Hallowed Be My Name
A Transplant's Trials, Tribulations, and Triumphs in Translation

Sante Matteo

> What would my life have been
> had I remained where I was born?...
> .....
> Then, who will solve this riddle of my day?
> Two languages, two lands, perhaps two souls...
> Am I a man or two strange halves of one?
> Joseph Tusiani, "Song of the Bicentennial"

Okay, maybe roses do "smell as sweet" in different languages, but I'm not so sure that Romeo could "be some other name" and still be himself. What's in a name? A lot, I think; a lot more than poor Juliet thinks. Of course, I may be prejudiced, or want to give myself more importance, because I am a name.

For the person who bears me as his name, I have meant many different things over the decades. I have been a source of joy and a fount of pain; a cause of loss and a begetter of gain: the worst of names, the best of names. He has been regarded and treated differently because of me. So, roses may smell as sweet by any other name, but not people. Sometimes their name can make them smell sweet. Sometimes it makes them stink. Names matter.

I am one and I am many. I am the name you see written in the byline. It is unique and unchanging in its written form, and so I am one (albeit twofold). But how do you, dear reader, pronounce that name? Each of you will probably pronounce it differently, depending on your linguistic background. I have been pronounced in many different ways through my bearer's lifetime. In spoken form, I am many (albeit still twofold).

If I hadn't used the personal adjective "his" above, some of you wouldn't even know if I was masculine or feminine and if my "owner" is a male or a female. (Those scare quotes around "owner"

are to question ownership in this case: does he "own" me or do I "own" him? Perhaps we shall see as we go along.) Before the internet, my bearded bearer used to get as many missives addressed to "Ms. Matteo" as to "Mr." Some correspondents played it safe and used "Dr." or "Prof." Nowadays, of course, you can do an online search and quickly get a gander at his gender and behold his bearded mug. Go ahead, try it. I'll wait. It won't take long.

If you tried it, I bet that I and my bearded human bearer (let's refer to him as SM) came out at the top of the search results and there was no confusion as to whether I might belong to more than one person. You probably had to scroll down through several items before finding links that led you elsewhere, to items that didn't refer to SM, and most likely those later links were to texts containing references to Saint Matthew, *San Matteo,* or to other religious texts referring to saints and to someone named Matthew, *Matteo.* While I can't be absolutely sure, I suspect that I am a unicum: the only such case with that particular first name coupled with that particular last name, and that I belong to only one person. Let me correct that: to only one living person, since my bearer's deceased grandfather also bore me as his name.

But before I go on to talk about that, we need to fix the title of this essay. Clever, allusive, and intriguing as it may be, it's also misleading. In fact, it's doubly wrong. That past participle, "hallowed," should be a noun instead: *hallows.* And that subjunctive, "be"--or hortative, jussive, optative, or whatever it is, or whatever it *be*--should really be the indicative: *is.* For in English—old English, anyway—my first part, *Sante,* would be translated as "hallows."

That's *hallows* as in *saints.* Since in English there is no grammatical gender, it refers both to male and female saints. But Italian nouns and adjectives do express gender, as well as number, so that the word for "saint/saints" has four forms: *santo* (one male saint), *santa* (one female saint), *santi* (several male saints; or a mixed group consisting of both males and females), and *sante* (female saints). So, in modern English, a more accurate translation of my first part, *Sante,* would be "Female Saints." My *onomastico,* name day, is All Saints Day, November 1. Older English names for that day, Hallowmas or Hallows Day, are no longer common, but the term has remained in the name we still give to the eve of my name day: Halloween (Hallows' Eve).

Sante is a very rare name in Italy. My parents didn't invent it or choose it from a list of common male names. It was his paternal grandfather's name, and it was the custom of the community that it would be given to the first-born male child. And presumably, his grandfather, the only male of three siblings, was in his turn named after his own paternal grandfather, and so on for every other generation.

Why the feminine plural *Sante,* rather than the masculine singular *Santo*? *Santo* is in fact the more common version of the name given to males when it does occur. Still, not even that more "correct" form is very common in most parts of Italy. On the other hand, the feminine version, *Santa,* or one of its diminutive forms: *Santina, Santuccia, Santuzza,* are for some reason considerably more common. I don't know why. Maybe because females are expected and encouraged to be saintly, whereas males are not? (But if that's the case, does it mean that those few males who bear the name *Sante,* like my guy, are expected or encouraged to be not only saintly, a *santo,* but to be like a whole bunch of female saints? What would that even mean?)

Naming children after a particular saint or religious figure—Francis, Anthony, George; Mary, Lucy, Catherine—is much more the norm than naming them after just a generic saint—*Santo* or *Santa*—or for all saints generally—*Santi* or *Sante*. Typically, once the obligation to name the first-born after a grandparent was satisfied, subsequent children would be named after the saint near whose feast day the child was born. Thus those born on or around March 19, St. Joseph's Day, would be named *Giuseppe* or *Giuseppina;* June 13, the Feast of St. Anthony of Padova: *Antonio* or *Antonietta;* October 4, St. Francis of Assisi: *Francesco* or *Francesca.* At some point in my bearer's ancestry it could be that a set of parents had run out of appropriate saints' names, or maybe couldn't agree with each other on one, and opted for the name of the whole category instead of picking one particular saint. Or it could be that a son was born on or near November 1, All Saints Day, starting the chain of first-born heirs that would continue to bear that name from generation to generation.

