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In less than a month I will be back in America looking at it all with a fresh lens. When I first arrived in Italy, though, I was bent on becoming immersed in everything Italian. This seemed to me the surest way of understanding what I had come to Florence to study – the architecture. Having had at this for a month or so and remembering my own experience of emigration to the States, I realized that this was neither plausible nor correct. With growing certainty from that point on, I knew that my goal should not be to search out all that is “authentically” Italian. Instead it is to understand contemporary Italy in its complexity so that I can then meaningfully reflect on my life in the U.S.

In my classes I learn about Italian architecture and urbanism from Roman times through the nineteenth century. On visits to Siena, Venice, Verona, Genova, Torino, and other cities I find myself looking at the built environment for its planning, execution, and presence, as well as recalling facts on its origin and patronage, all to get a feeling for it as a backdrop for the way things were. Of course, things have not been “the way they were” in centuries. It is fascinating to see the buildings and cities in roughly the same state in which they first appeared but adapted to their new roles and relationships.

The grand vaulted volumes of Santa Maria Novella reverberate not with liturgical choirs but with chattering tourists. On the waterfront of Columbus’s hometown Arabs perform some semblance of Native American music dressed in a mix of Iroquois, Navajo, and Sioux clothing. While giant LCD screens hang clumsily on the juncture of the Uffizi and Loggia dei Lanzi, the common Italian motorist pierces the ancient Tuscan countryside via some of Europe’s most ambitious tunnels and bridges. The sleepy neighborhood where I had my computer fixed has a higher density of microelectronics- and IT-related services than the Viale from Piazza Liberta to Piazza Beccaria. Venice’s customs house – now fitted for art display – shows off its intensely spalled and eroded masonry as a sculptural curiosity. After gripping with the soles of my shoes the paving ridged for horses’ hooves at the gate to Monteriggione I turn into the once-agrarian outpost town’s backyards to find only luxury cars. Recalling the Bandar-logs scaling their inherited Gupta ruins in *The Jungle Book*, contemporary Italy takes its famed past and its complex present, then edits, splices, and realigns the two to project into the future a collaged existence. One rich with irony, reinvention, reinterpretation, a uniquely Italian version of progress, and a touch of the absurd. In this way Italy has revealed itself to me as wonderfully constellatory. It has revealed itself through its disconnects and apparent misalignments.

Certainly, things here are rarely what they seem. Coming from the States I expected legibility, repetition, simple order, predictable cause and effect. Italy promised me all of that, then changed its mind, forgot to tell me, went on its midday break, and came back with something completely different, though infinitely more interesting than what I asked for, pretending the whole while that I was insane. Now, anticipating my return, I remember things back home that always puzzled me and things that I imagined other cultures make more sense of. The lessons learned in Italy now make me think twice before determining for sure the qualities of a piece of architecture, a city, an organization,

or a cultural practice. Even if the most successful parts of Italy are best left here, I will know that this place has taught me to see my surroundings as a complex web of functions and events. Most of all – as with the historical tours – it is not about tracing the straight line from A to B, but rather about seeing how all the other letters manage to jam themselves in between, as well as the stories they spell out.