
ITALIAN


WAYS


ON AND OFF THE RAILS
FROM MILAN TO PALERMO


TIM PARKS

CONTENTS

About the Book

In *Italian Ways*, bestselling writer Tim Parks brings us a fresh portrait of Italy today through a wry account of his train journeys around the country. Whether describing his daily commute from Milan to Verona, his regular trips to Florence and Rome, or his occasional sojourns to Naples and Sicily, Parks uses his thirty years of amusing and maddening experiences on Italian trains to reveal what he calls the ‘charmingly irritating dystopian paradise’ of Italy.

Through memorable encounters with ordinary Italians – conductors and ticket collectors, priests and prostitutes, scholars and lovers, gypsies and immigrants – Parks captures what makes Italian life distinctive. *Italian Ways* also explores how trains helped build Italy and how the railways reflect Italians’ sense of themselves from Garibaldi to Mussolini to Berlusconi and beyond. Most of all, *Italian Ways* is an entertaining attempt to capture the essence of modern Italy.

About the Author

Born in Manchester, Tim Parks grew up in London and studied at Cambridge and Harvard. In 1981 he moved to Italy where he has lived ever since. He is the author of novels, non-fiction and essays, including *Europa*, *Cleaver*, *A Season with Verona* and *Teach Us to Sit Still*. He has won the Somerset Maugham, Betty Trask and Llewellyn Rhys awards, and been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He lectures on literary translation in Milan, writes for publications such as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*, and his many translations from the Italian include works by Moravia, Calvino, Calasso, Tabucchi and Machiavelli.

Also by TIM PARKS

FICTION

Tongues of Flame
Loving Roger
Home Thoughts
Family Planning
Goodness
Cara Massimina
Mimi's Ghost
Shear
Europa
Destiny
Judge Savage
Rapids
Cleaver
Dreams of Rivers and Seas
Sex is Forbidden (*first published with the title* The Server)

NON – FICTION

Italian Neighbours
An Italian Education
Adultery and Other Diversions
Translating Style
Hell and Back
A Season with Verona
The Fighter
Teach Us to Sit Still

LIST OF MAPS

For all those who love to read on trains

ITALIAN WAYS

ON AND OFF THE RAILS FROM MILAN TO PALERMO

TIM PARKS

Harvill Secker
LONDON


Milano
Verona
Venezia
Torino
Genova
Bologna
Firenze
MARE ADRIATICO
ITALIA
Roma
Napoli
Bari
Taranto
Brindisi
Lecce
Otranto
MARE TIRRENO
Crotone
Catanzaro Lido
Messina
Palermo
SICILIA
Siracusa
Modica
MARE MEDITERRANEO

PREFACE

A TRAIN IS a train is a train, isn't it? Parallel lines across the landscape, wheels raised on steel, the power and momentum of the heavy locomotive leading its snake of carriages through a maze of switches, into and out of the tunnels, the passenger sitting a few feet above the ground, protected from the elements, hurtled from one town to the next while he reads a book or chats to friends or simply dozes, entirely freed from any responsibility for speed and steering, from any necessary engagement with the world he's passing through. Surely this is the train experience everywhere.

Yet only in India have I been able to stand at an open door as the carriage rattles and sways through the sandy plains of Rajasthan. The elegant melancholy of the central station in Buenos Aires, designed in a French style by British architects, its steel arches shipped from distant Liverpool, has much to tell about Argentina past and present. Certainly the history and zeitgeist of Thatcher's and then Blair's England could very largely be deduced from the present confusion of the country's overpriced, clumsily privatised, manifestly unhappy railways. In America the lack of investment in train travel speaks eloquently of a country always ready to appear righteous but pathologically averse to surrendering car and plane for a more eco-friendly, community-conscious form of mobility.