Still, even that eventuality would not explain the feminine plural ending *-e* in my person's or his grandfather's name. One hypothesis suggested is that it could come from the Latin vocative

of *sanctus* (saint): *sancte*, the form used when addressing or calling someone directly: "Hey, you, saint!" But I doubt it. Wouldn't other names of Latin derivation, such as Mario, Marcello, Tullio, Antonio, also have the vocative ending *-e*? None of the Latin-descendant names of my acquaintance do.

A more likely scenario is that something was lost in translation, or in transcription, when the name had to be entered on a birth certificate, which had to be compiled in Italian, that is in *standard Italian*. The dialect of my bearer's hometown, like many other dialects in Italy, is very different from standard Italian. In fact, so-called Italian dialects are not really dialects of Italian. That is, they do not derive from Italian, which evolved from the dialect spoken in Florence in the 13th and 14th centuries, at the time that Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio first started writing in the vernacular, while continuing to write in Latin as well. Their vernacular derived from Latin as did the spoken vernacular of most other towns in Italy (except some towns in the extreme south of the peninsula, once known as *Magna Grecia*, Greater Greece, that still retain dialects of the Greek spoken before the Roman conquest; and other towns populated by Slavs, Albanians, Normans, Germanic peoples, where dialects of those respective languages are still spoken). So, so-called Italian dialects are called so because they're found on the Italian peninsula, not because they are mutilated versions of Italian. They derive from Latin and could thus be considered different Romance languages, akin to French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian. What keeps them from being so considered is that they do not have a written form, and therefore no literature, and are spoken by very few people.

In many cases, including in the case of the language spoken in SM's hometown, they diverge from standard Italian more than Spanish does. Someone speaking Spanish could understand quite a bit of what was said in Italian and could be understood by Italians when speaking Spanish, whereas SM's grandmother, who had not gone to school and spoke only the dialect, would have had almost as much trouble communicating when visiting Florence or Milan as she would have had in Madrid or Paris.

Each town in SM's region has its own distinct language, unique in pronunciation, intonation, and to a lesser extent in terminology, even towns only a few kilometers apart. His hometown,

Petrella Tifernina, is no more than five to ten miles or so away from neighboring towns, Montagano, Lucito, Castellino sul Biferno. Their agricultural fields abut and intermingle with Petrella's at the edges of their respective terrains. Townsfolk can hear each other's church bells, and even each others' singing (and cussing) when the wind is right. And yet their respective dialects are far more distinct than, say, Brooklynese is from Texan. They can understand (and mimic) each other, but as soon as someone utters a phrase, their provenance is obvious to one and all.

I point all this out to correct my previous corrections. The whole truth is that my bearer's name (and my original identity) is not actually *Sante*. That is only the Italian version—the translation, as it were—of his real name as it was pronounced in his town's language: *Sandə* (with *a* as in *car* and the upside-down *e*, ə, standing for a schwa, the neutral vowel pronounced "uh," like the *u* in *burn* or the *e* in *camera*). Words in his dialect end in a schwa, not one of the Italian vowels, *a, e, i, o, u*. Standard Italian, on the other hand, does not have any schwa sounds at all, neither within nor at the end of words. Therefore that sound cannot be rendered with the Italian alphabet: there is no letter or group of letters to represent it. Furthermore, the Italian consonant cluster *-nt*, as in Antonio, is pronounced *-nd* in his and many other southern dialects. So, his family and townsfolk called him either *Sandə* or the diminutive, *Senduč* (with the č as in *church*, and the unstressed *a* morphing to *e* as in *ten*), which means "little (and cute/dear) *Sandə*." In other words, that spelling you see in the byline is a stand-in or alter ego, not the original or fundamental me.

In addition to the schwa sound, non-existent in Italian, another lacuna in the Italian alphabet is the ability to transcribe the *sh* sound in front of consonants, which is common in southern dialects but does not exist in standard Italian. For example, the Italian *questo* (this) in the *Petrellese* dialect is *coshtə*, which can be written in English but not in Italian, in which the *sht* combination is not possible. In standard Italian, the *sh* sound is made only before the vowels *e* and *i* and is spelled *sc* : e.g. *scena, scimmia.*

Since dialects do not have a written form, official documents, such as birth, marriage, and death certificates, are written in standard Italian. So, what seems likely is that at some point a baby named *Sandə* had to have his name entered on a birth certificate

using the Italian alphabet. Either the parents or the clerk or the parish priest, needing to Italianize the name, chose the vowel *e* as an appropriate ending, rather than an *o*.

The influence for such a choice might have come from French, in which the final *e* of words is either silent or pronounced like a schwa. Before Italy became a unified nation in 1861 much of southern Italy had been occupied and governed for centuries by a series of French rulers: the Normans (11th century), the Angevins, and the Bourbons, whose two-century reign over the Kingdom of Naples—albeit by an Italianized or Neapolitanized branch of the family—was interrupted briefly by Napoleon's conquest and rule. So, in the Kingdom of Naples, which included most of southern Italy, it was probably common practice to follow the French example and convert the schwa ending to an *e* in written form. In Italian, however, an *e*, regardless of where it occurs in the word: at the beginning, the middle, or the end, can only be pronounced as a full vowel (open, like the *e* in *pen*, or closed, like the *a* in *take*).

