

Nicholas Boyle

Life on the Fault Line



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When I arrived in Berlin, my principal hope was that nothing would happen, and the hope, I am glad to say, was largely fulfilled. A year without telephone-borne crises, meetings, and storms in the academic teacup — not to mention the freedom from the normal anxieties of teaching and administration — held out the promise of real progress on Volume Two of my Goethe biography. And the Wissenschaftskolleg, purring softly through the year like a powerful BMW limousine, has been tuned to give you, if you want it, a quiet and easy ride. The library facilities were of particular importance for me, saving an immense amount of time in catalogue-searching and travel, and getting long-term loans of multi-volume editions and reference works, without which I could not have worked here at all. True, I had to bring with me all 143 volumes of my own Weimar Edition of Goethe's works, but I have a proposal for solving this problem for future fellows with an interest in Goethe (see below). The secretariat was enormously kind and helpful throughout the year, doing their very best to cope with the inordinate demands of a computer-illiterate whose only word-processor was a fountainpen but who nonetheless must have seemed to them to have invested in a continuous paper-feed. The regular routine of the house helps one to one's own routine, and I came to look forward to the eight o'clock breakfast meetings with other regulars and the latest news from Dr. Meyer-Kalkus on the theatrical life of Berlin.

For, of course, the year had its surprises, but they were of a kind which the Wissenschaftskolleg is probably specifically designed to supply. I had not realized that whatever the political situation may be,

Berlin is already the theatrical and operatic capital of Germany: here at least there can be no doubt that the industries of the former East are competing most effectively with those of the former West. As a Germanist and dix-huitiémiste I felt I had to limit my indulgence to productions of works either German in origin or written in the eighteenth century, and — even though this restriction still left me embarrassed for choice — it was not difficult to come to the conclusion that for my purposes the *Deutsches Theater* and the *Komische Oper* were the best theatres in Berlin. It was, of course, regrettable that throughout the entire year not a single drama of Goethe's was performed in Berlin itself (there was an intelligent production of *Faust I* in Potsdam) but then Goethe and Berlin always had a difficult relationship, and this disappointment was made good by the — surely unique — opportunity of seeing in consecutive weeks, Händel's *Giulio Cesare* and Graun's *Cesare e Cleopatra*, composed for the opening of the *Staatsoper* (as it now is called) in 1742. (The Graun was as lavishly produced as one comes to expect on these generously subsidized stages, and it was magnificently sung, but an Englishman may be pardoned for thinking that Händel had the better of the contest.) In other ways too being in Germany's capital in 1994-95 brought some unexpected illumination. I had last been in the city in 1981 and now found it surprisingly difficult to adjust to the absence of the Wall. It is my impression that I was not alone in this. Maybe then some general process of acclimatization also advanced a step or two during the year in which I came gradually to relax and lose the sense of unease with which I first revisited those suburbs of flaking plaster, impregnated with the smell of lignite, where one imagined a uniform behind every window. Certainly, two of the three milestones on my way were of a thoroughly public nature. The general election in the autumn of 1994 which gave an acknowledged and therefore circumscribed role to the party of East-nostalgia (whether or not it claimed to be that, that was clearly what it was) had an important stabilizing effect. The visit to the old *Stasi* offices was an act of (wholly decorous) ritual profanation — of a kind which revolutions are said to require — which demonized a period of my life in which the iron curtain seemed scarcely a metaphor and I grew up thinking that across half of Europe night reigned permanently. And the wrapping of the *Reichstag*, which I had expected to be a piece of modish humbug, became an uncanny symbol of Berlin's emergence into a post-modern future from that comfortable cold war entanglement with its past, which had been at once depressed, masochistic, and unadventurous.

Obviously only an Institute for Advanced Study situated in Berlin could provide its fellows with a life on the fault-line where two

Germanies and two historical periods (and two Europes, East and West) ride up against each other. Other benefits of my year could perhaps have been supplied elsewhere, which is not to say, they were any less important. Thanks to the connections of other fellows I met some very distinguished Goethe-experts, though it was perhaps a disappointment that I was the only Germanist fellow and only at the end of the year did I make contact with the German Seminar of the Free University. But probably the most influential feature of the Wissenschaftskolleg for my work was something that is of the very essence of the institution — its international and interdisciplinary character. One had the feeling, at some of our colloquia or special evening lectures, of enjoying a perspective on the world as an intellectual unity which might be equalled in some few places but could not be surpassed anywhere, not even in the think-tanks of wealthy governments. In learning from the historians, social and economic scientists, and philosophers, who predominated in this year, and especially from those whose field of expertise lay in the Eastern European and Arabic-speaking regions, and in reacting to them at a personal as well as an academic level, I felt emboldened — after an initial phase of demoralization at being so exclusively surrounded by so many so successful people — to try to express my sense of this unity. Encouraged particularly by some kind words of Hilary Putnam I took up again in the last month of my stay a project for a series of essays on contemporary intellectual and political issues, which has been gradually developing over the last ten years and which I hope will now soon be finished.

Academically speaking the balance of the year looks more like a report on work in progress than a list of triumphs. A large section of Volume Two of *Goethe* written, but perhaps only half of what I had hoped. A quite different project revived and a long essay for it (almost) completed. The German translation of Volume One (due to appear on Goethe's birthday, 28 August 1995, under a title worked out in discussion with Dr. Meyer-Kalkus) seen through the press. A CD-ROM version of the Weimar Edition of Goethe's works (plus various supplements), for which I was the principal editorial adviser, seen into production (due for publication in October 1995). I receive no commission on sales, but I am bound to point out that at the cost of less than a centimetre of shelf-space (and 9,000 marks) the library of the Wissenschaftskolleg will be able to provide future fellows with unlimited electronic access to every recorded written or spoken word of Germany's greatest poet.

But any balance should include the marvellously varied stimuli as well as the partial achievements. Research visits to Jena and Bad

Lauchstädt that provided local colour for Goethe-related projects for years to come. Long discussions with Ramachandra Guha on the technique of biographical writing and his introducing me both to the eccentric anthropologist Verrier Elwin and to the Malayalan writer Paul Zacharia. Salma Jayyusi's overwhelming partisanship for archaic and Andalusian Arabic poetry (Goetheans tend to succumb too readily to Persian charms). The unique privilege of hearing György and Marta Kurtág rehearse Schumann's Goethe-settings. And the chance remark from György Kurtág that convinced me I really must settle down and read *War and Peace* — though I was later further humbled to hear from Walther Killy that he re-reads it every three years. After the Wissenschaftskolleg, Cambridge will seem positively relaxing.