The train arrived in Italy in 1839 with four and a half miles of line under the shadow of Vesuvius from Naples to Portici,

followed in 1840 by nine miles from Milan to Monza. Borrowing from the English, the Italians coined the word *ferrovie*, literally ‘ironways’. Unlike the English they had little iron for rails, almost no coal to drive the trains, and only a fraction of the demand for freight and passenger transport that the English Industrial Revolution had generated. It was hard to fill the trains and harder still to run them at a profit. But where business wasn’t good there was politics. The Risorgimento process that aimed to unite the peninsula’s separate, often foreign-run states into a single nation was in full swing; all sides in the struggle understood that rapid communication would encourage and later consolidate unification. There were also military considerations. What better way to move a large body of men quickly than in trucks on rails?

So railway building was almost always politically motivated, which again made the commercial side of the operation more difficult. After unification, debates over the routes of strategic lines offered a new battleground for an ancient *campanilismo*, that eternal rivalry that has every Italian town convinced its neighbours are conspiring against it. Amid all the idealism and quarrelling, by the end of the nineteenth century the railway unions had become the biggest and most militant in the country and hence would play an important role in the struggle between socialism and Fascism; after the Second World War they became central to the government’s policy of keeping the electorate happy by creating non-existent jobs and awarding generous salaries and pensions. More than one person has claimed that the whole history of Italy as a nation state could be reconstructed through an account of the country’s railways.

But this is not a history book, nor exactly a travel book, though there is travel and history in it. Nor did I plan it and set to work on it in quite the same way I did with my other books on Italy. A few words of explanation are in order for

the passenger who has just purchased his ticket and climbed on board *Italian Ways*.

My first sight of Italy came through the windows of a train. It was dawn on a summer morning in 1974. I had been dozing through France and woke near Ventimiglia to see the light greying on the Côte d'Azur as we flew over viaducts and through tunnels. It wasn't the first time I had seen palm trees, but one of the first. I was nineteen and travelling alone on an InterRail pass. Having met two likely Lancashire girls who had it in their heads to see the Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna, I tagged along with them, not appreciating that such a cross-country trip ran absolutely against the grain of Italy's topography and traffic flow; only a masochist would attempt to get from Ventimiglia to Ravenna by rail.

A few days later, on the platform at Firenze Santa Maria Novella, I bought a flask of Chianti with two German boys, the kind of wine they sell in bellied bottles with straw aprons, and after no more than a couple of swigs passed out, to wake up in my vomit three hours later in the corridor of an evening Espresso to Rome. Those were the days, fortunately long over, when cheap wine might be cut with almost anything. I spent that night in a sleeping bag on a patch of grass outside Roma Termini with thirty or forty other travellers, and while I slept, my shoulder bag, which was looped around my neck, was razored away; when I woke I had lost my shoes, guidebook and passport, but not my wallet, which was in my underpants. That morning my bare feet burned on the scorching tar as I began the first of many bureaucratic odysseys in this country that years later would become my home. Of the language I knew not a word. These were rites of passage; I had been delivered into my Italian future by train.

I have now lived in Italy for thirty-two years. There are plateaus, then sudden deepenings; all at once a corner is turned and you understand the country and your experience of it in a new way. You could think of it as a jigsaw puzzle in

four dimensions; the ordinary three, plus time: you will never fill in all the pieces, if only because the days keep rolling by, yet the picture does seem more complete and above all denser and more convincing with every year. You're never quite a native, but you're no longer a stranger. So just as my knowledge of Italian literature has slowly extended from the novels of Natalia Ginzburg and Alberto Moravia, which I read to learn the language, underlining every word, back through the masterpieces of Svevo and Verga, Manzoni and Leopardi, then further and further into the past until I was finally ready for Dante and Boccaccio, likewise my knowledge of *le ferrovie italiane* has extended and deepened and intensified. It's not a question any more of liking or hating them; these ironways are family.

At first train travel was just a chore. In 1992 I gave up language teaching at the University of Verona for a career track job at a university in Milan. With small children we didn't want to move to the big city, so I was condemned to commuting two or three times a week. I had no idea then that Italian railways were hitting an all-time low and even less knowledge of the reasons why that was so. I just suffered and of course laughed, since laughter is preferable to tears, and more sustainable. But often I enjoyed too: for to move on rails through a beautiful landscape is always a pleasure, and strangely conducive to reading, which is a major part of my life. Plus there was this: the deeper you get into a country, the more every new piece of information, every event and discovery, arrives as a fascinating confirmation, or challenge: how can I reconcile this bizarre thing that has happened with what I already know about the place? What might have seemed trivial or merely irritating the first year you were here now enriches and shifts the picture.