But now that the French have entered the picture I'm reminded of another assault frequently made on me: Francophones—including, or especially those who know just a little French—are prone to put an accent on that *e*, turning it into *Santé*, which means "health." That's not a bad name to have: *Health*, and SM rather enjoys being addressed that way. It happens quite often, since his studies and work placed him among Francophone and Francophile colleagues and friends (he got a BA and MA in French literature and professed in French and Italian departments). If I was originally concocted in a French linguistic context, I wonder if *Santé* was my original form and the accent (and stress) dropped out when it was converted to Italian. It's possible, I suppose, but wouldn't that name be just as strange as the Italian version? I haven't run across any French people called *Health*. Still, I do wonder sometimes how SM's life might have been different if he had adopted that accent and changed me permanently to *Santé*, if people would have reacted to me and to him differently, and if he would have been a different person.

But let's get back home, to Italy and Petrella. In SM's dialect, *Sandə* has no number or gender by itself. The same word is applied to a male or female saint, or to numerous saints. The gender and number are expressed by the article used in front of the noun: *a sandə* (Italian, *la santa*, the female saint); *u sandə* (Italian, *il santo*,

the male saint); *i sandə* (Italian, both *i santi*, the male saints, and *le sante*, female saints; the dialect article *i* is both masculine and feminine). It was understood that it was masculine and singular only because applied to a male. Women with the name always used the diminutive, *Sandinə* (in Italian *Santina*, little *Santa*).

But with that *e* added at the end, in Italian the word means "female saints." It wasn't a problem as long as SM lived in the town, where it was never pronounced with the *e* at the end. The Italian rendition resurfaced only when the boy to whom I had been assigned went to school and when I had to be written down in registries and on report cards. But even then it didn't create much of a problem, because everyone continued to call him by my "native" form, *Sandə* or *Senducə*. In a sense, Italian remained a foreign language that children were learning to use only in school, in order to read and to write. It didn't intervene in their everyday lives. No one yet had a television set, and even radios were relatively rare. It was only when life took the boy out of the confines of his hometown that I, his name, became a problem and a source of confusion.

But I've raced too far ahead again. We have to go back to the starting line. The problem was not due just to my first part: that *Sante*. My second segment, *Matteo*, is an even bigger problem, at least in Italy and among people who speak Italian. That's because *Matteo* (Matthew) is a very common first name throughout Italy. As a last name, it is typically in the form of a genitive or possessive: *Mattei, Matteis*, or *Di Matteo*; the equivalent in English of Matthews, Matthewson (Matheson, Matson), or Fitzmatthew.

The reason that it has an *o* ending, rather than the genitive/possessive *i* it sports in other parts of Italy, is likely analogous to the reason for choosing an *e* ending for the first name. In dialect, the ending would again be a schwa, *Matteə*, which had to be Italianized with an Italian vowel. In this case, since there was already an *e* in the penultimate position, they must have chosen an *o* instead, to avoid *Mattee* (three syllables: *ma-te-e*, with *e* as in *ten*). So the family that inherited me ended up with *Matteo* as a last name, at least on official documents. My boy's family was the only one with that last name in Petrella. After his family left for America, the only *Matteo*s left are in the town's cemetery: the boy's homonymous grandfather, Sante Matteo, and one of the grandfather's daughters who died young.

However, my bearer later discovered that *Matteo* is a common last name elsewhere in his region of Molise: in Jelsi, also in the Province of Campobasso; and further west, in Venafro, near the borders with Lazio and Campania. It seems likely that one of his male ancestors came from one of those towns, found work or a wife in Petrella, and moved there, introducing the last name *Matteo* until SM's family emigrated in the 1950s and took the name away with them. So, in a sense, I too was a migrant, and in both directions: in and out: an immigrant, or the descendant of a name that had immigrated to Petrella from some other town in the region, and an emigrant who left Petrella for yet another destination: America.

Above I specified that the family adopted the last name "at least on official documents." That limiting qualification is necessary because in town life those "official" last names were not used. Families were known by a family's nickname, which was also passed down from generation to generation. Members of SM's paternal family were known as *i Chiochierə* (*Kyokyerə*; and I'm not sure what that originally meant; I have a vague idea that it might refer to a lump on the head, imagining that perhaps an ancestor had been bonked on the head and passed the moniker on). Members of his mother's family, whose last name was Ruscitto, were known as *i Squəcciatə* (*Skwəchahtə*; likely the Italian *scocciati*, fed up, annoyed; maybe originally someone vexed enough to give a lump on the head to someone of that other family).

So, when I served as his name during his childhood, I was either *Sandə du Chiochierə* (of the *Kyokyehrə* clan) or *Sandə du Squəcciatə*. My official or bureaucratic second part, *Matteo*, only came up in school, where the teacher addressed students by their last names, maybe as a way of starting to Italianize them by taking them out of their local onomastic context and relocating them within a national sphere, where they had to be known by their official first and last names. It served as a way to start turning them into Italian citizens and not just *Petrellesi*.

As consenquence of all this onomastic and linguistic confusion, and because *Matteo* remains a popular first name throughout Italy (for example, recent Ministers and political leaders: Matteo Renzi and Matteo Salvini), while *Sante* is very rarely found as either a first or a last name, Italians always tend to switch me around to *Matteo Sante* (Matthew Female Saints) and to address my owner

as Mr./Dr./Prof. *Sante* when being formal and using a last name, or to call him *Matteo* when they want to be friendly and on a first-name basis.

