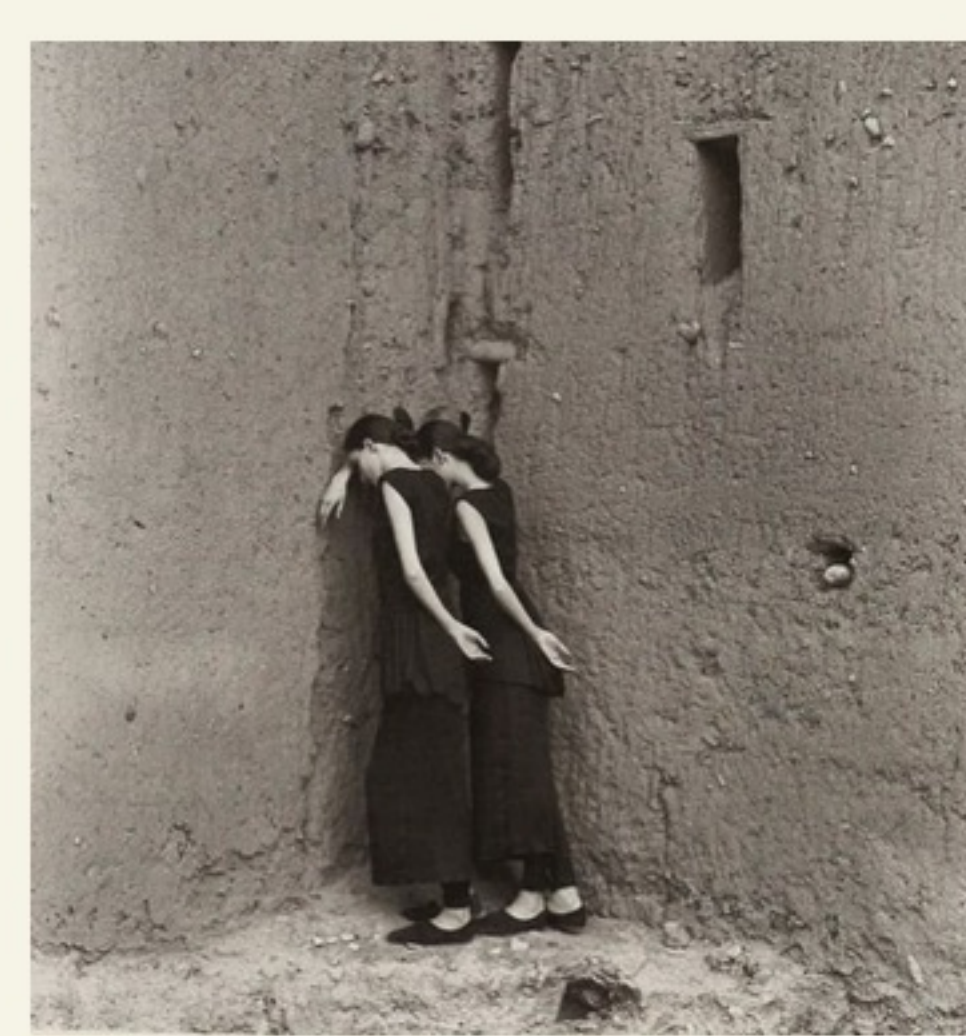


RECOGNITION, IN LANGUAGE  
AND IN LOVE*Lingua Textura* 003Written By **Grace Ebert**

Writer **Grace Ebert** joins us for a monthly column that explores the texture of language, how it permeates our reading practices, and the space it produces for thinking about literature, art, and all forms of creative expression.

*Of Mention: Jhumpa Lahiri's "Translating Myself and Others," Sabahattin Ali's "Madonna in a Fur Coat," and the etymology of recognition, and a note on love*

Jhumpa Lahiri taught herself to speak, read, and write in Italian at age forty-five. Prompted by a desire to expand her worldview, Lahiri plunged into the depths of the language, developing an intimacy with the vocabulary, etymology, syntax, and possibility of a world mediated anew with the help of a foreign tongue. She recounts this experience in "Why Italian?," the beautifully introspective and reflective essay that opens her new volume, *Translating Myself and Others*.