I began to take notes. I began to think that if someone wanted to understand Italy they might start by understanding how the train ticketing system works, or by

listening to the platform announcements at Venezia Santa Lucia and Roma Termini, the strange emphasis given to certain names, the completely impractical order in which information is presented. In 2005 the magazine *Granta* asked me to write a travel piece and, cheating a little, because this was not strictly travel writing, I had a chance to use my jottings. Out of character, I wrote four times as much as they wanted, 120 pages, far too much for a magazine piece, not really enough for a book; but then I hadn't been thinking of a book; I was just having fun, so much more fun than I'd expected, writing about the railways, the Italian way of running their railways. *Granta* published a fragment.

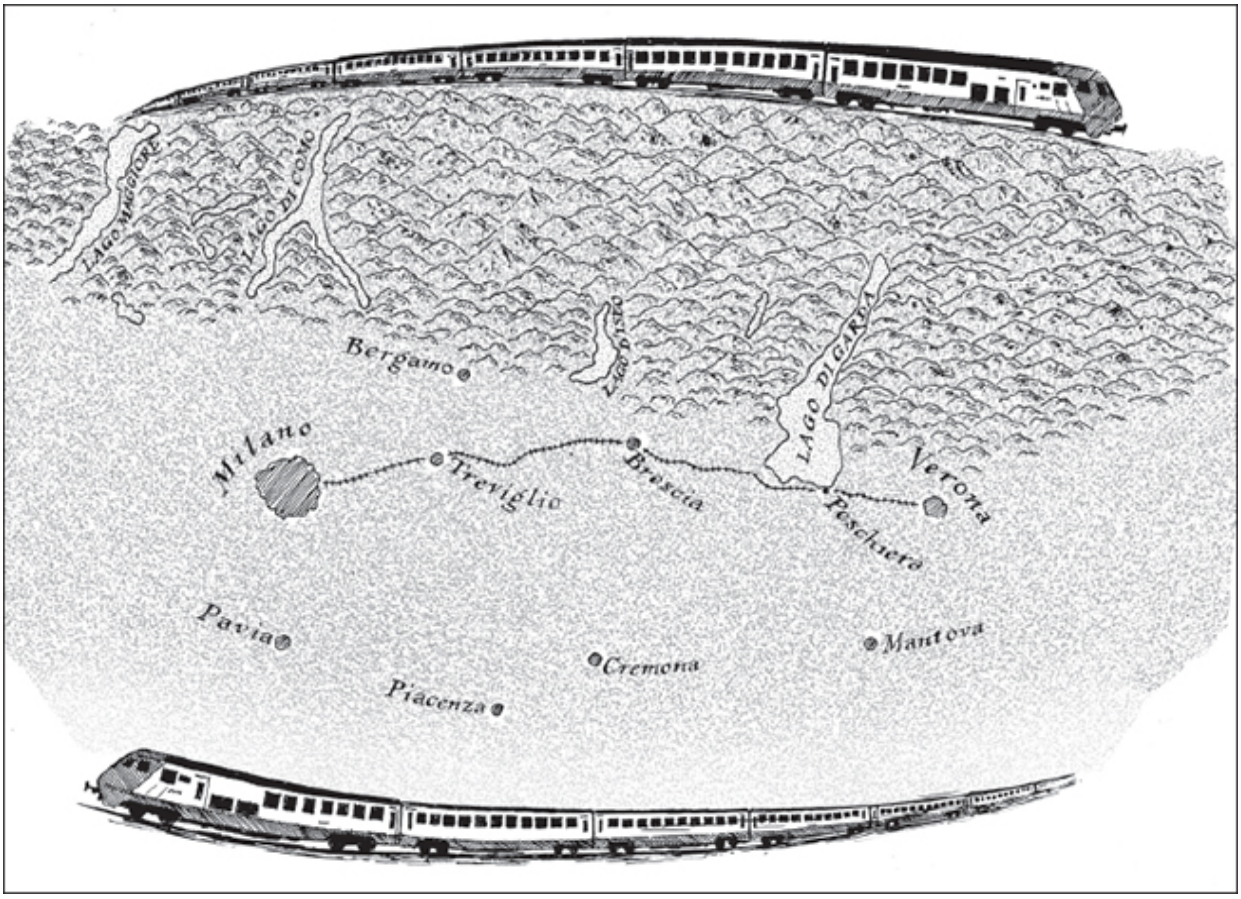
Seven years later, Italian trains have changed enormously, Italy has changed, as have Europe and the world. Not to mention the author. Last year I came back to the book that wasn't quite a book. Were these pages simply out of date? Or could the difference between the way things were then and the way they are now be used to show something that has always fascinated me: how national character manifests itself most clearly when the things you thought couldn't change finally do. If you look at the way high-speed trains are being introduced into Italy while the regional services languish, if you look at the way the mobile phone is used in the business-class compartments of a Milano–Roma Frecciarossa, if you look at how ticketing has been computerised and watch the way the frightening old on-board inspectors deal with it, if you travel the south coast of Calabria and Puglia and see how European Community money has been spent or misspent on the deserted railways, again and again, for good or ill, there it is, undeniably, the Italian way of doing things.