In Italy, my poor guy's documents must often be corrected. Even when he manages to persuade a clerk that *Matteo* is, in fact, the last name and *Sante* is the first, someone down the line will catch what to them is clearly a mistake and "correct" it back to the way it "should be," with *Matteo* as the obvious first name. Even Italian acquaintances who have known us (me and my bearer) for many years aren't always sure: some choosing to call him either *Sante* or *Matteo* and hoping for the best; some switching back and forth; some using both; some avoiding using the name altogether, using *caro* (dear) instead, or *carissimo* (very dear, dearest)—unlike Americans and Anglophones elsewhere, Italians can get away with such endearments used casually. Old acquaintances who once would begin their messages with "Caro Sante" will resurface after many years with a note beginning "Caro Matteo." My poor befuddled bearer eventually concluded that it was futile to try to correct people and decided to accept either name as a sign of friendship and affection. So, don't worry; feel free to call him whatever you want!

So, as you can see, as an Italian name among Italians I have sometimes been the worst of names. I feel bad for the guy, as if I'm somehow responsible. And I suppose I am. But it's not my fault, nor my responsibility. I didn't impose myself and all my complications on him. History, linguistics, and social customs did. What could or can I do about it?

If he had stayed in Italy, I likely would have been even more of a problem for him later in life in a wider Italian context. So maybe it's fortunate that he took me with him to America, because it turned out that across the ocean, among English speakers, I proved to be a boon at times: a key that opened hearts and minds, and a stepping stone to popularity and success. Americans seem to love me, both the way I look in writing and the way I sound—at least when pronounced in Italian.

Let me amend that: *many* Americans do; not all. There was that time in San Diego when SM and his wife (who wisely shunned me and kept her own maiden name) were looking to buy a house. He called and left messages. No one ever returned his calls. A friend, familiar with the ways of Californians, hypothesized that it

was because I sounded Hispanic: "Those sellers, like many white Californians, are prejudiced against Mexicans. They're afraid that if they sold their house to Mexicans, their neighbors would lynch them." Thereafter SM cast me aside and started using his wife's very "anglo" last name and substituted Sam for Sante as a first name, and suddenly, as if by magic, those subsequent messages left by "Sam Bennett" were all returned. If that doesn't show what power we names wield, what else do you need? So, he and I got a taste of what it's like to be targeted for prejudice and maltreatment simply because of one's name, or to be favored and rewarded for a different name, even though it was really a case of "mistaken identity": mistaking an Italian name for a Hispanic one. I wonder if results would have been different, had SM explained in his message that he was Italian. Nevertheless, in addition to revealing the racial prejudice directed at Mexicans and other Latin Americans, the episode also revealed what it must have been like for Italian immigrants of previous generations, when they were the undesirables in certain neighborhoods, and it brought home what it is still like for other immigrant groups who are currently maligned and ostracized.

Now that I'm thinking along those lines, I recall that there have been other occasions when the guy stuck with me as his moniker has been branded a foreigner because of me, the way I sounded or appeared, leading people to change their behavior after I made my appearance. From what most people say, my guy doesn't have a foreign accent when he speaks English (having arrived before puberty, which for many people seems to be the point of no return for mastering a new language without an accent). Yet occasionally some people do claim to detect an accent when he speaks, but only after they've heard his name and learned that he was born abroad.

The adult SM once attended a reception held after a play and ended up chatting with a woman for quite some time about the play: the set and staging, the performances, its meaning or message. Eventually, since they were strangers, they got around to asking about each other: where they lived and worked, their families, and so on; and they exchanged names. When she heard his name, she first asked the usual question he has come to expect: "Is that Spanish?"

"No, it's Italian."

"Oh, so your ancestors were Italian?"

"Yes, and I am too. I was born and raised there."

"Oh, really?" and then, suddenly starting to enunciate all words more slowly and distinctly, accompanied by broader hand gestures: "Oh, how in-ter-est-ing! Were you able to understand the play?" and thoughtfully trying to make sure that he could understand what she was saying, rephrasing and repeating the question: "Were you able to understand . . . uhmm, COULD you [pointing to his chest] understand [putting her open hand by her head] what they said [pointing to her own mouth and opening and closing her fingers against her thumb]?"

She had somehow miraculously forgotten that she had been speaking English with my flabbergasted guy for a good quarter of an hour without ever suspecting that he might not be a native-born American. But when I was brought into the conversation, and his place of birth was revealed, she automatically attributed ignorance of English to him, a foreigner, dismissing the reality of her own experience.

A similar incident happened when he went to vote at around the same time. In Orem, Utah, where they were living at the time, voting for their district took place in a private home. He went with a friend and neighbor who knew the residence. The woman overseeing the balloting, presumably the owner of the house, chatted with both of them for several minutes. She knew the neighbor, a fellow Mormon and church member, but didn't know SM or his family (the only non-Mormon family in the neighborhood). Being a friendly neighbor, she asked SM where he lived, about his work and family: how many kids, how long they had lived there, whether they liked it, and so on: a pleasant neighborly chat. When they got around to casting their votes and she asked his name and saw it written, she turned to his friend and asked, "Oh, does he speak English?" The friend replied, "Isn't that what you've been speaking with him?" She furrowed her brow, looked at SM suspiciously out of the corner of her eye, and retorted unsurely: "Well, I just need to make sure, you know." She kept looking at him askance until he left, no longer just a friendly neighbor but an intruder.

So, okay, I guess I have been the cause of trouble for my poor namee here in the new country too, not just in the old country. Lower-key versions of the above incidents do recur fairly frequent-

ly, but often with more positive overtones. Just a few months ago, when SM again went to vote, this time in Oxford, Ohio, he gave his name and address, and the woman checking the rolls asked him the usual question: what kind of name that was. He told her, Italian, and she exclaimed, "Ah, that explains that nice accent you have!"

