hunchbacked boy trudged along under the relentless Sardinian sun. He was walking from his village, Ghilarza, to the next, Abbasanta. The bell in the squat church in the square behind him clanged out the hour with a single flat bong. He stopped, balanced four cumbersome tax ledgers on the garden wall of one of the fine houses he was passing, pulled a yellowed handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his brow.

His father had been sent to prison years before, sacrificed by his own faction to another, in a bureaucratic intrigue as intricate as those of the Court of Louis XIII (although the part of Cardinal Richelieu was played by a pig farmer). On account of the father's imprisonment, the family was impoverished, and so the boy was forced to go to work in the tax office, to walk between one office and the other, using dry riverbeds because there were no roads. The boy claimed to remember almost nothing of his father. But when he made this gesture, dabbing at his forehead with a folded handkerchief, he could sense his father's hand moving through his. He was no longer a schoolboy who swept the back of his hand across his brow. A year ago, when he was twelve, the first sprouts of his pubic hair appeared, and he had felt a quirky pride, and a sense of amazement — his body, too, would turn into a man's.

He straightened himself up, pulled his shirt, sticky with sweat, away from his chest, swallowed hard to soothe his parched throat, picked up his four awkward ledgers, and started to walk. He thought of the spigot, some 200 meters distant, where he would be able to stop and get a drink of water, sit down on a stone bench. It seemed a long way away.

The hunchbacked boy, trudging along under the unrelenting Sardinian sun, could not imagine that these rainless summers, much crueller than the winters, wilting the crops and sending the

sheep mad with the heat, would someday make this island a paradise. Foreigners will come to this clump of dirt, the dirt God had left over when he finished making the world and threw down in the middle of the mocking sapphire waters of the Mediterranean. The people who grew from this rocky soil will sell the tourists who come to lie in the sun plastic sunglasses and rush mats and suntan lotion and hot dogs and flip-flops made in the People's Republic of China.

Like all the islanders, the boy feared and hated the sea: it had brought them nothing but invaders, and it left in its wake the sluggish sea-swamps breeding mosquitoes which left a fog of malarial lethargy over the whole island.

It was 1904. Antonio could not imagine the tourists who would arrive in their Fiats and Audis and BMWs, carrying luggage — genuine leather or knock-off vinyl — crammed with T-shirts emblazoned with the names of North American universities; bicycling shorts; bathing suits of neon green, pink and yellow; their radios blaring Pink Floyd and Italian remakes of American rock'n'roll oldies. They will barrel along the *autostrada*, past the sign that will say, GHILARZA, ABBASANTA, SANTU LUSSURGU, in blue and white, with a yellow-and-black sign on top of that directing them to the RISTORANTE OK CORRAL. The music coming over their car radios will be broken up by news broadcasts: Italy has banned neofascist skin-heads rallies; in the former Soviet Union, a special health commission has issued a report on malnutrition among old age pensioners. The boy could not imagine either Soviets or fascists, never mind neofascists, the post-Soviet world. Nor could he imagine that the street he was now walking along will be renamed after him: Via Antonio Gramsci; in fact, that in nearly every town and city on this island, there will be a via, a corso, or a piazza bearing his name.

He reaches the spigot, fills his cupped hands with water, and sits down on the stone bench, his feet dangling above the earth, his back aching. Later on, he will write about how relations of power are embedded everywhere, but for now this knowledge is only the pain as he sits in this seat made for normal men.