That is what I have tried to capture in this book.

Part One

THE TRAIN OF THE LIVING DEAD

2005


LAGO MAGGIORE
LAGO DI COMO
Bergamo
LAGO DI GARDA
Milano
Treviglio
Brescia
Peschiera
Verona
Pavia
Cremona
Mantova
Piacenza

Chapter 1

VERONA–MILANO

ITALIANS COMMUTE. EVERY September I receive a letter from the administration of the university where I teach, in Milan, reminding me that since I am not resident in the city, I have to apply for a *nullaosta* for the forthcoming year. This piece of paper, signed by the rector himself, will say that *nulla ostacola* ... nothing prevents me from working in Milan while living a hundred miles away, in Verona.

What on earth could prevent me? Only Trenitalia, the railways.

As so often in Italy, there is no official form to fill in; you have to make up the request yourself. This can cause anxiety when Italian is not your mother tongue and you are aware that there may be special formulas and terms of address. A university lecturer does not wish to seem inept.

‘What if I just ignore it?’ I once asked a colleague. ‘It’s only a formality.’

That was many years ago, in the nineties. I was innocent then. It was explained to me that in Italy a formality is a sort of dormant volcano. It might seem harmless for years, then suddenly blow your life away. So, one day, if I misbehaved in class, or supported the wrong candidate in some hotly disputed faculty election, the rector might decide that Trenitalia really wasn’t reliable enough for me to be resident in Verona and work at the university in Milan. In the same way, in Italy, after years of neglect, certain laws on

accounting or political-party fund-raising might quite suddenly be vigorously enforced for reasons that have little to do with someone's having broken the law. Never say *only* a formality.

Rather discouragingly, the colleague who enlightened me with this dormant volcano analogy later suggested that I might want to apply for an available lectureship in Lecce. Disturbed, I pointed out that if Milan was a hundred miles from Verona, Lecce was six hundred. At that point surely the *nullaosta* would not be a formality at all. 'There's an overnight train, Verona–Lecce,' I was told. 'No problem. You could go twice a week. Or stay the week and come home at weekends.'

It was a serious proposition. Hundreds of thousands of Italians do this. In Milan I have colleagues who are resident in Rome, in Palermo, in Florence. I have students who return to Naples or Udine every weekend. Thousands upon thousands of miles are travelled. Italians like to live where they live – where they were born, that is – with Mamma and Papà. Then they commute. Even when it offers no work, your home town is always the best town; a thick web of family ties and bureaucracy anchors you there. Trenitalia connects these city states. It makes the nation possible and allows it to remain fragmented, allows people to live double lives. Not for nothing is the holding company called Le Ferrovie dello Stato. State railways. *Nulla ostacola*.