The woman sitting next to her, an acquaintance of SM, protested, "What accent? He doesn't have any accent."

"Oh, YES he DOES!" the other insisted in no uncertain terms. She was absolutely sure, even though all SM had uttered was his name and address. But at least she declared it to be a nice accent.

So, in a slightly different sense of *nomen est omen*, it's not what my guy says or does, nor how he says or does things, but simply his name that determines people's perception of who or what he is. Who knew that I held that kind of power, or that kind of responsibility? (Well, I guess the Romans must have known it, since they coined the phrase—but wait, since we're talking about names, should that be Latins instead of Romans? All Romans—residents of Rome—spoke Latin presumably, but were all Latin speakers throughout the vast empire called Romans? Could it have been Latin-speaking non-Romans who coined the saying? In other words, would a "Roman" of another name still hold that conceit: that *nomen est omen*? Or was it a saying and a concept that actual Romans imposed on the people they colonized? Maybe imposing the name "Roman" on all the conquered peoples, along with the conviction that *nomen est omen*, was a way to subjugate them, or incorporate them, by convincing them that their name was, in fact, their destiny and that resistance was futile. Sorry if I occasionally digress so far into these cavernous parentheses. But being myself a name, and an unusual one, I do have a vested interest in pondering such questions of nomenclature.)

By the way, to get back to our story, something similar often happens to my guy in Italy too, although I'm not to blame for it there. It's not because I sound foreign when I issue from his lips. When he converses with strangers in Italy, say on a train, nobody initially suspects that he is not Italian. What some do notice eventually, however, is that he speaks Italian without any street slang and without the usual fillers: *cioè, dunque, dico, insomma, voglio dire;* similar to *that is, I mean, like, you know.*. But even more tellingly, he speaks Italian without a regional accent. In addition to speak-

ing their native dialects, Italians also speak standard Italian with a distinct and identifiable pronunciation or accent, be it Sicilian, Ligurian, or Tuscan; Neapolitan, Roman, Milanese, or Venetian. As soon as strangers exchange a few words, each can guess what part of Italy the other is from. Since SM left his hometown and Italy as a child, when he still spoke only the dialect in daily life, he had no occasion to use and master standard Italian and acquire the pronunciation used in his region (Molise now, but when he lived there still the combined region of Abruzzo e Molise). He reacquired his Italian much later, and did so from books, in the classroom (mostly by having to teach it), from travel throughout Italy, and from exposure to the Italian national media: television, radio, movies. As a result he never developed a distinct regional accent. In fact, he sounds most out of place when speaking Italian in his home region, where his uninflected pronunciation is different from everyone else's. Linguistically he is more a foreigner there, his home, than anywhere else in Italy – unless he is speaking dialect in his hometown. But even that comes off as a bit foreign, because he speaks the dialect of the 1950s, when his family left, whereas the dialect of the town's residents has evolved and has been Italianized. He uses terms and constructions that now seem antiquated. His native linguistic community is no longer to be found anywhere.

In a sense, that lack of typical spoken fillers, of current jargon, and of a regional accent does make him somewhat alien in Italy, not completely or typically Italian, or at least unusual enough to perplex some of his listeners, accustomed to identifying a speaker's regional provenance. So, after several minutes of conversation, puzzled by his "too pure" lexicon and diction, they will ask him what part of Italy he is from: "*Scusi, ma Lei di dov'è?*" (Say, where are you from anyway?). He has been asked if he was a "*speaker,*" the term Italians use for television or radio announcers, who are trained to lose their regional accent and speak in a "neutral" Italian. When he informs them that he lives in the United States and is an "Americano" by adoption, they suddenly "notice" that he speaks Italian with an American accent; just a "slight" one, they hasten to reassure him., lest he be offended.

In other words, depending on how one looks at it, he and I don't wholly fit in either here or there, and yet belong both both there and here: Italian and American, but not fully either one:

"slightly" foreign in both contexts.

But it occurs to me that "Sante Matteo" hasn't always been his name in America either. I have morphed from place to place and from time to time. That is, I have not always been pronounced the way I'm pronounced in Italian, nor always the way I'm pronounced in the closest American approximation of Italian: *Sahn-tay Mah-ttay-oh* (in Italian the *e* doesn't have the glide at the end of the 'ay' sound; it's closer to the *e* in *less*). Over the years I have been mutilated to *Santa, Sana, Santee, Sani, Sant,* and to *Matio* (as in *patio,* with the *tt* rolled as in *better*), *Matteeoh* (with the hard *t* as in *but*), *Maddoh* (as in *meadow*). And those versions sometimes took hold because SM was complicit in accepting them by not correcting the speakers and thereby perpetuating the deformations.

On the first day of the fifth grade in Cleveland, Ohio, shortly after SM had arrived from Italy, the teacher, Mrs. Smith, looked at his name and asked, "Is that *Santa Maddeeoh*?" He just nodded, because he was too shy to correct her and because he reasoned that she was the teacher and knew better. He was in a new country where they spoke a different language, and he supposed that they had different pronunciations for names too. Who was he to protest or correct the teacher? So, all the kids in the class called him *Santa,* usually silencing the *t* and pronouncing it *Sanna,* and naturally, accompanying it with an endless list of references and jokes about Santa Claus: "Hey, *Sanna,* how's life in the North Pole? What are you going to bring me for Christmas? Is it true that your cat has Sandy Claws?"

