

# The Traveling Self: Writing Autobiography in Italy and Florence

COURSE DESIGNATOR FLOR 3xxx

Language of Instruction English

NUMBER OF CREDITS 3

Contact Hours 45

*"I did not then represent to myself towns, landscapes, monuments, as pictures more or less attractive, cut out here and there of a substance that was common to them all, but looked on each of them as on an unknown thing, essentially different from all the rest, a thing for which my soul thirsted and which it would benefit from knowing."*

(Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way. In Search of Lost Time. Volume 1*)

*"What I write about myself is never the last word: the more 'sincere' I am, the more interpretable I am"*

(R. Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. R. Howard, McMillan, London 1977)

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Travel experience in Italy has been for centuries an inspirational path for writers, novelists and journalists from all over the world. The huge history and the most significant places in this relevant European country - connected both to the Northern cultures and at the crossroads with the Mediterranean ones - has prompted new narrative strategies, peculiar fictional characters, innovative plots. Authors have been travelling the country by different means of transportation - carriages, trains, but also on foot - that have had an influence on their perspectives. They have walked into churches, squares, gardens and museums, to explore a flourishing collection of symbols and values from the past and foresee the complexity of the future of Western civilization. They have tasted delicious and repellent flavors in Italian markets, shops and restaurants, and discussed Italian society and its issues. They have changed their personal mindsets, exploring new maps of their own cultural identity.

Traveling abroad has always been, in fact, an experience of enrichment, enhancement and transformation of a traveler's identity and intimate self. Starting from this assumption, **this Creative Writing course will use the narrative strategies offered by modern and contemporary autobiography to draw inspiration from** the students' Italian and European travel experience. At the same time a 'classic' field in literature and a flourishing contemporary trend, the genre of autobiography defies categories and allows to experiment with innovative forms - from diary to travelogue, from literary nonfiction to the so-called "autofiction" – that are also currently evolving under the influence of the social networks and the possibilities of augmented experience offered by the Web.

## INSTRUCTOR

Alessandro Raveggi - [info@alessandroraveggi.com](mailto:info@alessandroraveggi.com)

## COURSE OBJECTIVES / LEARNING OUTCOMES

The course trains students:

- **to enhance their own experiences of travel in Italy**, using several writing assignments related to both specific readings - shorts stories, articles, excerpts, all included in a single course reader - walking tours, site visits and encounters with prominent authors in Florence;
- **To reflect and experiment on the role of autobiography** as a macro-genre that includes both fiction, nonfiction, memoir, travelogues, and its distinct narrative strategies (monologue, dialogue, enumeration, character construction, etc.)

- **To revise** in different steps, under the supervision of the instructor and in groups, not only the assignments but also a final work to be submitted at the end of the semester as a significant result of the Florentine experience.
- **To practice and strengthen their own writing skills** in view of a large range of academic and professional applications.
- **To work individually** on a specific Italian writing task, while benefiting from **class discussion, group work** and the constant **mentoring** and editing on the part of the Instructor.

## METHODOLOGY

Students in this class, following a program supported by readings by English, European and Italian authors and by class discussion and writing workshops, will especially benefit from the setting provided by the city of Florence. Through site visits and walking tours, the instructor will guide students to reflect on the many experiences offered by the city itself, analyzing the virtues and the contradictions of the famous Renaissance town, nowadays a complex tourist destination that faces new environmental issues related to globalization. They will also meet with prominent authors of the contemporary Florentine literary scene to discuss relevant topics for the course program.

## COURSE PREREQUISITES

There are no prerequisites for the course.

## REQUIRED READING/MATERIALS

- W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (excerpts)
- M. Cartarescu, from *Blinding* (excerpts)
- D. F. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (excerpts)
- M. Benedetti, *The Truce* (excerpts)
- A. Ernaux, *The Years* (excerpts)
- E. Carrère, *Limonov* (excerpts)
- Stendhal, *Rome, Naples and Florence* (excerpts)
- M. Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (excerpts)
- T. Landolfi, "A Dark Shadow"
- I. Calvino, from *Collection of sand* (excerpts)
- C. Levi, "Rainbow Market"
- I. Calvino, "The cheese museum"
- G. Stein, *Tender Buttons* (excerpts)
- R. Walser, "The Walk" (excerpts)
- M. Ortese, "The Tree"
- I. Calvino, "Mushrooms in the City"
- C. Noteboom, *Tumbas* (excerpts)
- M. Lowry, "Strange comfort afforded by the profession"
- J. Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (excerpts)
- J. London, "Hoboes that pass in the night"
- D. Del Giudice, "Reaching dew point"
- M. Enard, *Zone* (excerpts)
- W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo* (excerpts)
- M. Proust, "Place-Names: The Name", from *Swann's Way. In Search of Lost Time. Volume I*
- A. Tabucchi, "Voices Borne by Something, Impossible to Say What"
- A. Savinio, "Noontide at Anacapri"
- A. Fernández Mallo, "Turin Stroll"

