

“You tell lies sometimes too, don’t you, Ryszard?”

- Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Ryszard Kapuscinski

This is a course involving quite a lot of reading, and a fair amount of your own writing; it is neither exactly a workshop nor quite a seminar but something I’m learning to call a “studio class”. As such, it will demand an unusual degree of thinking and participation from you. I hope we will arrive at an ideal balance between reading, writing, and speaking. Don’t stay if you don’t like reading, writing, thinking aloud, and listening to others.

I have it in mind that you will produce reading response papers on most of the books (1 page is enough) and three major pieces of writing for the class (perhaps 3, 5 and 5 pages respectively, minimum): something about a person, something about a place, and something on a subject that involves some research (ideally going beyond Wikipedia). If any of you – as has been the case in these classes once or twice before – happen to be engaged on some project of your own that you would like to advance instead of one or all three, talk to me about it, I’ll be sympathetic to your ideas.

We will begin with 3 “portraits” that I will bring in: of John Berryman by Saul Bellow, of Randall Jarrell by Robert Lowell, and of Rainer Werner Fassbinder by Wim Wenders (that makes two poets and one film director). I want you to get your feet wet by writing a portrait of someone you know personally – not of yourself, and not of anyone in the class. (My three examples happen to be elegiac reminiscences of celebrated individuals – yours don’t have to be/ are unlikely to be.)

All written work is to be presented on paper, and with enough copies to go around (and two for me, so that I can keep one); the magic number is 17; say, 18 for luck. Not everything will be workshopped, but I will always be happy to read anything you write.

My way in might have been science writing, sports, autobiography, any number of things. I’ve ended up going for history with a little added geography: an engaging mix of politics, travel, and, now, memoir. I propose that we read seven books: six translations, and one in (apparently Russian-influenced) English. The cultural locus of the authors is more or less Eastern Europe, but the chosen books nevertheless manage to cover 100 years and 4 continents. Obviously, the matter of content will be distracting or beguiling. But you should try to read in a critical/ appraising way: see how a topic is identified and isolated; how a tone is established; what approach is taken; what form is found; is the authority personal or impersonal; how the totality of a book stacks up.

I propose to read in order: Kapuscinski, Roth, Stasiuk, Brodsky, Chatwin, Handke and Ernaux, ca. two weeks on each book. There is a lot of reading, and you should always come prepared to class. Any chance you have, any time you have, just read. Read ahead if you can. (The holiday week and the week I will be away, most obviously.) A counsel of perfection would be to have read all the books once through, by, say, the middle of September. Read around the subject, too, read more from the authors: it's all good, as someone says.

For me, the reading response papers are a wonderful way to find out that (and how and what) you are thinking. Occasionally, I will ask a student to read his/ her paper aloud in class. I see them as an aid to discussion, not something to be discussed in themselves. Most times we move onto a new book, you will be writing one of these little papers. One copy only, for me, which I will mark up and return to you.

Learning is much more important than grading. (For what it's worth, it'll be the usual: attendance, participation, quality of written and spoken work.) Please don't insult me or your classmates by being absent without leave (and this includes fooling around with your smartphones). The motto is BE HERE NOW.

I look to you to bring energy, imagination, commitment, and discipline to the class. It's a huge, lawless, and quickly expanding field. I'd be very surprised if you've come across any of the books before. They're all different, all wonderful, all held together by some idea of what it is to have lived through a certain experience, a certain historical era, a certain place. There are so many ways in which life is not at all to do with choosing. But this course should, if it works, allow you better to cope with – and more effectively to observe and understand – whatever lies before you.

Here is a sketch of how I see the semester going. Approximately so:

21 August: Introductions, syllabus, first materials

28 August: Kapuscinski (first part only of Another Day of Life)

4 September: no class – holiday

11 September: Roth

18 September: no class, I'm away

25 September: Roth

2 October: Stasiuk

9 October: Stasiuk

16 October: Brodsky

23 October: Brodsky

30 October: Chatwin

6 November: Chatwin
13 November: Handke
20 November: Handke/ Ernaux
27 November: Ernaux

4 December: Conclusions/ reprises

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Office hours, Tuesdays 1-3 pm, or by appointment

A list of the books:

Ryszard Kapuscinski: Another Day of Life
Joseph Roth: Hotel Years
Andrzej Stasiuk: Fado
Bruce Chatwin: In Patagonia
Joseph Brodsky: Watermark
Peter Handke: Sorrow Beyond Dreams
Annie Ernaux: A Woman's Story

M.H.