For the rest of elementary school, he was *Sanna Maddeeoh,* and he continued to be called by that name by all those elementary school students who went on to Junior High and High School with him. Even today, when he runs into friends from elementary school that's what they call him. What is even more striking is that even in his own community of *paesani,* families who had come from the same hometown, the children, both those who had been born in America and the ones who had emigrated from Italy, also came to call him *Santa/Sanna* when speaking English with him, because they heard the American kids calling him that in school or at play. And to add continuing insult to initial injury, they too still call him that decades later, on those rare occasions when he goes back to Cleveland and runs into them.

Having long since gone back to using a more or less accurate version of his official Italian name, both professionally and socially, he finds it (as do I) particularly jarring to hear someone from his own Petrellese-American community address him with such a non-Italian rendering of his name. For some reason it makes him feel a bit like a traitor, although he's not sure why: for betraying his real name when he was a child by not sticking up for it and protecting it from such abuse; or maybe for betraying these old friends and *paesani* by adopting another way of pronouncing his name behind their back, after he left their community, and now resenting the way they mis-pronounce it, albeit through his own fault, not theirs.

In Junior High, the 'Santa Claus" jokes continued, and others were added to the repertoire. Since he now had different teachers for each subject, and he was still too bashful to correct the pronunciation they proffered, I was turned to *Santee* in one classroom, *Sandy* in another, *Sant* and *Sani* in others, and those were the names by which the students in those courses subsequently knew and addressed him: a cacophony of different appellatives as he made his way through the crowded halls. Students who were in several of his classes didn't know what to call him. *Sani* became especially popular because of a widely advertised toilet bowl cleaning product at the time: Sani-Flush: "Hey, *Sani . . . Flush*, how many bowls did you clean today?"--along with slightly and not-so-slightly more vulgar variants.

Since Collinwood, the neighborhood school he attended after elementary school, was both a Junior High and a High School, he spent six years there, from the sixth through the twelfth grade. As the years went by and his circle of acquaintances increased, and as he became better known throughout the school from serving as editor of the junior-high newspaper and later the high-school paper, and as an officer in various student clubs and in the student council, his first name became better known and a little more standardized among a majority of the student population. His friends and most other students and teachers came to call him *Sahn-tay*. But that improvement only applied to his first name. His last name continued to be pronounced *Mad-ee-oh* (rhyming with *patio*). And that was because that's the way he pronounced it himself (the traitor!), as did his parents when they gave their name in English.

When his father arrived in America, several years before the rest of the family was able to come, he had been told that that was the American way to pronounce it, and that his first name, *Nicola*, was to be "Nick." So that's the way they all learned to pronounce their last name for Americans. Cosequently even today his best friends from high school call him *Sahn-tay Mad-ee-oh*.

So, when and how did the Italian pronunciation of me come back into the picture? Not until he returned to Italy for the first time after he finished high school. Cleveland had a half-year school calendar, meaning that, depending on one's birthday, some students started school in the fall and others in the winter, which in turn meant that some graduated in January, at the end fall term, and others in June, at the end of the spring term. He graduated in January, worked for a few months, and returned to Italy for four months before starting college in the fall. Though he visited his hometown, he spent most of the time in Rome with relatives who had moved there shortly after his family had emigrated to the United States. In their homes, he continued to speak dialect with them, but also managed to re-learn some standard Italian from television, movies, and new friends he met through his cousins. Among his relatives, he was *Sandə*, as he had been in his hometown as a child and within his own family and within the Petrellese community in Cleveland, but out and about in Rome, he became *Sante Matteo*, finally pronounced correctly in Italian. But alas, that's also when Italians started to turn me around, switching first and last name.

Nevertheless, having found me again as I was meant to be, as far as pronunciation is concerned, when he returned to the States he tried to hold on to that version of me. He got a scholarship to go to Kenyon College, a small and prestigious liberal arts school in the middle of Ohio farmland. There were no other students from his high school there; no one he knew. He could start over; introduce himself with the Italian pronunciation of his name, and correct people until they pronounced it "right" (more or less). And so for four years, I became a pretty good approximation of myself: *Sante Matteo* (albeit with the American "ay" sound for *e*), and his college friends with whom he remains in contact still call him that. For them, unlike Italians, there is no confusion between first and last name, but because in college students tended to call each other by their last names (especially the first two years he attended, when

Kenyon was still all-male), he was called *Matteo* as often as *Sante* (to them, one just as unusual as the other). But at least it wasn't because of a "mistake"; all who used it knew it was his last name and used it as a sign of bonhomie.

I was the subject of another curious case of onomastic equivocation in college. Friends revealed to SM that when they saw his picture and identifying information in the "baby book," the name they gave to the freshman catalog and student manual, they assumed that the printer must have made a mistake. The listing consisted of three lines under the picture: Sante Matteo / Collinwood High School / Cleveland, Ohio. Since Kenyon was an expensive and exclusive college that attracted many students from elite eastern prep schools with WASP-ish names, they supposed that the name was really Collin Wood and that Sante Matteo was either the name of the (private) school he had attended in Cleveland, or the name of his town of residence, probably in California or another southwestern state, and Cleveland had been listed by mistake. But when they eventually learned the truth, he and they all got a chuckle out of it; no real mischief done: some stereotypes had been brought to the surface, but thus also made more perceptible and easier to address and modify.

