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## Removing Wittgenstein's Glasses

*Whereabouts*, **Jhumpa Lahiri**, Bloomsbury, 2021, pp. 176, £14.99 (hardcover)

*Fifty Sounds*, **Polly Barton**, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021, pp. 360, £12.99 (paperback)

As anyone who has tried to learn a language by immersion knows, you attempt a dance without knowing the steps; your right foot appears to have been replaced with another left; you trip repeatedly in the beam of assessing eyes – but stumble on, sustained by the brief, ecstatic moments when you find the rhythm. With breathtaking naivety, I myself embarked on just such an endeavour when I washed up alone in a Spanish city, aged thirty-one, and have rarely experienced such self-loathing. For two years, I inhabited a state of extended apology, except when engaging with fellow émigrés – rather like Adam Gordon in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Ben Lerner's modern classic of linguistic dislocation and self-conscious expatriate drifting.

Consider, then, the far greater leap taken by Polly Barton at twenty-one, when she travelled to the far-flung island of Sado in the Japan Sea, two and a half hours by ferry from mainland Niigata, on the north-west coast of Honshu, primed only by the pages of *Teach Yourself Japanese Language, Life and Culture*. She had been ambivalent about applying for the teaching exchange programme, but had been persuaded by her boyfriend. He was rejected, and she was put on the waiting list before being accepted. The linguistic submersion that followed would represent 'a sensory bombardment . . . a possession, a bedevilment, a physical takeover'.

Growing up in suburban London, Barton was fascinated by Japanese culture but embarrassed by the clichés it evoked: anime fandom, white kids' halting efforts at 'learning Japanese' and origami. Her Japan 'was muted, austere, monochrome, picked out in pale pink and red like an Utamaro print, and it didn't admit foreigners. In short, the Japan I wanted



didn't want me'. In fact, it wasn't far from the Japan she discovered: a country where, like a lovestruck teenager, she thrilled to the sensation of treading a cultural tightrope, 'forever poised on the knife-edge, impaled by an ever-renewing need to prove myself'; and where the immutable fact of her otherness would wear her down.

After Sado, Barton moved to Tokyo; then (after some years away) Matsusaka, a semi-rural city between Tokyo and Osaka; then Osaka, where she established a career as a freelance translator. Now based in the UK, she works as a Japanese literary translator. She won the Fitzcarraldo Essay Prize in 2019 with her proposal for *Fifty Sounds*, a strikingly original memoir that articulates with wit and perspicacity what it means to learn a language the non-Duolingo way: the isolation, the frustration, the elation. Conceived as a 'personal dictionary of the Japanese language', it is a must-read for linguists and anyone with a propensity to throw themselves in at the deep end.

Japanese has three scripts: two phonetic, the *katakana* and *hiragana*, each comprising forty-six characters; and the Chinese-originated *kanji*, of which 2,136 characters are 'in common usage'. The *katakana* is employed for words absorbed and adapted from other languages. Initially, Barton's inner pedant railed against the 'absurdist parody' of these mangled mirages of English. It took time to quash her 'linguistic tyrant' and accept that the original English spelling or meaning was irrelevant, for this language was discrete.

Deploying a fragmented, loosely linear structure, she maps her experiences onto the Japanese onomatopoeic alphabet, whose organising system means 'fifty sounds'. Leading the world after Korean, the Japanese mimetic lexicon is three to five times larger than those of Indo-European languages; while English includes onomatopoeic vocabulary, it's neither so extensive nor so clearly defined. Each section opens with one of Barton's idiosyncratic definitions, for example: 'chiku-chiku: the sound of kicking against the pricks, or the ugliness of learning a language as a native English speaker, or the manner of stabbing repeatedly with a sharp-pointed instrument'.

When she began her baptism of fire, she felt surprisingly liberated from judgement, her internal critic finally silenced. Her brain 'souped'



in Japanese, she revelled in the addictive high of dawning clarity. Yet of course, the more you learn, the more you realise you have yet to learn. 'Just about getting by' takes a toll, as the novice lives precariously, every interaction fraught with the potential for humiliation.

A sense of inadequacy had blighted her undergraduate years studying philosophy at Cambridge. Self-expression was painful, and she was cowed by the eloquence of her peers. Finally, in the third year, a breakthrough: Wittgenstein 'rearranged her brain'. *Fifty Sounds* – which is richly intertextual, referencing writers from Roland Barthes to Anne Carson – is built on Barton's interpretation of Wittgenstein's assertion that philosophy 'is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language'. Unless we detach ourselves from this language, says Barton, we cannot define our context, for it is transparent to us. In Wittgenstein's words: 'it is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off.' Moving to Japan was theory made manifest, and the glasses fell irrevocably from her 'myopic monolingual eyes'.

Language shapes identity and perspective. A survey of over a thousand bilinguals reported that two thirds felt like 'a different person' when speaking different languages. When bilingual Japanese women living around San Francisco were given the same questions in two languages, their responses seemed to reveal conflicting personalities: their Japanese answers emphasised family loyalty and traditional gender roles; English answers prioritised honesty and individuality. Barton herself was told she seemed 'softer and cuter' in Japanese, was 'serious and scary' in English.

As her mimicry of Japanese speech and behaviour became more convincing, her assimilation more successful, she felt she might lose the self she recognised. The effort of repressing emotions in a reserved society that cherishes conformity became overwhelming. Convinced she was 'failing at Japan', she started unravelling. She would swallow anger at digs made at Western values – the materialism she saw reflected in the *katakana's* vocabulary, but also others she subscribed to: candour, warmth, personal development. Her students would say 'I like travelling but I prefer Japan,' describing the relief they felt on returning to its pristine streets, delicious food and familiar language. Having rejected security and



embraced the unknown, Barton recoiled at what seemed like smug, insular patriotism, but eventually came to accept, even identify with the longing for stability.

