



# MUSE

*The official newsletter of the Humanities Division  
Brandeis University*



## Message from the Head of the Division

Dear Friends of the Humanities,

I concluded my Brandeis teaching career in the spring of 2020 with my signature course, CLAS 150B, Pompeii: Life in the Shadow of Vesuvius, just when Covid-19 was erupting into a full-scale pandemic and everything was going online. In that dark season of last April as I was concluding the Pompeii course, I found some reassurance in the Romans' response to their own natural calamity of 79 CE: their town, Pompeii, as many of you know, was overwhelmed, buried, and more or less forgotten after Mount Vesuvius unleashed its destruction, leaving the iconic site to become an archaeological laboratory for Roman daily life many centuries afterwards.

Pompeii's regional neighbors, however, from Sorrento to Stabiae, Naples itself, and the major harbor city of Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli)—also greatly damaged by the eruption of 79 CE—picked themselves up and carried on for centuries (to the present day), with remarkable energy and prosperity.

My point here is that sometimes we have to travel far away and even long ago to put perspective on our present concerns and troubles. Our Study Abroad programs have contributed to giving our students such perspective, and one of the sad casualties of the Covid-19 disaster has been the closing down of such programs. For our final issue of MUSE for this fall semester, Ethan Seidenberg '21, undergraduate major in Creative Writing and Computer Science with a minor in German Studies and the UDR for the German Studies program, tells us about his experience last spring on Study Abroad in Edinburgh, Scotland, how his time there was cut short (travel plans/ travel bans), and what it all meant to him as he "returned home" to Brandeis, not unlike Odysseus returning to his home on Ithaca after his many challenges and struggles in the wider world so long ago.

All best wishes to you all for happy holidays and a brighter 2021 ahead.

Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow  
Head of the Division of the Humanities  
The Kevy and Hortense Kaiserman Endowed Chair in the Humanities  
Professor of Classical Studies  
aoko@brandeis.edu

# An Unexpected Homecoming: A Story from a (Premature) Study Abroad Returnee

## Ethan Seidenberg

Nine months ago, I was called back to the United States from Scotland, yet the memories of my time there still seem fresh as ever. Sometimes when I sit in my apartment in Waltham, I distinctly recall my small single dorm room in one of the University of Edinburgh's residence halls and think on how things have changed. A crystal-clear memory of one of the many days I walked Edinburgh's streets will flash across my mind like a vivid picture. I was exploring the Royal Mile or Victoria Street, dining at pubs and enjoying sticky toffee pudding, curiously peering into shops I found interesting...

But along with those happy memories of my time in Scotland, I also recall that fateful day, March 12, 2020, when I received my notice telling me I had to leave. The moment I saw just the subject line: "URGENT CLOSURE NOTICE," told me everything I needed to know. I had to go home.

I read the e-mail in an utterly numb silence sitting like a machine processing everything. My first thought: Guess I need to return the tuxedo I rented for that black tie party tonight...On second thought: Oh, and I should probably call my parents and start packing. Clearly, I had my priorities in order.

In the back of my mind, I think I knew the closure of my study abroad program was coming. By mid-March there were already a small number of COVID-19 cases in Scotland, the United States had already restricted travel from the rest of Europe, and the situation was quickly getting worse. Many institutions by that point had closed down. If I weren't called back home, then I figured the University of Edinburgh would eventually adopt similar measures of moving to online learning, which they soon did after I returned to the USA. Ironically, a strike at the University of Edinburgh forced the same hand.

Even so, I knew once I received my notice to return home that surely many other students would face a similar fate. After a very early morning flight and a couple layovers, I was back in the United States the next day. I thought I'd be mourning the loss of my study abroad experience more and bemoaning how much I miss it, but strangely enough, I never did...back then at least. Little did I know that all would come later...And by later, I mean right about now.

No, I'm not spontaneously bursting into temper tantrums about not being in Scotland, thankfully. Fortunately, I never felt nor do I feel any sort of bitterness about leaving. Strangely enough, I feel no regrets. Even though my time in Scotland was cut short, I take solace in knowing I tried my best to explore everything my study abroad opportunity had to offer. I explored Edinburgh from its historic landmarks to its diamonds in the rough side streets. I took a couple of excursions to Northern England, and I even traveled to Ireland and Iceland.

Even in this limited experience, I was able to explore like never before. Not just literally in terms of seeing what Scotland much less other parts of Europe had to offer, but also in terms of my own identity and what the concept of home meant to me. While abroad, I could take a chance at exploring things traditionally beyond my comfort zone. I could enroll in classes or clubs not offered at

Brandeis, explore historic landmarks, witness conversations discussing the logistics of drinking alcohol, and rave about the Eurovision Song Contest without it being weird. (These last two things did happen, by the way.)

Being away from what I considered to be home also taught me a great deal of just what that concept means. I feel that home can certainly be where you were born or raised, but I also feel it can be so much more than that. Home can be in the community of your university, your circle of friends, your daily routine. Home can be in a club you go to every week, whether in your home country or abroad. Home doesn't even need to be a place you've lived in for long. They say, "home is where the heart is," and Scotland has certainly taken a piece of mine. Because above all, home is a place that you love, and where you can be yourself freely. Above all: home is acceptance.

Although my study abroad experience in Edinburgh, Scotland, was cut short, I can very easily accept its end. I have no regrets. If anything, I am immensely grateful for the time I spent there. And most importantly, I feel I explored everything I could to the best of my ability to make Scotland my home, if a temporary one.