There was another relapse: a detour along an unexpected path where I got a little lost. It happened when SM was drafted into the Army after college. The drill sergeants at the boot camp, faced with recruits and draftees coming from all over the country with names from many ethnic and national backgrounds, didn't have the patience or desire to learn how to pronounce them all accurately. At mail call, they would call out common names, such as Anderson, Jones, and Smith, but when they got to difficult foreign names, say, a Polish name they would just say the first letter of the name and the word "alphabet": e.g. "R alphabet!" to indicate that the name began with an R and was followed by a lot of letters of the alphabet that they wouldn't even try to pronounce. For other foreign-sounding names, they would approximate or minimize. For SM they started saying "Mat." And so he became *Mat* for the duration of his two-year stint. His Army buddies called him with that nickname, some knowing it came from his last name, some assuming it was a shortened from of his first name (Matthew), most not knowing or caring—he was just "Mat" and that was it.

I felt kind of cheated, spurned, especially because I think that my guy actually got a kick out of it. He found it liberating. As in college, he was in a completely new environment, among strangers who knew nothing about him and had no expectations pertaining to his character or behavior. As a soldier with the American-sounding name *Mat* he could don a different mask from his previous incarnations and try out different personalities: no longer the shy immigrant schoolboy in a new country or the self-conscious college student from a poor inner-city urban school thrust among rich, upper-class prep school graduates. Every new experience and context expanded his horizons, but being "Mat" perhaps made him feel a little more integrated as an "American" than in previous situations where his ties with Italian-related roots remained present in his everyday life.

Still, I and my manifest foreignness continued to be there, albeit marginally and mostly behind the scene, on paper if not in people's mouths, as a reminder of his own alienage (he was not yet a US citizen): his full name written on his orders, his files, his letters. Plus, contributing to his and my foreignness there was the fact he had not been naturalized and was still an Italian citizen (one didn't have to be a citizen to be drafter, just a permanent resident). And that was by choice: he wanted to remain "Italian." So the "Mat" phase, when he felt and behaved more "American" than previously or afterward, was temporary: more a hiatus than a building block for the construction of a different, more stable identity.

And that hiatus came to a rather abrupt end—to my relief, I must confess—when he was discharged from the Army to go to graduate school. With no further contact with his Army buddies, "Mat" disappeared from the stage, never to return: one soldier who did fade away.

Since the graduate program was for a PhD in Italian, I came back on stage in my full Italian glory. And I basked in hearing myself pronounced correctly, since the courses were all on Italian literature, mostly conducted in Italian, and professors and students were all Italophones. In a sense I, or at least my Italian self, never had it so good as that first fall semester at the Johns Hopkins University, because I was the only version in play. No one there knew my dialect version or any of the American mispronunciations accumulated along the way. So, at last, I, *Sante Matteo*, had the field

to myself as my bearer's lone moniker, and I reveled in the lack of confusion and the absence of rival pronunciations.

But not for long. For the Spring term, Italian graduate students went to study at the JHU villa in Florence. Back in Italy, of course, the correct pronunciation could be taken for granted. But that's when the confusion between first and last name resurfaced, and did so with a vengeance, and I was routinely converted from *Sante Matteo* to *Matteo Sante*. The confusion is augmented in Italy, because it's more common there to put the last name first, both on documents (even without the use of a comma) and in everyday use, whereas in the United States the "last name" is so called because it is, in fact, positioned last, and if placed first for alphabetical listings, it is always followed by a comma. In Italy, when SM said or wrote *Sante Matteo*, the word order did not serve to reveal as clearly which was the first name (*nome*) and which the last name (*cognome*). He always had to clarify that "Matteo" was the last name, often causing eyebrows to be raised in surprise or incredulity.

In his previous stays in Italy, he had lived in his hometown, where only the dialect was spoken and only the dialect version of his name used, or he had lived with his dialect-speaking relatives in Rome when he returned for the first time. His forays into strictly-Italian-speaking sectors of Italian society had been limited and had not involved many encounters with Italian bureaucracy. But, now on his own as an adult, in a city with no relatives or acquaintances from his hometown, he and his name were unmoored from his dialect. The choice was no longer between *Sandə* and *Sante*, but between *Sante* and *Matteo*.

But I've digressed again. I was talking about my fate in America, wasn't I? (But maybe that's to be expected, since that's precisely what I've been doing through SM's life. And perhaps my digressing is even a good thing. Continually going astray and losing my way may serve to illustrate that digression and diversity happen, that that's how life is; identities are unstable and change from one context to another. There is no permanence and no straight linear path. Maybe we shouldn't resent and fight instability and flux; just accept and make the best of it.)

Still, let's come back to America, which is still my bearer's permanent residence and where in most circumstances I have served him rather well, even if I do say so myself. After people hear me

pronounced more or less correctly, many like to repeat it: all of me, first and last name (and that's all there is of me: two words, five syllables; no middle name); and often they repeat it several times, turning it into a chant (as if enchanted?): "It sounds so musical! Like opera!" Back in college, some friends started singing me to the tune of the Cuban song "Guantanamera," which was very popular at that time, substituting *Sante Matteo* for *Guantanamera* (same number of syllables; same stress). They still break into that song when they encounter SM at college reunions.