When she read about John Bowlby's attachment theory, Barton was aghast to discover that people with 'insecure' attachment styles – anxious and avoidant – are predisposed to mutual attraction, as are the 'secure' fifty-five per cent of the population, which does much to explain why romantic relationships are tough going for some, and seemingly easy for others. Not only did she recognise herself in the anxious type, she saw that 'if Japan was a person, it would be male, and it would be avoidant'. Japan's indifference had been clear from the start, when it put her on a waitlist. It did not need her, or her faltering syllables, but – as with the lover who doesn't call – this only strengthened her desire.

This dynamic was heightened by conducting romantic relationships with native Japanese speakers, most definingly with an older teacher at the island school. If language learning is a second infancy, falling in love in another culture is like 'finding a language parent'. The affair's clandestine nature; the gaps in age and culture; and his instructor role inculcated a fierce passion that haunted Barton for years. For her, learning a language is like living in eros, a state of yearning that, once intimacy is achieved, inevitably dissolves: 'it is the always-bruised but ever-renewing desire to draw close: to a person, a territory, a culture, an idea, an indefinable feeling.' Despite the inner conflict it expresses, *Fifty Sounds* is in many ways a love letter to the Japanese language and the art of translation.

Prize-winning American author Jhumpa Lahiri enlists similar metaphors in *In Other Words*, her 2015 account of her struggle to master Italian: 'My infatuation will become a devotion, an obsession. There will always be something unbalanced, unrequited. I'm in love, but what I love remains indifferent. The language will never need me.' In 2011 she moved from Brooklyn to Rome with her family, having pledged to exile herself from English and read and write only in Italian.

Although her books – the Pulitzer Prize-winning story collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, another collection of short fiction, *Unaccustomed Earth*, and two novels, *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize – explore migration and assimilation, she had never



consciously lived the experience, her Bengali parents having moved to the U.S. when she was only two. She is, she believes, 'a writer who doesn't belong completely to any language'.

Learning a new language in adulthood is to intentionally cast oneself adrift. We become children again, relinquishing the status we have accrued in our native tongue. For Lahiri, who likens writing in Italian to writing with her left hand, 'when I give up English, I give up my authority . . . How is it possible that when I write in Italian I feel both freer and confined, constricted? Maybe because in Italian I have the freedom to be imperfect'.

It is an act of almost masochistic courage, propelled by an instinct that disengaging from our established linguistic framework will somehow liberate us. Lahiri describes trying to write in this language where she feels like 'an intruder, an imposter': 'My project is so arduous that it seems sadistic. I have to start again from the beginning, as if I had never written anything in my life. But, to be precise, I am not at the starting point: rather, I'm in another dimension, where I have no references, no armor. Where I've never felt so stupid.'

Publishing this May, six years after *In Other Words, Whereabouts* is her first novel written in Italian; also, unusually, translated into English by her. This controlled, fragmentary portrait of a woman alone in an undefined city is born of Lahiri's Italian voice and identity. Its succinct chapters and spare prose layer precise exterior observation with piercing interior reflection, recalling the work of Rachel Cusk and Amina Cain. An academic in her mid-forties – self-contained, self-critical – moves through her home territory, encountering acquaintances, forging fleeting connections, reflecting on memories and the life she has chosen. 'Solitude: it's become my trade. As it requires a certain discipline, it's a condition I try to perfect. And yet it plagues me, it weighs on me in spite of my knowing it so well.'

There are glimpses into her past, the unsettled depths beneath her composure: her mother's rages, her father's death; her awkward, studious adolescence; her duplicitous ex-lover. After hearing women at the swimming pool trade tragedies, the water 'reeks of grief, of heartache. It's contaminated'. She has never lived away from her home city, is both soothed and confined by its familiarity, the fluctuating possibilities of



isolation and companionship it contains.

Eventually, she accepts a year's fellowship across the border. Like her creator, she leaves the cocoon, wades into the waters of uncertainty. Before departing, she follows a doppelganger through the streets, another version of herself: 'My double, seen from behind, explains something to me: that I'm me and also someone else, that I'm leaving and also staying'. It is tempting to read the novel as a metaphor for Lahiri's plunge into Italian, a lake whose shores she hugged for twenty years, taking lessons at home, before realising 'you can't float without the possibility of drowning'.

Although *Whereabouts* differs inevitably to Lahiri's novels written in English – its length and structural simplicity, for a start – it has the intensity and subtlety for which her writing is known. A tantalising sense of the unseen lying beyond the frame, an ending that is also a beginning, evince a haunting restraint, leaving the reader with the promise of the unknown. Since dedicating herself to Italian, Lahiri has renounced the geographic specificity once central to her writing. The city in *Whereabouts* (Italian title: *Dove mi trovo*, meaning *Where I am*) is both abstracted and unmistakably Italian, as is the lifestyle depicted – a sandwich enjoyed in a sunny piazza, light playing on frescoes, streets emptying in August – and the book celebrates the everyday minutiae that make up a life.

In these different yet complementary books, two writers in dialogue with their adopted cultures share a clarity and attentiveness – each, perhaps, having removed Wittgenstein's glasses. Examining solitude, desire and the urge to cross borders, these narratives illuminate the endless oscillation between home and away, security and freedom: a duality within us all. In a world whose boundaries seem more sharply delineated than ever, they feel especially salient.