



## A LONG BOUT OF SOME PAINFUL ILLNESS JOHN HYMAN

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My main task at Wiko was to complete a book about colour, form, and the theory of art. I arrived, with untidy drafts of six chapters out of ten and a pile of notes, intending to finish the book by Easter and to turn to a different topic in the remaining months. Instead, the last full stop appeared on my screen at two o'clock in the morning on 31 July – the day of our final farewell lunch and the day on which I returned to the UK.

This wasn't because of a hectic schedule. I travelled to other cities to give talks in philosophy departments or at conferences, but not more than half a dozen times during the year. It was the pace at which I was able to progress. So although this hadn't been the plan, my whole year was evenly filled with work on a single, wonderfully absorbing theme, punctuated by our weekly colloquium, by cycle rides around the city, by operas and

concerts and visits to museums, and by lunches or evenings with colleagues, whom I increasingly came to think of as my friends.

I suppose this sounds idyllic. I feel a little embarrassed to admit it, but it was. George Orwell said somewhere that writing a book is like a long bout of some painful illness. This one was long, and certainly not pain-free; but it couldn't have happened in a more congenial place.

The principal reason was the co-operative spirit in Wiko itself. I felt, almost as soon as I arrived, that I was in a place where the administrative staff, the kitchen staff, the librarians, language teachers, etc., all work together to make an institution flourish and take an equal share of pride and satisfaction in a place they all sustain. Coming from an averagely dysfunctional and more than averagely hierarchical Oxford college, this was a delight. And the co-operative spirit communicated itself very easily to the Fellows. Apart from a few moderately contentious discussions – just enough to keep us on our toes – there was an almost uncanny atmosphere of intellectual fellowship, for which my academic training had left me quite unprepared.

The other characteristic of the community at Wiko I shall miss was its exceptional diversity. The highlights of the year, as I remember them, involved mathematics and music, Borges and Boulez, Cairo and Zanzibar, and more. When I think about this now, I am reminded of Wittgenstein's remark that the strength of the thread is not due to one single fibre running through its whole length, but to the overlapping of many fibres.

Because of these characteristics of the place, being at Wiko affected my work profoundly, but mainly in a way that is very hard to measure. A couple of conversations with Barbara Finlay transformed one of the chapters of my book. Coinciding with her was a marvellous stroke of luck. But even more important than this, I suspect, was the constant reminder that communicating ideas is an easier and more sociable activity than philosophers generally believe. I very much hope this is visible in my book.

Now I must say a few words about Berlin. Two things in particular impressed me. First, it is wonderfully bike-friendly. The air is cleaner than in Oxford and there are more cycle lanes than in any other city I know. The ride from Grunewald through the Tiergarten and along Unter den Linden, which I probably did more than fifty times, was as exhilarating in my last week in the city as it had been when I first arrived.

Second, the city's history in the twentieth century seems – to a visitor at least – acutely visible. Many Berliners told me and showed me that much has been erased. But there is still so much to see and to absorb, even at our sedate end of the city: Gleis 17 at Grunewald

station; piles of old crockery from the Palast der Republik on sale in a tatty antique shop on the Ku'damm; and of course the Villa Jaffé itself, whose history Eva von Kügelgen recounted to my German class.

Finally, my work filled my mind for much of the last year; but it was also the year of the US/UK conquest of Iraq. Along with every other reason I have for feeling privileged to have been at Wiko, it was a valuable experience to have such knowledgeable, diverse and perceptive witnesses as colleagues during this year.