TO BE PRESENT AT a nine o'clock lesson or thesis commission in Milan, I have to get the 6.40 Interregionale from Verona Porta Nuova to Genova Piazza Principe. It's the train of the living dead. But at least, leaving home at six, many of the city's traffic lights are still only flashing yellow. You can move. You can even stop moving and park.

Verona's main station was rebuilt, like the roads around it and the nearby stadium, for football's 1990 World Cup. The cup took place before the roads were finished, at which

point urgency if not interest was lost. The big teams of the time didn’t come to Verona. I vaguely recall Belgium beating Uruguay. I can’t remember the names of the other teams. Did anybody go and watch? In all my later years as a season-ticket holder at the stadium no one has mentioned these games. But the hastily conceived road system will be with us for decades to come, an underpass on a tight bend that has claimed a dozen lives, and likewise the attractive stone floor inside Verona Porta Nuova Station. It’s made of small dark metamorphic slabs that mix a highly polished, almost mirror finish with mottling patches of rough gritty brown. Very stylish. When the Tangentopoli, or Bribesville, crackdown on political corruption began in the early nineties, it was suggested that much of the building for the World Cup in Verona had involved the mayor and his cronies giving contracts to friends and relatives. No one paid more than a brief visit to jail. No one really thought that this was an especially bad thing to have done.

Alas, even at 6.15 in the morning there’s an impossibly long queue at the ticket windows. The serious commuter has to have a season ticket. But what kind of season ticket? In England now there are different tickets for different trains run by different companies. There is the confusion and clamour of free enterprise, and, in an attempt to balance supply and demand, there are differently priced tickets for peak and off-peak travel. This is annoying, but comprehensible and all very Anglo-Saxon. In Italy the complications are of a different nature. Truly to get a grip on them would be to understand Italian politics and social policy since the Second World War.

First and foremost, train tickets must be cheap, and be seen to be so. People’s desire to live in one city while working in another, coupled with the fact that Italian salaries are among the lowest in the European Community, require this. A student has to be able to afford to travel home *every* weekend or every other. The friends you make

at primary school are your friends for life. You can't be without them. Who will do your laundry, if not your dear mother? There are few launderettes in Italy. So to travel from Verona to Milan – 148 kilometres, my ticket tells me, or about 92 miles – costs only €6.82, peak or off-peak, weekend or weekday.[fn1] About £5 at the time of writing. It's cheap.

At the same time, the railways have traditionally been used as an organisation to absorb excess labour and keep unemployment down. 'What a lot of officials!' wrote D. H. Lawrence on the station in Messina, Sicily, in 1920. 'You know them by their caps. Elegant tubby little officials in kid-and-patent boots and gold-laced caps, tall long nosed ones in more gold-laced caps, like angels in and out of the gates of heaven they thread in and out of the various doors.'

Having shed a hundred thousand staff in the past twenty years, Trenitalia is no longer so dramatically overmanned but still employs far more personnel per mile travelled than France, Germany or Britain. Ten thousand of the ninety-nine thousand rail workers are considered unnecessary. And the officials still have smart caps with gold bands, and shiny buttons on their dark jackets.

Returning from Venice one evening to the tiny station of Verona Porta Vescovo, I discovered that the doors would not open. On the Interregionale there is a red handle you pull upwards when the train stops. The door should slide open. One passenger after another yanked and tugged. Imprecation, blasphemy. Since there were platforms on both sides of the train, they yanked and tugged on both sides. Just as the train began to move off, a door jerked open and a handful of passengers spilled out.

At which point, still congratulating ourselves on our close shave, we were yelled at by a man with a wonderfully peaked cap, a cap far larger and rounder and above all redder than seemed necessary. It was the cap of the

capostazione, the stationmaster. Someone explained why we had got off when the train was already in motion, which of course is strictly forbidden. *'Non esiste!'* the important man protested. It wasn't possible that the doors wouldn't open. We must have done something wrong. Various passengers corroborated the story. '*Non esiste!*' he insisted. It can't be. Perhaps to work for Trenitalia sometimes requires living in denial.