In Collinwood Junior and High School, with more than three thousand students from various ethnic groups, but primarily Italian Americans, I think that, because I was unique and "kind of pretty," I helped my guy get elected to clubs Student Council, and become editor of the school newspaper. The fact that I sounded so Italian, plus the fact that he and I were genuine imports from the Old Country, led many students to vote for SM whether they knew him or not. They were attracted to and voted for me, the name, not the person. A slogan concocted by friends who initially urged him to run for Student Council in Junior High was: "All of the kids in Collinwood say Sante Matteo is triple good! TRIPLE good!" printed on posters, but also sung in the halls to the popular TV commercial jingle of the time for Tootsie Roll Pops: "All of the kids in the neighborhood say Tootsie Roll Pops are triple good!" He won. Or perhaps I, his name, did. I was triple good!

More recently, during an extended stay in the hospital for cancer treatments, confined to his room after a stem-cell transplant, a nurse asked SM how to pronounce his name. "Oh, how musical!" she exclaimed. Thereafter whenever she went to his room she would throw open the door and belt out "Sante Matteo" to a different tune each morning, with "O Sole Mio" a favorite. Her intention may have been to wake him up without entering his room because he was in isolation, but whether intentionally or not she must have woken up everybody else on that floor with her rousing morning serenade (is that a contradiction in terms, if *serenade* derives from Italian *sera*, evening, and means "evening song"? But since there's the word "matinade" —maybe because people don't like to sing or hear singing too early in the morning—we're stuck with that oxymoron. Confession: I like oxymorons [oxymora?] maybe because they resonate with many ambiguities inherent in me).

Others not so musically inclined express their enchantment without chants, with allusions to other facets of Italianness: "Oh, it's just so Italian! I can just smell the garlic when you say it." Even without the musical accompaniment, it's gratifying to bring a taste, or a whiff, of Italy to the world.

A university colleague liked attending gatherings with SM so that he could take him around and introduce him to others just so that he could declaim his name over and over: "Allow me to present *SANTE MATTEO*. Isn't it a name to kill for?" Hmmm, flattering perhaps, but a little perturbing! I feel bad enough for the trouble I've already caused my ingenuous bearer. I certainly wouldn't want to have homicide on my conscience.

During SM's cancer treatment another nurse had searched his name on the computer: whether to seek medical records or other information, or just because the name was so unusual, or because she heard that singing nurse belting it out for all to hear. She went to SM's room to report her amazement that he came up at the top of the search results. "Wow, you are really famous! And throughout the whole world! Books and all kinds of stuff! And both in English and in Italian! Is that really all you?" Well, yes, sort of, he acknowledged sheepishly, trying to explain that it's not because he or his accomplishments are that important and famous, but primarily because he is probably the only person in the world with me as his name: "There are no other *Sante Matteos* anywhere to compete for Google's attention; only me." But she found it hard to believe that I—a name that was, yes, a little different and unusual, but certainly didn't look or sound *that* weird and far-out—could truly be one-of-a-kind on the entire planet. She preferred to believe that she had a world-famous celebrity, and not just a unique name, on her hands. I don't think SM minded her insistence too much. And I didn't either.

So, dear reader (and you are indeed very dear if you have followed me in my onomastic ramblings this far), as you can now see, in the lives of names there are trials and tribulations just as in the lives of the people who bear us, but we—and they, thanks in part to us—also get to enjoy some triumphs along the way, depending on where that way takes us.

What then is the moral of this tale? Is it that perception is reality, since just hearing or seeing a person's name determines how

we perceive who and what that person is? Possibly. Claiming that all of reality is nothing but perception, however, may be going too far, at least when referring to the physical universe (*pace* Schrodinger and his cat). Nevertheless, in the realm of human relations, an individual's (or group's) status is defined at least in part by how that person (or group) is initially perceived. Someone's physical appearance: such as skin color, height and weight, hair and eye color, or mode of dress, or way of talking, will be perceived differently within different communities, in different settings, and at different times. Sometimes and in some places, those external or superficial characteristics serve as a sign of commonality, at other times or elsewhere as tokens of diversity. They dictate acceptance or rejection and foster notions of the superiority or inferiority of certain groups, leading to communal assumptions and institutionalized systems of discrimination and oppression: racism, sexism, bigotry, shaming, and other forms of bias and victimization.

If a name—a mere concatenation of sounds or letters, an artificial linguistic construct imposed on a body arbitrarily by society, with no inherent, natural connection to the physical body to which it is assigned—can influence how someone is perceived and mold attitudes and behavior, two apparently contradictory conclusions seem possible:

1, discrimination is so ingrained in human behavior, either biologically or culturally, that you humans will always find a way to practice it, using any characteristic, physical or cultural, that presents itself as a pretext to determine an in-group and an-out-group;

2, all discrimination is essentially baseless and silly, with no solid foundation on which to stand; just a house of cards arbitrarily constructed without logic or common sense. (Well, if you'll permit me one last parenthetical aside and let me retract that "silly": The whole process would be silly, indeed utterly absurd and ridiculous, if it weren't so dangerous and sometimes deadly.)

Take your pick. But if you want my take, based on what I've learned from my adventures as a floating signifier flitting about here and there and eliciting various responses wherever I landed: the differences you think you perceive in each other are mostly skin-deep, sometimes only name-deep, and they are figments of your indoctrination. Look deeper and they'll disappear. And remember that you heard it from a "hallowed" source: *Female Saints*.

Oh, they have taught me to translate all things –
even my very self – into some new
and old infinity of roots and boughs,
so that I wonder whether I am old
or whether I am new beneath the sky,
beneath the cielo of my long-lost land.
Josep Tusiani, "Song of the Bicentennial"

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