

Writing El Camino de Santiago: Writing on the Collective Experience

In Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron", he challenges the poet and writer to write about the human condition with honesty and awareness instead of the narrow obsession with the psyche and the individual mind. Similarly, the literature devoted to the ancient pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela focuses mostly on the individual journey rather than the communal and social experience. The journey to Santiago in Northern Spain, commonly called El Camino de Santiago, has been the subject of many creative works. It has most commonly been explored in literature through personal memoirs. This work focuses on the individual path—the pilgrimage as a journey for one in a period of questioning or life changes—but rarely focuses on the rich communal bond between pilgrims. Though the individual experience is undoubtedly poignant, the Camino is also a journey where strangers and foreigners become companions and confidantes. This is one of the most vivid and relevant parts of the pilgrimage, but it has not been fully explored in literature. This creative project will add a portrait of that exceptional communal bond to the Camino literature on the personal pilgrimage. Using the experience of the Camino along with academic and artistic research, I will create a collection of original poems for an Independent Study/399 in the English Major in Creative Writing. This creative project on the pilgrimage will then be submitted for honors in the English Major in Creative Writing.

The Road to Santiago has drawn pilgrims to the relics of St. James, said to lie in the Cathedral at Santiago, since before the twelfth century. This journey is one of the most popular pilgrimages in the world, next to pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mecca. As it has since its beginning, this ancient ritual unifies people of varying beliefs, cultures, and social classes in a "communitas" that defines the Way of St. James. When pilgrims finally reach their destination, they line up to place their hand on a stone pillar, the Tree of Jesse, at the Cathedral. So many have placed their hands on the pillar that an embedded hand print, more than an inch deep, lies in the stone. As Kerry Egan writes in her memoir, "Fumbling", "The handprint was not carved by the artist. It was created by millions of hands clutching that pillar as they enter the cathedral, ending their pilgrimage."

Poetry has much to contribute to the Camino because poetry must, as Auden says, convey and embrace the collective human experience. The final goal of this project is to create a body of poetry that will stem from the idea of the "found poem"; a form in which a poet assembles text not originally intended as poetry. A "found poem" on the Camino could include snippets from newspaper articles, something written in graffiti on a wall, a message carved into stone, or the lyrics of a song sung on the roads. "Found" writing will give authenticity and honesty to my portrayal of the communal pilgrimage. These "found" pieces will act as raw materials and I will add expression and meaning to them through my original writing. The end result will be a tapestry of sounds, signs, voices, and sights: a living testimony to the diversity of the Roads to Santiago.

This project will ask questions on the remarkable collective experience of the Camino and how it can be expressed in art. How does the experience of a pilgrimage create the sense of community that so many pilgrims describe? How can one reflect or pay homage to this "communitas" in an art form? What kind of poetry is the best vehicle for the contemporary experience of the Camino? How well does the poetry that Auden describes work to capture that communal experience? How can writers explore and interpret the collective experience of the Camino as well as the personal journey? What can writing about that communal bond contribute to the pilgrims and to the modern world? What kind of relevance does the "communitas" of the pilgrimage have in our current climate and in the historical context of the journey?

I will spend four weeks learning about the pilgrimage in hopes of understanding the historical, social, and political contexts it has endured. This time will also be spent reading current writing in many genres and exploring other creative projects on the Camino, including music, art, and journalism. This research will include everything from old guidebooks, such as

“The Pilgrim Route to Compostela” by Robertson McCarta, to memoirs like Egan’s “Fumbling: A Pilgrimage Tale of Love, Grief, and Spiritual Renewal on the Camino de Santiago” to poems by Federico Garcia Lorca and Rosalia de Castro. My historical research will help me gain a greater understanding of the creative work that already exists about this pilgrimage. I will then spend three weeks walking the Camino along the French Route, beginning in Pamplona. As a pilgrim I will experience and absorb the kind of “found” writing I have described: songs, notes, letters, graffiti, and posters. I will record all of this in a journal, along with my own record of day-to-day events. On returning home I will spend a week combining my prior research and understanding with my experience of the Camino to prepare myself for the intensive writing of the Independent Study/ 399 that I will begin in the fall, granted that I am accepted to this program this spring. The work created in this Independent study, sprung from my research on the Camino, will then be submitted for departmental honors.

I studied Spanish for three years in high school and I am currently taking Spanish lessons with a tutor to review and improve my Spanish language skills. I studied Italian, a very similar language, intensively last summer through a study abroad program. As a double major in Music and the English Major in Creative Writing, I have taken literature and writing classes, including Reading and Writing Poetry, Reading and Writing Fiction, Style in Literature, and Theory and Practice of Poetry. I have attached poems from my coursework for the committee to review. Also, I traveled throughout Italy when I studied abroad last summer, so I am aware of the many precautions necessary when traveling in Europe. As part of my initial research I will read guide books and pilgrim accounts to help me plan a detailed itinerary that I can execute successfully once I am abroad.

In an essay in his book “Monster”, Brian Bouldrey writes that “Of all the pilgrims I met on the road to Santiago—the quack Italian bone doctor, the Madrid bullfighters, the Frenchwoman who carried all of her things in two shopping bags, the Brazilian pilot—the one who haunted me the most was the cross-eyed Gypsy, alone, walking against the flow.” There are many people who make this journey, and the poetry of this project will expand upon and dedicate itself to that colorful diversity that Bouldrey describes. The literature of the Camino de Santiago must reflect and praise this unique communal aspect; that strangers become family to walk the road together.