## GRADING

### CRITERIA FOR GRADING AND GRADING STANDARDS

Grading Rubric		
A	93-100	Achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements.
A-	90-92	Achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements.
B+	87-89	
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect.
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements.
D	60-66	
F	0-59	

### Grade breakdown

Assignment #1	10%
Assignment #2	10%
Assignment #3	10%
<b>Midterm portfolio (including revisions)</b>	<b>15%</b>
Assignment #4	10%
Assignment #5	10%
<b>Final Portfolio (including revisions)</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Final Work</b>	<b>15%</b>
Participation	10%

**Participation - 10%**

**Assignment #1 - 10% - FLORENTINE SCENES: Churches and Squares** – Length: from 500 to 700 words

**Assignment #2 - 10% - EXPLORING MUSEUMS AND ART COLLECTIONS** - Length: from 500 to 700 words

**Assignment #3 - 10% - AT THE MARKET** - Length: from 500 to 700 words

**Midterm Portfolio - 15%**

- It will include extended revisions of the previous writing assignments 1-2-3

**Assignment #4 - 10% - NATURE WRITING** - Length: from 500 to 700 words

**Assignment #5 - 10% - SICILY TOUR ASSIGNMENT** - Length: from 500 to 700 words

**Final Portfolio - 15%**

- It will include extended revisions of the previous writing assignments (including 4 and 5)

**Final Work 15% - Length: up to 1500 words**

- Before the Midterm review, the student will discuss with the Instructor their ideas for a final work, related to the topics and the techniques reviewed in class. These are the options:
  - *Travelogue* about a weekend in an Italian/Tuscan city (excluding Florence)
  - *Monologue* of a foreigner in a specific Italian/Florentine context
  - *Dialogue* between two foreigners in Florence / in Italy
  - *Short story or longform nonfiction* about Food/Society/Art in Italy
  - *Auto-fictional short story* in Italy / about an Italian character

**CLASS SCHEDULE**

**WEEK 1 – INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE**

**Writing workshop:** Your first days in Italy

Focus: Writing about personal travel experiences, writing about Italy. An Introduction

Opening lines (introductory workshop)

**WEEK 2 – AUTOBIOGRAPHY / 1 – Most relevant techniques in Fiction and Non-fiction**

**Writing workshop:** Writing about yourself

Focus: Monologue, dialogue, writing about walks, space description, travel essay with autobiography

**Readings:**

- W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (excerpts)
- M. Cartarescu, from *Blinding* (excerpts)
- D. F. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (excerpts)

### WEEK 3 – AUTOBIOGRAPHY / 2 – New authors and examples - Autofiction

**Writing workshop:** Diaries and memoirs

Focus: Character construction in a diary/memoir, fictional portraits, the art of biography

**Readings:**

- M. Benedetti, *The Truce* (excerpts)
- A. Ernaux, *The Years* (excerpts)
- E. Carrère, *Limonov* (excerpts)

### WEEK 4 – FLORENTINE SCENES: Churches and Squares

**Walking Tour #1: A Walk from Santa Croce to Piazza Santo Spirito**

**Writing workshop:** In class, students will start working on their writing assignment, after a 1 hr walking tour through the most relevant squares and churches in Florence, and a previous discussion on the readings (conducted both during the visit and in class).

Focus: Self-awareness in the city, the description and variation of feelings

**Readings:**

- Stendhal, *Rome, Naples and Florence* (excerpts)
- M. Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (excerpts)
- T. Landolfi, "A Dark Shadow"

### WEEK 5 – EXPLORING MUSEUMS AND ART COLLECTIONS

**Walking Tour #2: Site Visit to Villa La Pietra – Harold Acton Collection**

**Writing workshop:** In class, students will start working on their writing assignment, after a 1 hr tour inside the Harold Acton Collection in Florence, and a previous class discussion on the readings.

Focus: Accurate description of collections, wunderkammer, enumeration of items

**Readings:**

- I. Calvino, from *Collection of sand* (excerpts)

ASSIGNMENT #1 due – Florentine Scenes

### WEEK 6 – AT THE MARKET – Tasting Florence and Italy

### Walking Tour #3: San Lorenzo Market

**Writing workshop:** In class, students will start working on their writing assignments, after a 1hr walking tour inside the historical central market of San Lorenzo in Florence, and a class discussion on the readings.

**Readings:**

- C. Levi, "Rainbow Market"
- I. Calvino, "The cheese museum"
- G. Stein, *Tender Buttons* (excerpts)

Focus: Describing taste, wandering through markets, Food nonfiction

ASSIGNMENT #2 due – Exploring museums and art collections

### WEEK 7 – MIDTERM PORTFOLIO REVIEW

**Midterm portfolio review in class**

Final Work guidelines and class discussion

ASSIGNMENT #3 due – At the Market

Midterm Portfolio due at the end of the week

### Spring Break + Sicily Tour

### WEEK 8 – NATURE WRITING in Italy

#### Walking Tour #4: Bellosguardo and Torrigiani Garden

**Writing workshop:** In class, students will start working on their writing assignments, after a 1 hr walking tour on the hills of Bellosguardo and at the Torrigiani Garden in Florence, and a class discussion on the readings.

