



A 18th-CENTURY-SALON  
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Some of us wish they had been born in a different century. "My" century would have been the 18<sup>th</sup> century, not because of its revolutionary fever, but because this was the century of salons and coffeehouses, those places where the exchange of ideas was so seamlessly interwoven with casual friendships and where conversation was made into an art form. Imagine a hybrid space, poised between the formal elegance of an aristocratic salon and the raw effervescence of a coffeehouse, and this would capture the unique atmosphere of the

Wiko's dining hall. As in the best of salons, guests are hosted by the regular group of people living there. To describe them simply as the "Wiko staff" would not do justice to the charm and spirit with which they made "their tables" tiptoe delicately around personal biography and questions of philosophy, biology, literature, or history. As in the best of salons, conversation was neither purely academic, nor nakedly personal, but passionate about ideas that matter. As in the best of salons, these conversations happened between semi-strangers, people whose names you knew, but whom you might not see tomorrow, people who might not become your friends, but who spoke in that most 18<sup>th</sup>-century spirit of *civilité*. The invisible glue tying those tables together was a simple love of conversation whose sole purpose, to quote Horace, was to "please and to educate". The Wiko lunches and dinners, which the more protestant of us liked to blame for not being office spaces, made me experience my bureaucratic academic life, ordinarily busy with evaluating and ranking, as an ebullient enterprise.

But this is no ordinary salon, for the Wiko's main vocation is to provide us with the academic resources that some of us lack. My normally impoverished library at the Hebrew University was here replaced by the most astounding library services I have ever come across.

I had gone to the Wiko to write about Love and Suffering, and quickly found myself absorbed by the happy love of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Nathaniel Hawthorne und Sophia Peabody, the tumultuous life-long relationship between Thomas Carlyle und Jane Welsh, and later became engrossed with the misery of Balzac's *La Femme Abandonnée*, Werther's suicide, and the slow agony of *La Dame aux Camélias*. The sociological question I had come to the Wiko with was whether modern romantic suffering had something to tell us about the nature of self and identity in modernity. Do we, modern people, suffer in love in the same way as our 19<sup>th</sup>-century counterparts? I had belabored this question and was at pains to find an adequate answer. But while at the Wiko the "breakthrough" came: I went back to Hegel, Kojève, and Honneth's concept of "recognition", and found in it the key to interpret the nature of modern sexual struggles. Recognition is one of the most distinct political problems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it became obvious to me that "recognition" was the most salient problem of intimate relationships as well.

And so it was that, in a place that gave me the happiness of the imaginary space of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century salon, I found a way to think about the puzzle of modernity and romantic misery.