

11/29/12

Essay Submission

These days are the cropped tail ends of days—they are shorter than they ever were before. It is only five as I make my way down the old road from Fiesole to Florence, but the light is already stretched out over the stonewall like white wine and water. And the stonewall has paradised itself with great lagging bunches of grapes that roll down to their tips like large purple tongues. The ripening olives, too, are purple bruises against the heather green leaves. They've rounded out on delicate necks that crane down, or rather the fat olives are too heavy for their trees and they bruise the stonewall too...

Because it would not be so difficult, I think, to acknowledge some kind of world-wide stereotypes about Italians and Italian culture and then refute them all with a simple statement about how knowing specific individuals, for instance the four members of my host family, demolishes most of these stereotypes (while perhaps affirming one or two, but only for one or two people and therefore they would simply be personality traits for individuals and not actual statements on Italian culture). No, this would not be so difficult, I imagine.

What is difficult for me is finding a way to discuss the romanticism, my relationship to the aesthetic of Italy, while not romanticizing Italy myself. And you can see, I have already failed at that. But the descriptions above are all true, and even as I write this in an Italian café off Piazza Annunciata, the owner of the café, a tall Italian with dark hair, sings along with the Italian music in a deep, fluid voice. The tables are aged and the wooden benches that surround them are splintering at

their edges. It helps that the owner also sings along to Bob Marley when he comes on—yes, that definitely helps my case.

But it is a matter of having read *A Room With A View*, if you must know. Having read that novel and others and having never been to Italy before, I think, that lead to my inability to imagine Florence as a modern city with a modern civilization living in its streets. It was very difficult for me to reconcile that reality with the romance, the possibility that Italy held for me. How was I not to expect Florence to disturb me the way Lucy Honeychurch was so disturbed when she went. And I have already been to all the same Lucy goes to in the novel, to Santa Croce, to Fiesole. And an Italian even drove me there!

But it was difficult, initially, to understand how a modern world not only lives on top of, but within the old Florence whose tower houses still jut up from the same streets that now house Wind stores and McDonalds cafes.

It is possible I began to understand this relationship on the first day I managed to get through the Piazza Duomo without bumping into a single person because my eyes were not trained on the huge structure beside me. My mouth was not agape! This is not to say that I have developed a tolerance for Florence or have become unappreciative of the aesthetics, but at some point in this semester Florence has become livable, not just observable. At some point I became one of the people who simply walks by the Duomo, or perhaps “by” is not the correct word, but rather “through.” I have become someone, who like the Florentines, lives here, who walks through a space, within a space that for so many others is merely a place to look at but not to be a part of. If anything this experience, this new relationship to the space

that has somehow dismantled all of my romantic ideas of Florence, has only made me appreciate Florence all the more.

Before living in Italy for three and a half months, Florence was an emblem of the Renaissance, free of the muck and pollution that exists in the world today, free of the politics and policies that make me distrust my own country. But after only a month or so my dinner table discussions had turned to ones in broken Italian, broken English, of American and Italian politics and politicians. Fraud and deregulation, pollution, exploitation. Italy could not remain as merely a pristine beacon of art and history for me. But I would not trade those conversations for the world. I've loved following the democratic primaries with my host family, loved listening to them mock their candidates the way we do in the States. It is invaluable to me that living in Italy has burst the romantic bubble I placed it in before coming here because by doing so, Italy has become real to me. That must sound silly. What I mean is, in a sense Italy has become human for me. And that is all I could really ask for from an experience like this—because dehumanization plagues the entire globe as a catalyst for war and inequality, and I believe that the opportunity for study abroad is pertinent, especially now in our current global state, because it challenges this rhetoric of dehumanization.

But like I said before, I am not immune to aesthetics of Italy that to me seem real and true. There are times still, when walking, that I catch a glimpse of a skinny medieval street and maybe it is the late in the day and the light has dyed even the trees orange, or maybe it is mid-day and raining—but I am happy to see the ways in which Florence is a hybrid of its past and its present, happy for how the city has not

abandoned its past, but incorporated it, and there in those alleys I can still find the beauty that makes a person love her city despite all the muck of the world.