**Readings:**

- R. Walser, "The Walk" (excerpts)
- M. Ortese, "The Tree"
- I. Calvino, "Mushrooms in the City"

Focus: Eco-Environmental Fiction/nonfiction, writing about nature, walks, gardens, etc.

ASSIGNMENT #4 due - Sicily Tour Assignment

### WEEK 9 – WRITING ABOUT LOSS, DEATH, SPIRITUALITY

### Walking Tour #5: Porte Sante Cemetery in Florence

**Writing workshop:** In class, students will start working on their writing assignments, after a 1hr walking tour and site visit at the famous Porte Sante Cemetery at San Miniato Church, and a class discussion on the readings.

**Readings:**

- C. Noteboom, *Tumbas* (excerpts)
- M. Lowry, "Strange comfort afforded by the profession"
- J. Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (excerpts)

Focus: Biography and the cemetery, writing about loss, grief, death, writing about community and cultures

**Encounter (at the cemetery) with *Games of Thrones* translator and essayist EDOARDO RIALTI  
"Writing about your (inner) demons"**

ASSIGNMENT #5 due - Nature writing

### WEEK 10 – OTHER TRAVEL EXPERIENCES IN ITALY: Means of Transportation

**Readings:**

- J. London, "Hoboes that pass in the night"
- D. Del Giudice, "Reaching dew point"
- M. Enard, *Zone* (excerpts)
- W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo* (excerpts)

Focus: Writing (and recap) about transit, movement, travel experience itself, describing means of transportation (trains, cars, airplanes)

### WEEK 11- OTHER MAPS: Italian (Imagined) Cities and the Web

**Readings:**

- M. Proust, "Place-Names: The Name", from *Swann's Way. In Search of Lost Time. Volume I*
- A. Tabucchi, "Voices Borne by Something, Impossible to Say What"
- A. Savinio, "Noontide at Anacapri"
- A. Fernández Mallo, "Turin Stroll"

Focus: Writing the urban space, mapping other Italian cities, the use of web experience as writing experience. Recapitulation of the previous features and technique, related to travel experience in autobiography

**Encounter (in class) with Florentine contemporary author and journalist VANNI SANTONI  
"Writing about the self in the Italian cities"**

### WEEK 12 – FINAL PORTFOLIO REVIEW - FINAL WORKSHOP

Students will receive individual feedback on their final portfolios (including all the assignments) and a revision of their final work, in class.

## WEEK 13

- **Final portfolio due**
- **Final work project presentation by the students**
- **Final discussion**

### ATTENDANCE POLICY

Regular attendance and punctuality are mandatory in order to earn full marks. The final grade will take into consideration preparation required for class (i.e. readings) and participation in class discussions. If you miss more than **one class** without evidence of medical need, **your final grade for the class will be dropped by a third of a letter grade for each extra absence** (check the *Academic Handbook* for the attendance policy in place at the Florence Program). When missing class, it is the student's responsibility to find out what information was given in class, including any announcements made.

Missed assignments: a valid doctor's certificate dated on the day of the absence is required to make up for any missed assignment (paper due, presentation due, project due, test, quiz, midterm, final, and all other graded activities). Failure to provide such evidence will automatically result in an "F"/"0" grade for the assignment. No exceptions allowed.

See the *Academic Handbook* for guidelines on providing a valid medical certificate.

### USE OF ELECTRONIC DEVICES IN CLASS

All electronic devices, including cell phones and laptops, must be turned off during class time. **Failure to comply with this policy will be factored into the participation grade for the course and may lead to disciplinary measures.**

### UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Academic integrity is essential to a positive teaching and learning environment. All students enrolled in University courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty. Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else's work as your own, can result in disciplinary action. The University Student Conduct Code defines scholastic dishonesty as follows:

#### SCHOLASTIC DISHONESTY:

Scholastic dishonesty means plagiarizing; cheating on assignments or examinations; engaging in unauthorized collaboration on academic work; taking, acquiring, or using test materials without faculty permission; submitting false or incomplete records of academic achievement; acting alone or in cooperation with another to falsify records or to obtain dishonestly grades, honors, awards, or professional endorsement; altering forging, or misusing a University academic record; or fabricating or falsifying data, research procedures, or data analysis.

Within this course, a student responsible for scholastic dishonesty can be assigned a penalty up to and including an "F" or "N" for the course. If you have any questions regarding the expectations for a specific assignment or exam, ask.

#### STUDENT CONDUCT

The University of Minnesota has specific policies concerning student conduct and student needs. This information

can be found on the Learning Abroad Center website.

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