

REFLECTIONS ON “JEWISH ITALY”

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When the University of Denver asked me to design a writing-intensive class for the Core Curriculum for the winter and spring quarters of 2010, I immediately turned to a long-cherished project: an overview of Jewish culture in Italy. The workshop not only enabled me to better integrate writing into my ideas and plans for the course, but also pushed me to interrogate some of my perceptions and notions about academic writing. Finally, I benefited from the workshop’s camaraderie, from its mediated forum for discussion with other faculty members about writing--a forum that rapidly revealed how writing touches upon so many other aspects of teaching and learning.

Indeed, the first obstacle I encountered as I began my planning would be words. I had opted to file my course under the “Communities and Environments” rubric. Specifically, the communities and environments that the class would address were going to be rather difficult to name. This may seem like a pedantic academic quibble--after all, haven’t I just described briefly in the previous paragraph the topic of my course? Yet, to cite a famous aphorism, Italy was a mere geographical abstraction until the 1860s when the modern nation of Italy was founded; so referring to “Italians” and “Italy” would utterly anachronistic for 19 or so of the 20 centuries I wished to cover. Even today, regional and local identities loom so large in Italy that Italians have coined the term “campanilismo” to describe their deep, fierce, and proud attachment to their birthplace, derived from “campanile” or bell tower, traditionally the tallest building of each town. One extreme example of campanilismo is the famous Palio of Siena, a horse race that expresses the traditional and heated rivalry of different *neighborhoods* of the *same town!*

And if the “environment” at its simplest in what is now Italy (note again my awkward description of that geographical abstraction!) thus resisted easy definition, how would I describe the people I wished to study? “Jews on the Italian peninsula” was awkward and ignored the presence in modern times of less religiously observant people of Jewish origins who may or may not identify as Jewish; the Hebrew term “Italkim” (“Italians”) wouldn’t be immediately intelligible to many students; and yet even if I did admit anachronisms into my terminology “Italian Jews” implied the primacy of religion for identity whereas “Jewish Italians” implied that of nationality.

I decided in the end to opt for a specious clarity over accuracy, vowing to explain to the students on the first day of class that my chosen title of “Jewish Italy” demonstrated the importance of language, and, in this case, my failure to find the correct words to describe the relationship between people and places indicated the complexity and difficulty ahead of us. *Va bene!*

Next, given the interdisciplinary nature required by the University of Denver for my class, I gathered and reviewed an array of materials. As I did so, I questioned how to join writing and these materials in ways beyond the traditional midterm and final papers. One important point I had taken away from the writing workshop was a fresh appreciation for the conventions of academic writing--to me comfortably familiar--as well as its diversity across disciplines. Thus, while collecting photos and inscriptions from the ancient Jewish catacombs underneath Rome and its environs for the first unit of the course, which begins with ancient Rome and ends with the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 CE, I asked myself how students could respond in writing to such materials using different disciplinary conventions.

Looking over the catacombs' brief, occasionally illegible inscriptions, I recalled the 19th century Italian author Ugo Foscolo, whose poem "Dei sepolcri," "On Tombs," was wrought out of epitaphs, replicating with his pen the engraver's chisel, gathering famous names as the foundation for an Italy which did not yet exist. Foscolo's melancholy imagination would be inverted by Giorgio Bassani, a twentieth-century Jewish Italian author whose masterpiece *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* opens with silent Etruscan tombs, which rather than suggest the future, loom as monuments to an inscrutable past. I will be asking students to similarly respond in a literary fashion or to take their cue from the historical materials assigned for this initial unit--a historian's essay, excerpts of Philo of Alexandria's diplomatic correspondence to the emperor Caligula regarding his anti-Jewish persecutions, and Flavius Josephus' *The Jewish War*.

I hope to combine this thematic beginning--the beginning of Jewish life in Italy--with the beginning of engaging students in academic writing. We will discuss the tombs' epitaphs as well as writings of Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus in terms of their intended audience(s). The obvious differences among these materials will, I hope, prompt students to reflect on which audience they are setting out to write for, what discipline their writing might therefore suit, and how this affects their choices as authors. Such questions parallel our discussion during the workshop of how to grade students' writing; I plan to design my grading rubric for student work concurrently with my design of their assignments.

As the course next leaps forward to the Middle Ages, I will be aiming to incorporate both in-class writing and in-class reading in this unit. My experience in the workshop and in my previous classrooms has lead me to embrace quiet time during class, to allow class (especially during two hour class periods) to have an ebb and flow, to not equate bustle to learning. I find it striking that students expect only rarely to read beyond the occasional passage while in class. We will be reading novellas featuring Jewish characters--

including a novella that was the basis for Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*--to understand how non-Jews represented and understood Jews. We will read these texts as homework and then together in class. Our in-class reading will again include images, in order to hone our critical skills by applying them to different kinds of material. We will examine together images from Debra Higgs Strickland's *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* as well as Alfred Rubens' *A History of Jewish Costume*. We will also view a Youtube.com video of the "Festa dei Giudei," the "Festival of the Jews" as celebrated in contemporary Sicily during Holy Week, online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ya1_Xzh4JIc

Proceeding chronologically, the course will next treat the Renaissance, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation by examining Jewish dancing masters and musicians in Renaissance courts as well as the notorious papal bull, "Cum nimis absurdum," that inaugurated the Roman ghetto. By now, we will be approximately halfway through the quarter; I will be assigning a midterm paper, but to encourage students to consider writing as an ongoing process, their midterm paper will be based on their previous writing. Additionally, this paper will undergo a peer review before being rewritten and turned in a second time. I will be using the peer review guidelines from the workshop; I have conducted peer review sessions before with some success. I do find that their utility is limited, but nonetheless such sessions can at the very least cull the most tangled sentences and contorted ideas from students' papers. I have usually received positive student feedback regarding peer review sessions. After the midterm paper, the students will have a more tranquil unit with a week off from writing assignments in which we will study the intertwined topics of food and the religious cycles of the Jewish calendar, in particular the Passover celebration. Our focus will be on the interaction between reading and thinking or doing--the performativity of language in ritual, the transfer of text into act in following a recipe's instructions.

At this point in the term, we will only have a handful of weeks left to cover the truly fascinating history of Italy's Jews in the 19th and

20th centuries. We will move from the temporary emancipation of Jews from Italian ghettos by Napoleonic troops to their embrace of the *Risorgimento* to their shock at the 1938 racial laws, before concluding with some more contemporary portrayals of Italian Jews. Again, to foster an appreciation for writing as both a method of learning and as a skill, rather than the means of producing the “product” demanded by the instructor, I will be charging students with more responsibility in regards to their final papers. However, to facilitate this potentially daunting process, I am following a suggestion from the writing workshop by breaking the final paper into discrete (and individually graded) steps: a proposal and a rough draft will precede the final draft.

Concluding both this course and my reflections here is Italian-Turkish director Ferzan Ozpetek’s 2003 film “Finestra di fronte,” “Facing Windows,” a film set in the Rome of today and of the 1940s. A secret epistolary romance weaves together past and present—the letters continue to speak through the years, and, by drawing together their readers, create a new story, that of the film itself. Passion, writing, and reading, it seems, are well-suited.

