



A LOVE LETTER
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I look back on my fellowship year at the Wissenschaftskolleg and I find that I am astonished. I am astonished that so much could have happened in such a short time; that flavors could have been so intense, encounters so significant. I marvel at the new beginnings and changes that I at least seem to have detected in myself. These words remind me of Emerson's admonishing observation: "If any of us knew what we were doing, or where we are going, then when we think we best know! We do not know whether we are busy or idle. In times when we thought ourselves indolent, we have afterwards discovered that much was accomplished, much was begun in us." So I reckon with the possibility that I am mistaken. Perhaps the source of my astonishment is a kind of tipsy intoxication, a euphoria of the sort that sets in late in the night, when neckties are loosened and the effects of wine and music and the near warmth of others are felt. Yes, I can't shake the conviction that there was something vaguely transgressive about the life we entered into at the Wissenschaftskolleg, something even dangerous. Like children sent away to boarding school, or

students in their first year away from home at university, or like Hans Castorp removed from his normal world to the magical remoteness of life at the sanatorium, we found ourselves plucked from our normal lives and thrown together; we were afforded, in relation to one another, and to the staff, an unaccustomed, an unsettling, and so, maybe, a risky freedom.

How else to explain the special camaraderie, something I know other Fellows have noticed? In my own case, not since I was a student have I found myself so capable of taking an interest in and learning from the work of others, others with very different aims, backgrounds, ages, and situations. I won't mention names; I won't signal specific intimacies. Some of you – I find myself writing this as a letter to my Co-Fellows and to the staff – will know how you affected me. Others might be surprised to learn how profoundly grateful I am for the chance to have met you, to encounter you each day, to learn about your research, or simply to get a sense of your life. And now I see – is it because I am an American that I am prone to be sentimental? – now I see that this is turning into a love letter. And because I can't let this happen (I can't? Why not? Maybe I need to let it happen), I will shift gears.

At the Wissenschaftskolleg, I wrote one book, conceived of and began work on another, and suffered a mysterious injury that deprived me and still deprives me of the ability to move my left hand. I don't blame the paralysis on Wiko (although I admit that in the novelistic retelling, this connection could not be ignored entirely). But I do credit Wiko for my productive frenzy. Perhaps some credit is also due to the injury itself, a thought I will now consider:

The central theme of the book I completed at the Wissenschaftskolleg – *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* – is the idea that consciousness, human or otherwise, cannot be explained alone in terms of what goes on inside us – in the brain, or anywhere else. We are spread out into the world and are made up of a dynamic interplay. Brain, body, and world all make for the conscious mind; in the book I show, or try to show, that this idea – that you are not your brain – is precisely what is demanded by a rigorously natural scientific, biological approach to our own nature.

The fact that I experienced the loss of the use of my hand as the deformation of my mind strikes me now as poignant confirmation of my thesis. To work one's hands across the keyboard is, or was, for this writer at least, a way of moving through a space of ideas and problems. Thinking isn't something that happens in us, it is something we do. Just as a child counts with his or her fingers, and as we solve arithmetic with a pencil and paper, so we,

or at least some of us, think with our hands. And so to lose the hand was to suffer a cognitive impairment. And now I come to my point: in order to survive at Wiko without my left hand, in order to survive as a writer, I needed to reconfigure my way of thinking, my way of being a philosopher, my whole creative practice. Now, I hope that the hand injury heals, and that my deficit proves to have been only temporary. But the struggle to reshape myself that I undertook as an inmate of the Wissenschaftskolleg has changed me. And perhaps it is just these changes – along with what I think of as the Walpurgisnacht-like suspension of the normal that we enjoyed as Wiko Fellows – that encouraged the unfamiliar openness to the new that so marked my experience of the community of the Wissenschaftskolleg. This spirit of interest and appreciation certainly animates the new project – on pictures, consciousness and art – that I began at the Wissenschaftskolleg, a project I could not have conceived if not for the conversations, lectures, readings, and museum trips that my time at Wiko allowed.

I mentioned being an American, and being sentimental, and now I want to say something more about this. America is a big topic; on the whole it's not one I find interesting. But, since this is a love letter (now I have made peace with this fact), I do want to share an uncomfortable aspect of my visit in Germany, an aspect that has something to do with the sort of American I happen to be. My father grew up under German occupation; he came to America as a young man; he speaks English with a German accent. I vividly remember only two nightmares from childhood; both had to do with my father; in one, I crouched on the floorboards of a Jeep as my mother and I drove down Bleecker Street in New York City in search of my father, fires of warfare blazing all around. Mine was not an ignorant household, and we were not bigots. But Germans and the idea of Germany were a source of deep disquiet. A close friend at school was a German, the daughter of a banker stationed in New York. I can remember her fleeing from our dinner table in tears as my father pronounced on the unchangeable menace of Germans always and forever. And so it is something of a surprise to me, or at least a revelation, that I found conditions of life so very congenial in Berlin. Why should I be surprised to find myself liking the city where my grandfather trained as a doctor? But feelings sublimate; one day my young son August, then six, attacked me for having had him circumcised. Why did you do that?, he demanded. Don't you know the Germans will always be able to tell I am Jewish!

I mentioned I'm not that interested in the topic of America. I'm also not that interested, anymore at least, in the topic of the Germans and the Jews. I was born in 1964 and I no longer have those preoccupations. But it is striking and remarkable that I managed to allow

my son, born as recently as 2001, to feel the weight of that history. For all of us, those born early, and those born late, the chance to come to Germany and learn to feel good there is a special gift, a chance for healing and completion. With our bodies and our memories we remake history together.

I would not wish to end this letter, or this report, or whatever this is, on such a brooding note. Instead, let me mention that I have made it my aim to see if I can find ways to maintain some of the mood and quality of my fellowship experience as I return to my normal life. I expect this will not be an easy task. And maybe this is as it should be. The value of big change is directly proportional to the degree to which such change is exceptional. And there are times for letting loose and dancing the night away. But it is right to go home and make it to work on Monday morning. Wiko fellowships, like the effects of wine, or like youth itself, don't, and shouldn't, last forever. *Oder?*