An explication of her approach to the art, the short text is also a study of the illuminating, captivating power of language to order, ground, and make sense of the self. "The Italian language did not simply change my life," she writes. "It gave me a second life, an extra life." While Lahiri is speaking of language as an auxiliary, she lauds its role as an effective method of and site for both comprehending the most fundamental elements of the self and stretching them into new, unfamiliar territory. Italian's secondary nature in this instance, though, also means that she maintains a critical remove, describing herself as being "partly blind" to her work written in that tongue: "It makes me understand, and appreciate, that the inability to see clearly and fully can illuminate the world in a different way. Despite the distance, it can permit me to strike at the heart of things." Here, it's the lack of total recognition that's exciting and valuable; obscurity in understanding and vulnerability in communicating simplify the process of unearthing what's most essential.

While Lahiri is speaking of translation and language, this sentiment is broadly applicable for art, life, and for love. Raif Efendi, the shy, withdrawn protagonist of Sabahattin Ali's sentimental *Madonna in a Fur Coat*, embodies this notion. A man who prefers dreams over reality, Raif is avoidant, shunning any possible connection with coworkers, his children, and his wife. He's referred to as the kind of man who makes people wonder, "What do they live for? What do they find in life? What logic compels them to keep breathing?" He seemingly defies and outright rejects intimacy of all kinds, and it isn't until the narrator, with whom he develops a distant friendship just prior to his death, reads Raif's journal that the latter's motivations and desires come into view.

Recognition, a requirement when speaking a language or forming a relationship, can be defined as "to acknowledge and know again." Its etymological links include *recognizance*, a derivative of the early 14th Century *reconisaunce*, meaning "a bond acknowledging some obligation." Distance and unfamiliarity are inherent to the concept, considering there must be a separation between the one recognizing and the one being recognized in order for the bonding act to even be possible. We might think of a good-faith version of recognition, then, as necessitating a degree of commitment, time spent observing, speaking with, and coming to understand another being, object, or belief for what's really there at the heart.

There are, of course, limits to our abilities to know that which exists beyond ourselves. As Raif wanders through Berlin, he visits a contemporary art museum where just one work captivates him. The piece is "Madonna in a Fur Coat," a fictional self-portrait of a pale woman with dark eyes from which the novel draws its name. Raif returns for multiple viewings and is so enraptured that he fails to identify the woman who joins him in front of the piece. "We'd sit there together, looking at the painting," she later tells him. "But still you didn't recognize me, even though you'd turn your head from time to time, to glance at this stranger who was ruining your concentration." The woman is Maria Puder, the portrait's subject and creator who develops a friendship with Raif that she insists must remain platonic, although they very clearly fall in love.

Much of what Raif studies in those viewings and throughout his time spent with Maria are eyes and the feelings, experiences, and idiosyncrasies he insists they convey. He describes "reading" his beloved's facial expressions and perceiving what she attempts to communicate, saying "she speaks only with her eyes." Optics are a primary motif throughout the novel—words like "eyes," "see," and "look" grace nearly all pages—and this feels fitting for a narrative perpetually churning around what someone chooses to hide and what they allow others to behold, especially considering our first sensory connection to another is often conjured through the eyes.

No matter how intimate Raif and Maria become, the two continually conceal parts of themselves. "All the same, there were areas we left untouched, if only because we had no idea what they were. But I sensed their importance," Raif writes, returning to Maria's sentiment from earlier in the novel: "People can only get to know each other up to a point and then they make up the rest." In *Madonna in a Fur Coat*, Ali presents love and relationships as always containing a mirage, illusions dreamed up by what's left unsaid or what can't be articulated.

The novel does not suggest, though, that attempting total recognition is futile, instead relying on the idea that bonding with another and opening one's soul is where life is most fulfilling and meaningful. Lahiri echoes this notion when discussing her desire to learn Italian, saying she does so "in order to develop another pair of eyes, in order to experiment with weakness." In love and in language, neither of which guarantee complete recognition, it's the vulnerability of revealing more of oneself, of releasing those weaknesses from their cloisters, that's essential to achieving what Raif terms the "sublime vista" buried within us:

"Maria Puder taught me I had a soul. And now, overcoming a habit of a lifetime, I could see a soul in her. Of course, everyone else in the world is similarly endowed. But most come into this world and leave it without even knowing what they had missed... It was only then that we truly began to live—live with our soul. At that moment, all doubts and shame could be set aside. All rules could be broken, as two souls joined in embrace. All my inhibitions had disappeared."

Ultimately, *Madonna in a Fur Coat* is Ali's heartbreaking love story that wrenches us into the all-consuming excitement of new love and then the terrifyingly hollow depths of love lost. As Lahiri asks "Why Italian?" we also might ask why love? Her answer to the question is as suitable for the former as it is for the latter: "To open doors, to see differently, to graft myself onto another."



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