For example, it's clear that if ticket prices are to be low (less than half the prices on Deutschebahn, less than a third of British railway companies) and manning high, the train service will be expensive to run. How can a country with a national debt running at more than 100 per cent of GNP deal with this? One answer is: *il supplemento*.

If to take an Interregionale to Milan costs €6.82, to take the faster Intercity costs €11.05, or rather the base ticket of €6.82 plus a supplement of €4.23; the even faster (just) Eurostar will cost a further 50 cents. Once upon a time the supplement formed only a small percentage of the ticket, but since basic rail fares are taken into account to calculate national inflation rates, while Intercity rail fares are not, or not until recently, the supplement has tended to grow in relation to the basic ticket. A great deal of inflation can be hidden with such ruses. But what do you get for this extra money? The Interregionale takes fourteen minutes longer than the Intercity and twenty-four minutes longer than the Eurostar. Do I value fourteen minutes of my time at €4.23?

It's more complicated than that.

To encourage people to pay the higher fare, the Interregionali tend to disappear for certain periods of the day, especially if you're making a long trip. On the other hand, following a logic that runs exactly contrary to notions of supply and demand, if you travel with the living dead, as I am often obliged to, the *only* trains will be Interregionali, to cater to the poorer commuters, the damned, those who could not, on a daily basis, pay the higher fare, all this

thanks to that rather pious though always welcome Italian commitment to a certain kind of popular socialism (of which needless to say both Catholicism and Fascism are close relatives). The more demand, then, the lower the fare.

So we have the 6.40 Verona–Genova Interregionale in the morning and the terrifying 18.15 Milano–Venezia Interregionale in the evening. Curiously, these humdrum overcrowded commuter convoys with their cheaper tickets travelling at peak times are the most reliable and the most punctual. Covering 100 miles in two hours with a locomotive and rolling stock capable of 110 miles an hour, they have time to play with.

SO ON THE FIRST day of the new academic year I buy my annual season ticket to Milan. There is no special window. You stand in the queue with everyone else. Four windows are manned, six are not. Fortunately, they recently introduced a single queuing system at Verona Porta Nuova, a long winding snake between rope barriers, this to avoid those frustrating situations where you choose the wrong queue and find yourself stuck for hours. We all welcomed this sign of progress and civilisation. The ropes were a smart white and red swinging from bright chrome posts; but having set up the snake, they failed to block entry to the windows to people who had not queued up, people entering at what was supposed to be the exit.

A man leans against a pillar, chewing gum, watching, waiting, then, just as a window becomes free, he strides rapidly towards it and pushes in. The ticket seller knows what has happened but does not protest. The people in the queue grumble but don’t actually intervene. This has always surprised me in Italy, the general resignation in the face of the *furbo*, the sly one. It is always worth trying it on here. If things get unpleasant, you can protest that you didn’t understand the rules.

A notice tells you that you're not supposed to ask for information at the ticket window, just buy your ticket and go, but people are asking for the most detailed information. 'How much would it cost to switch from second to first class on an overnight train to Lecce with four people taking into account reductions for the family and the granny over seventy?'

The ticket sellers are patient. They don't have a train to catch. Perhaps they like giving out information, they like demonstrating knowledge and expertise. At the place where the official queue emerges from its serpent of ropes, the point where you're getting close to your turn, you'll find it's impossible to see the ticket window furthest to the left, because it's hidden behind a pillar clad (for the World Cup) in a highly polished chocolaty-brown stone. This hidden window, I've noticed, is always in use, whereas those directly opposite the queue, and hence highly visible, are frequently closed. If you don't know that the window behind the pillar is there, you don't go to it. And the ticket seller doesn't call to you. He has no buzzers to push, no warning lights to attract his customers. Trenitalia does not want to spoil us.

At the window to my right, someone is asking for the timetable for a complicated series of connections to a town in Liguria. The queue frets. 'On which trains can I take my bicycle?' he asks. Another *furbo* manages to sneak in when the window near the exit is momentarily free. This time the ticket seller protests, but half-heartedly. 'I'll be quick,' *il furbo* says. 'Otherwise I'll miss my train.'

