



LEARNING ABROAD CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

The Traveling Self: Writing Autobiography in Italy & Florence

Course Details

Course Designator & Number: FLOR 3017

Number of Credits: 3

Language of Instruction: English

Contact Hours: 45

Instructor: Alessandro Raveggi (info@alessandroraveggi.com)

Course Description

"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)

Travel experience in Italy has been for centuries an inspirational path for writers, novelists, and journalists from all over the world. The deep 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, and innovative plots. Authors have been traveling the country by different means of transportation—carriages, trains, but also on foot—that have influenced their perspectives. They have walked into churches, squares, gardens, and museums to explore a flourishing collection of symbols and values from the past and to 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. It allows us to experiment with innovative forms—from diary to travelog, 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.

Course Objectives

The course trains students to:

- Enhance their own experiences of travel in Italy, using several writing assignments related to both specific readings—short stories, articles, and excerpts, all included in a single course reader—walking tours, site visits, and encounters with prominent authors in Florence
- Reflect and experiment on the role of autobiography as a macro-genre that includes both fiction, nonfiction, memoir, travelogs, and its distinct narrative strategies (monologue, dialogue, enumeration, character construction, etc.)
- 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
- Practice and strengthen their own writing skills in view of a large range of academic and professional applications
- 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.

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

Grading Rubric

| Letter Grade | Score or Percentage | Description |
|--------------|---------------------|--|
| 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 | Achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect. |
| C+ | 77–79 | |
| C | 73–76 | |
| C- | 70–72 | Achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to fully meet the course requirements. |
| D+ | 67–69 | |
| D | 60–66 | |
| F | 0–59 | Represents failure (or no credit) and signifies that the work was either (1) completed but at a level of achievement that is not worthy of credit or (2) was not completed and there was no agreement between the instructor and the student that the student would be awarded an I. |

Summary of How Grades Are Weighted

| Assignments | Percentage of Grade |
|--|---------------------|
| Participation | 10% |
| Assignment #1 | 10% |
| Assignment #2 | 10% |
| Assignment #3 | 10% |
| Midterm portfolio (including revisions) | 15% |
| Assignment #4 | 10% |
| Assignment #5 | 10% |
| Final portfolio (including revisions) | 10% |
| Final work | 15% |
| Overall grade | 100% |

Assessment Details

Participation (10%)

Assignment #1 (10%) FLORENTINE SCENES: Churches and Squares—Length: from 500 to 700 words

Assignment #2 (10%) EXPLORING MUSEUMS & 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 word

Final Portfolio (15%)

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

Final Work (15%) *Length—up to 1,500 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

Course Content

Unit 1

Introduction to the Course

- Focus: Writing about personal travel experiences, writing about Italy. An introduction.
- Writing workshop: Your first days in Italy
- Opening lines (introductory workshop)

Unit 2

Autobiography 1—Most Relevant Techniques in Fiction & Nonfiction

- Focus: Monologue, dialogue, writing about walks, space description, travel essay with autobiography
- Writing workshop: Writing about yourself
- Readings:
 - W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (excerpts)
 - M. Cartarescu, from *Blinding* (excerpts)
 - D. F. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (excerpts)

Unit 3

Autobiography 2—New Authors & Examples—Autofiction

- Focus: Character construction in a diary/memoir, fictional portraits, the art of biography
- Writing workshop: Diaries and memoirs
- Readings:
 - M. Benedetti, *The Truce* (excerpts)
 - A. Ernaux, *The Years* (excerpts)
 - E. Carrère, *Limonov* (excerpts)

Unit 4

Florentine Scenes: Churches & Squares

- Focus: Self-awareness in the city, the description and variation of feelings
- Walking tour #1: A walk from Santa Croce to Piazza Santo Spirito
- Writing workshop: In class, students will begin working on their writing assignment, after a one-hour 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).
- Readings:

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

Unit 5

Exploring Museums & Art Collections

- Focus: Accurate description of collections, wunderkammer, enumeration of items
- Walking tour #2: Site visit to Villa La Pietra—Harold Acton Collection
- Writing workshop: In class, students will begin working on their writing assignment, after a one-hour tour inside the Harold Acton Collection in Florence, and a previous class discussion on the readings.
- Readings:
 - I. Calvino, from *Collection of Sand* (excerpts)
- Assignment #1 due: Florentine Scenes

Unit 6

At the Market—Tasting Florence & Italy

- Focus: Describing taste, wandering through markets, food nonfiction
- Walking tour #3: San Lorenzo Market
- Writing workshop: In class, students will begin working on their writing assignments, after a one-hour 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)
- Assignment #2 due: Exploring Museums & Art Collections

Unit 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

Unit 8

Nature Writing in Italy

- Focus: Eco-environmental fiction/nonfiction, writing about nature, walks, gardens, etc.

- Walking tour #4: Bellosguardo and Torrigiani Garden
- Writing workshop: In class, students will begin working on their writing assignments, after a one-hour 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”
- Assignment #4 due: Sicily Tour Assignment

Unit 9

Writing About Loss, Death, Spirituality

- Focus: Biography and the cemetery, writing about loss, grief, and death, writing about community and cultures
- Walking tour #5: Porte Sante Cemetery in Florence
 - Discussion (at the cemetery) with *Games of Thrones* translator and essayist Edoardo Rialti
 - “Writing About Your (Inner) Demons”
- Writing workshop: In class, students will begin working on their writing assignments, after a one-hour 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)
- Assignment #5 due: Nature Writing

Unit 10

Other Travel Experiences in Italy: Means of Transportation

- Focus: Writing (and recap) about transit, movement, travel experience itself, describing means of transportation (trains, cars, airplanes)
- Readings:
 - J. London, “Hoboes that Pass in the Night”
 - D. Del Giudice, “Reaching Dew Point”
 - M. Enard, *Zone* (excerpts)
 - W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo* (excerpts)

Unit 11

Other Maps: Italian (Imagined) Cities & the Web

- 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
- Discussion (in class) with Florentine contemporary author and journalist Vanni Santoni
 - “Writing About the Self in the Italian Cities”
- 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”

Unit 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.

Unit 13

Final

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

Policies

Attendance Policy

Students are expected to be on time and attend all classes while abroad. Many instructors assess both attendance and participation when assigning a final course grade. Attendance alone does not guarantee a positive participation grade; the student should be prepared for class and engage in class discussion. See the on-site syllabus for specific class requirements.

University of Minnesota Policies & 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. This information can be found [on the Learning Abroad Center website](#).