



DIVERSIONS
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That little song they played on the M19 when it reached Rathenauplatz from Ku'damm was part of the soundtrack of my days in Berlin: “De-de-de dum: Beginn der Umleitung”. Usually I just enjoyed the elegant economy of the genitive construction (though I was jealous, too – I wish we had it in English), but sometimes I amused myself by forcing unwarranted meaning onto the simple fact that the straightforward route down Koenigsallee had been thrown for a loop by the vagaries of the city's public works program. For a

good ten months and more, I and my fellow Wiko Fellows (and yes, I know, lots of other people too) were subject to a diversion from the regular course. What happens to you, I wondered as I sat there on the top of the bus, when you turn off the normal road? How do you understand the relations between the diversion, and what came before, and what comes after? Exactly how, I would ask myself, does it all connect?

In the first few months at Wiko I felt not diverted but uncomfortable. Not, I hasten to add, because of anything our most lovely and accommodating staff did or didn't do, but because, I think, I was in a sulk. With hindsight I can see that I descended into a slough of despond mainly because I was having a huge amount of trouble composing the introduction to my book on memorized poetry. Usually my work follows a simple three-stage process: first I read, research, take notes and think; second, I beat the argument into shape in a succession of ever-more detailed plans; and then third, I set myself to write. Usually this last part is the time for fun: because I have a map to my destination, I can allow myself some play along the way – I have the latitude to dally with language's material properties, to welcome the new ideas created by its chance conjunctions and the sudden springing of unexpected images. Yet on this occasion the sequence refused to reproduce itself: I spent days writing carefully-honed prose that then had to be thrown away when I realized it didn't say what I needed it to say. In the midst of my discontent I was quite unable to see the wood for the trees, and thus experienced my self-loathing not as the work-related phenomenon it actually was, but rather as a more general condition of being.

Which is to say, it was clear to me back then that my presence at Wiko was a mistake. Perhaps I was a clerical error, the result of some inadvertent shuffling of files at the end of a long day. Or maybe it was not quite so bad as that – most likely I was akin to one of those awful compromise candidates, those sad souls voted in with no real enthusiasm after no one can be bothered to fight any more in a fractious department meeting. That my fellowship was an undeserved honour was evidently obvious to the other, bona-fide, Fellows. Didn't I catch them looking at me with a quizzical expression in their eyes? I knew what they were thinking: "What is such an idiot as you doing here?" Now I think it possible that they were considering other matters entirely, such as what we were going to have for lunch, or the precise mechanism of evolutionary change, or whether I might be any good at table tennis, but at the time I was well on my way to full-blown paranoia. It probably didn't help that I was entirely deprived of my own kind. I hadn't given the question much thought in advance, but I guess I'd assumed that Wiko, like all the other groves of academe I've ever known, would contain at least a couple of other English Lit. schol-

ars. Discovering that this was not the case no doubt provided an important corrective to my cultural parochialism, but it didn't make it easy to find my posse. More to the point, who on earth was I, if not defined against my usual institutional others? Within the small world of the English department, we Victorianists like to think of ourselves as the clubbable convivial ones, a gloriously Broad Church of messy pragmatists, bordered as we are by unbearably unrealistic and egotistical Romanticists on one side and those joylessly elitist Modernists on the other. But the security of such minor narcissistic differences was not going to apply at Wiko, given that its lines of demarcation were inevitably painted with a much broader brush.

All in all, then, I was adrift. I am sure that my husband and sons would say that they had had their own crosses to bear back then, what with the general unfamiliarity of things, *trennbare Verben*, and a punishingly early start to the day, but it seemed to me that they were coping well; between the Nelson-Mandela-Schule, the English Football Club of Berlin and Hertha BSC, all three of them constructed their own circles of friends and spheres of activity (*Gott sei Dank* for sport). No, the problem was me – or rather, a singularly unmoored version of me.

But, because of a variety of small, positive shifts and one large and awful jolt, things changed. The good alterations were multiple, and incremental, and so are now hard to summarize. I am sure that many are common to most Fellows most years: within what became the comforting pattern of our regular meals and meetings, we began to settle into each other's company, taking increasing pleasure in our running jokes and growing bonds of friendship. Away from Wallotstraße, too, I started to find a better way of seeing Berlin, a city that had initially oppressed me with the weight of its terrible past and its steadfast refusal to charm. Grunewald certainly looked wonderful when we returned to Germany after our Christmas break – there's nothing like the sodden greyness of the British Isles to make one appreciate the crisp brilliance of a heavy snowfall under the bluest of skies – but then Grunewald looked pretty wonderful at all times of the year. Rather it was this: once I stopped being disappointed that Berlin didn't present itself like the cities I already knew, then I was able to admire its particular strangenesses; the things it does exceptionally well; the kinds of human interactions and behaviours its gaps and absences allow and even encourage. It was a revelation to me that one could learn to love a place that wasn't beautiful.