Nobody shouts. There is a slow, simmering resentment, as if the people who have behaved properly are grimly pleased to get confirmation that good citizenship is always futile, a kind of martyrdom. This is an important Italian emotion: I am behaving well and suffering *because* of that. I am a martyr. *Mi sto sacrificando.* It is a feeling that will justify some bad behaviour at the appropriate moment.

Do these people really need to ask for so much information at the ticket windows? No. There are excellent poster-size timetables showing all departures from the station. The Italians are good at this. There are cheap, comprehensive and just about comprehensible national timetables available at the station's newsagent. They give you *all* the trains in northern Italy for a six-month period. There is an information office. For some reason the information office is at the other end of the station, perhaps fifty yards from the ticket windows – you have to walk down a long, elegantly paved corridor – and the timetables are *not* displayed near the ticket queue. This seems to be true in every station in Italy. It's strange. You cannot consult train times while waiting in the queue, which might be exactly when you want to consult them. Of course you hurry to the queue without looking at the timetable, because you fear that if you don't, you'll lose your place and miss your train, but then at the window you have to ask for information. At one window a ticket seller patiently starts to explain the advantages and limitations of a complex promotional offer. The PA system announces the trains about to leave.

TO COPE WITH THIS stressful situation Trenitalia introduced the SportelloVeloce or FastTicket, as it's also called. (Theses could be written about this habit of offering a translation that is not really a translation but as it were an Italian fantasy of how English works directed more at an Italian public, as a marketing operation, than at an English-speaking public on the move.) This is a window that you're only supposed to use if your train departs *within the next fifteen minutes*. Sensibly, they placed the SportelloVeloce in the position where people usually sneak in to beat the main queue in its long snake between red ropes and chrome bars.

But what if my train leaves in half an hour? I stand in the queue for fifteen minutes, I see things are getting tight. Do I switch to the fast queue, where there are already four

people? What if one of them asks for information? What if everybody decides that they can now arrive only fifteen minutes before the train leaves and use the fast queue? This would be a problem, because whereas at least two of the main windows are always open, the FastTicket window is frequently closed.

Or what if I queue at the SportelloVeloce twenty-five minutes before my train leaves but get to the ticket seller eighteen minutes before it leaves? Will he serve me? Probably yes, but he would be within his rights not to. Immigrants, in particular, tend to get turned away. I mean non-whites. And sometimes tourists. Foreign tourists. So do I have to go to the back of the queue? Can I keep him arguing for three minutes, at which point he would no longer be able to deny me a ticket? Unless perhaps my train is suddenly signalled as delayed for half an hour. Not an unusual occurrence. Or, since a standard rail ticket is valid for two months, what if I say I'm getting the Intercity to Bolzano leaving in five minutes, when in fact I'm planning to get it in two weeks? Is anybody going to check that I actually board today's train? These are unanswered questions. FastTicket has not made ticket buying easier. A child could see this. So why was it introduced? The time has come to talk about image.

Use of English is always a clue. Readers will have noticed that only the slow trains now have Italian names, the Interregionale and, slower still, crawling doggedly from one watering hole to the next, the Regionale. These are the trains that need not be presented to the outside world, to the foreign businessman and the credit-card-holding tourist. The rolling stock is old and rattly. In summer you roast and in winter you freeze. The seats are narrow and hard, the cleaning … well, best take a deep breath before passing the toilet. But as soon as you start paying supplements you are in the territory of English, or at least international-speak. The proud old categories of Espresso, Rapido and Super-

Rapido have largely disappeared. Now we have the Intercity, the Eurocity and the Eurostar.

What we are dealing with here is an ongoing Italian dilemma. Are we 'part of Europe' or not? Are we part of the modern world? Are we progressive or backward? Above all, *are we serious*? There is a general perception that the Italian way of doing things, particularly in the public sector, is sloppy and slow, compromised by special interests and political considerations; hence an enormous effort must be made to work against the Latin grain and emulate a Teutonic punctuality, an Anglo-French high-tech.

This unease goes right back to the making of the Italian state. It is there in the patriot D'Azeglio's famous line, 'We have made Italy, now we must make the Italians.' It is there in Mussolini's obsession that 'our way of eating, dressing, working and sleeping, the whole complex of our daily habits, must be reformed'. To make the trains run on time would be proof that Fascism had achieved this, that a profound change had occurred in the national psyche. '*Abassa la vita commoda!*' proclaimed one Fascist slogan. Down with the easy life! You can understand why elections could hardly be free and fair when the main political party was fielding slogans like that.

But at another level, and quite understandably, Italians have no desire at all to change. They like an easy life. They consider themselves superior to those crude and fretful nations who put punctuality before style and comfortable digestion. A compromise is sought in image. Italy will be made to *look* fast and modern. There will be FastTicket windows even if they make the process of buying tickets more complex and anxiety-ridden than before. At the main station in Milan a member of the railway staff has now been given the task of vetting those who stand in the queue at the SportelloVeloce. 'What train are you getting, *signore*? When does it leave?' But how do we know if the reply a passenger gives to this official is the same as the request he

will make at the ticket window? A problem of overmanning is solved, a new job invented, but the gap for the *furbo* remains open.

SUDDENLY I BECOME AWARE that there is a man sitting at one of the five ticket windows that was previously closed. A man in uniform. I'm second in the queue now. The man sits there quietly, unobtrusively. He has just started his shift. He looks at the queue where people are anxiously focused on the windows that are busy. He scratches an unshaven neck and turns the pink pages of his *Gazzetta dello Sport*. He is not shirking work, but he is not inviting it either. He has reading material.

I nudge the man in front: 'That window's free.' He looks at me suspiciously, as if I were trying to get him out of the way to grab the next free window. 'Are you open?' he calls before committing himself. The man raises his eyes to gesture to the electronic display at the top of his window. 'It says open, doesn't it?' As a result, just a few minutes later, I find myself going to the window hidden behind the pillar, where I discover that my one-time neighbour Beppe is serving.

Fifteen years ago Beppe gave up a promising and remunerative life as a freelance electrician to take up the dull job of serving at the ticket windows in Verona Porta Nuova. He had applied for the job when temporarily unemployed some years before; he survived a long and complex admissions process and served his time on a waiting list of some scores of men and women. When, years later, the call finally came, it was an opportunity his wife and parents wouldn't let him pass up: a meal ticket *for life*. This is how a railway job is seen. It is decently paid and as irreversible as a place in paradise. In the 1960s there was even the suggestion that railway jobs should be made hereditary, a return to the medieval estates. This might seem laughable, but when most Italians in prominent

positions seem to be the children of others in similar positions, when the multitude of small family companies that make up the most dynamic part of the Italian economy are generally passed on from father to son, or indeed daughter at a pinch, one can understand why the unions felt this arrangement could be introduced for an elite group of workers like the railway men.

Another friend of mine, a young man who once specialised in making handmade harpsichords, gave up his little workshop to become a railway carpenter repairing vandalised carriage fittings. Peer pressure to make these sad decisions is considerable. Job security is placed beyond every other consideration. Beppe, I know, finds his work at the ticket window desperately tedious but hangs on with bovine good humour. ‘These are hard times,’ he says, though one of the hardest things these days is finding an electrician in a hurry. Handmade harpsichords are not widely available either.

‘An annual season ticket to Milan,’ I tell him.

‘Interregionale, Intercity or Eurostar?’ Beppe asks.

I explain that I take the Interregionale going but as often as not an Intercity coming back.

My old neighbour shakes his head, rubs his chin in his hand. ‘Complicated.’

In the early 1990s, as part of an urgent effort to make the railways lean and mean, or at least not quite so bonnie and bountiful, the Ferrovie dello Stato (FS) were officially split off from government control and obliged to return, if not a profit, then certainly not much of a loss. However, since the government continued to own more than half the company’s shares and to regulate every aspect of company policy, stipulating what lines it was obliged to run with what regularity and at what fares, the move was little more than, well, a formality. Then in the late nineties, to fall in line with European legislation on competition in the transport sector, the monolithic company was split up into various smaller