And then, in the midst of these shifting sensibilities, the sudden jolt hit. On the morning of January 22nd, I received a telephone call telling me that a dear friend and colleague

had died the evening before; while standing at the stove making dinner, she had suffered a massive and completely unexpected brain haemorrhage. In some ways, Sally Ledger and I were exact duplicates – we were both forty-seven, Victorianists, wives and mothers of sons – and over the past year or so we had been working on some big ideas together, plans to co-direct a Dickensian study centre and transform it into a pre-eminent venue for nineteenth-century research and, not incidentally, to have a laugh while doing so. The loss of Sally has been incalculable to a huge number of people and to many different worlds, scholarly and otherwise; I bring it into this essay because its effect on me was profound, definitively altering my attitude towards my stay in Berlin from that day forwards. Such an unbearable illustration of the fragility of life, of the insecurity of our tenure on this earth, made me feel and think many things, just one of which was this: It was a complete waste of time, time that was essentially finite, to be insecure about such a petty issue as one's place in an academic institute. I realised that if I could simply drop my tedious and hobbling self-consciousness, then Wiko offered a tremendous opportunity: I should take pleasure in those things that I knew that I did well and at the same time appreciate, and learn from, the wonderfully various talents and knowledges of my colleagues. If not now, then when?

So this is what I tried to do. Every time I crossed Villa Walther's internal courtyard, I walked past a plaque emblazoned with the words "Carpe Diem" – its bas-relief, of a bearded gentleman bringing down a deer, seemed a rather strange figuration of the Latin tag (at least, seizing a stag doesn't get into my list of ways to make the most of each day), but I didn't let that distract me from the basic message. I started to have a good time. I had fun being Poetry Girl (no matter that – despite my current project – I've never really seen myself as a "poetry" person; no matter that I am too old to be any kind of "girl"); I had fun writing in genres that were altogether new to me (no matter that these experiments have yet to find their way into print). Most importantly, though, I began to have a lot of different, and very enjoyable, sorts of conversations. I was amazed by what I learnt when I actually engaged with people in other fields, people who I had previously assumed would find me insufficiently serious or interesting.

And what did I discover? For one thing, this: to step outside your area of study and see what it looks like from another vantage point is astonishingly energizing and, well, just downright fascinating. The benefits were simultaneously intellectual and emotional; some had almost immediate and quantifiable effects, while others, I think, will operate according to distinctly different temporalities and logics. On the level of work accom-

plished, I can stump up the following prosaic evidence: not only did I get that damned introduction finished, but also the project's long and involved historical overview, and then, by the appointed deadline of July 1st, the whole manuscript itself. Perhaps I'll always be the only person who will notice the Wiko sentences and the Wiko structures of thought within the passages of this book, but I know where they are and I know whom to thank. Elsewhere in my thinking and feeling, though, I may never be able to place a finger and say it was just here, or there, that I glimpsed the possibility of other ways to go. Perhaps it will take me a long time to make sense of some of the things I found out away from my habitual paths, but no matter. If I can keep alive to the pleasures and surprises en route, then all should be fine.

But – let's be honest – these are Pollyanna-ish thoughts for the future that I am having today (September 14th), not ones I could entertain in Berlin a couple of months ago. Back then, things seemed altogether crueller: just as I had figured out not only how to do Wiko, but how to enjoy doing it, the time began to hurtle towards its conclusion, bringing almost daily indications of our impending eviction. Endless e-mails about plans for the *Abschiedsfest*; no doubt well-meant but seemingly heartless letters of information about “Preparing for your Departure” and “Next Year's Fellows”; the recall of library books that had become dear; a welter of cardboard boxes and packing tape – the *Abschluss* was closing in upon us. And then, to make the message crystal-clear, the M19 resumed its southward journeys down Koenigsallee. Yet I must admit that there were consolations. “You have both grown up and become younger,” someone said to me at the leaving party; this was perhaps one of the nicest, if most paradoxical, compliments I have ever received. By the finish of it all, I do believe that I was well and truly diverted.

Ach. Ende der Umleitung. Fellows must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither. Like many of us, I am sure, I have found it hard returning to my former life. But I think – I hope – that I haven't just slipped back thoughtlessly into the old course.