



THE VIEW FROM INSIDE
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One of the philosophical ideas floating vaguely at the back of my mind when I arrived at Wiko had to do with the contrast between what we might call “inside” and “outside” perspectives on human language. Think of an everyday word like “green” in English. If you are an English-speaker, the sounds made when you say “green” and the marks on paper produced when you write it are not just sounds and marks. From your point of view they have a special character that we usually take for granted but that, in certain frames of mind, can come to seem mysterious, almost magical. They have meaning. If you are an English-speaker and you look at the shapes made on the page by the ink when the word “green” – or any of the words on this page – are printed, you do not see them merely as shapes made by the ink on the paper. Their meaning is obvious to you – it can even seem to jump out at you – just like the actual green colour of a green apple. It takes

considerable imaginative effort to blind yourself to that meaning, to force yourself to see the shapes merely as an arrangement of ink on paper.

How can we describe and understand this special character? This is where the contrast between inside and outside perspectives comes in. From an outside perspective, we can describe the various different circumstances in which the word “green” might or might not be uttered and how it is responded to: we can point out that people are more likely to say “Yes” in response to “Is that green?” if you show them a lime, a lawn or a cucumber than if you show them a strawberry, a buttercup or the Eiffel Tower. Or we can talk about the kind of cognitive processing that is involved in responding to the “Is that green?” question or in producing utterances of “green”. We can investigate the ways in which normal English-speakers’ brains are typically affected when they hear the word, and perhaps compare their use of “green” and the corresponding brain activity with that of people suffering certain kinds of brain lesions interfering with language. There is a tremendous amount of rich and complex detail we can go into about human beings’ productions of, and responses to, utterances of “green” and their behavioural, psychological and neurological causes and effects. But no matter how much detail we go into, something seems to be left out. That is the peculiar quality of meaningfulness that literate English-speakers recognize when they see the word “green”. That quality, it seems, can be recognized and described only from an inside perspective, the perspective that we occupy as people who have mastered the English language in its written form. And we can describe the quality accurately in English only by saying something that appears, at least from an outside perspective, utterly trivial and uninformative, namely, that the word “green” means *green*.

Although it was not an explicit focus of my work, the idea of inside and outside perspectives gradually came to pervade my thinking at Wiko and to expand beyond the sphere of language as such. An early stimulus to this was reading and thinking about Thomas’s work on fictional worlds, which defends what I think of as an inside perspective on literature, and which reminded me that inside perspectives need not be uninformative. An individual sequence of ink marks like the ones you see when you look at the printed word “green” can, in the right context, present a language-user with something over and above those ink marks: the meaning *green*. But, at a higher level, combinations of individual words give her something with a higher order of meaningfulness or significance: characters acting and interacting in a fictional world. Reading Claire’s and Elias’s novels, and thinking about the different possibilities of coherence and degree of

detail revealed by their various imagined worlds, gave the idea of fictional worlds a solid place in my thinking, and reflecting on Ilma's work on memoir suggested new ways in which boundaries between inside and outside might be permeable. I saw counterparts of fictional worlds in the visual arts: in the "imaginary world" of satyrs and centaurs explored by François in his work on vase painting, in the pictorial spaces of 15th-century Italian art that Frank helped me to see on a visit to the Gemäldegalerie, in the visions revealed by the videos from Ghana that Birgit showed us, and in the play of reality and make-believe within the Baroque paintings discussed by Christiane. I also came to recognize the possibility of musical worlds created by ordered sounds. Toshio's music, which he helped me understand "from outside" by explaining some of the scales he used to create his music, constituted a world that could almost immediately be perceived "from inside" as a moving landscape of beautiful shapes in transition, suggestive of flowers opening, wind on water, gathering storms. Helmut's combinations of sounds were far more resistant to an inside view, often stubbornly insisting on being heard as just sounds. But in the end, both from increased familiarity and from my coming to understand how they emerge from a profound and passionate engagement with the tradition of Western classical music, they too yielded to an inside view, revealing worlds of beauty, intense feeling, and unexpected humour and lightness. And another kind of auditory world was revealed by Hanns's readings – poems and melodramas – showing how words that are already meaningful and already constitute a fictional world acquire yet another level of significance through the art of the human voice in speech.

Each of the Tuesday colloquia revealed its own world of inquiry and gave me a hint of how it felt to see that world from the inside. As Beatrice and Karl so nicely pointed out in their "Introduction" to our official end-of-year party, the introductions played a big part in the success of these colloquia, helping the participants, in every case, to think their way into the presenter's point of view. Here again, especially as the year went on, I was struck by the play of inside and outside perspectives in each person's approach to his or her material, and the way both kinds of approaches could be fruitful and revealing. I was often especially drawn to the approaches that took what I thought of as an inside view on topics that are typically treated from the outside – in the case of health care policy, for example, Julie's gripping account of cancer care in Botswana and David's exploration of the emotional significance of revealing, or hiding, one's HIV status. And Olivia's vivid presentation of ideas about movement and self-awareness made me realise that an inside perspective can be a matter of how things feel – really feel, in a bodily, in-one's-bones way –

rather than of how they look or how we think them to be. But it was also interesting to see outside perspectives on topics where inside perspectives are more common – for example, in literary studies, Beatrice’s emphasis on the role of paper, book, and writing in the development of early Islamic culture, and Barbara’s project of mapping the actual places in Europe that are mentioned in European literary texts. The idea of inside and outside perspectives on specifically human behaviour and functioning came up for me also in some of the colloquia dealing with biology and anthropology. Conversations with Paul and other biologists made me appreciate the excitement and sense of promise associated with the thought that such traits as human altruism might be explained in an “outside” way, as an extension of the behaviour of social insects, or even of the cooperation of different cells in a eukaryote, without undermining my conviction of an irreducibly “inside” perspective on human rationality.

But where the contrast between inside and outside perspectives seems most salient to me, as I now write this report more than two months after the end of my Wiko year, is in thinking about my experience at Wiko itself and the project of writing about it. When I first arrived at Wiko, there was nothing but an outside – the analogue of meaningless sounds and marks on paper. There was a collection of Fellows and their partners, all of whom seemed likeable enough, but largely unknown quantities, and sometimes to my embarrassment – I have mild prosopagnosia – hard to tell apart. There was a book of project descriptions that, like the Fellows themselves, seemed reasonably interesting but, for the most part, too remote from my own concerns to engage me seriously. There were of course splendid buildings, tremendously friendly and helpful staff, the most luxurious office I have ever had and delicious meals. But in spite of the warm welcome, the whole situation seemed, at the outset, peculiar, alienating and somewhat guilt-inducing. Here we were, a collection of fortunate academics and writers and composers, being housed and fed, entertained and generally nurtured, at considerable public expense, and with very little in the way of obligations in return. But what was the point of it all? Good times for us, sure, but beyond that, just a lot of talk, a lot of writing in our various offices and probably, in a few years, some books and articles that some people might read but that would mostly serve to take up shelf space in libraries.

But as the Fellows and partners got to know one another and a genuine social and intellectual community began to form, the possibility of another perspective emerged: a view from inside. The projects that had seemed so remote at the outset became vivid and engaging, even if not always convincing, and where they seemed unconvincing it became

stimulating to think about why. The vaguely delineated and somewhat interchangeable Fellows and partners became complex individual human beings with histories, personalities, character traits, distinctive intellectual qualities, stories (and jokes) to tell, ideas and perspectives to share, opinions to defend. Again and again I found in both likely and unlikely conversations – at lunchtimes, after colloquia, at the Xerox machine, in chance encounters on the way back from the supermarket or on the bus, after a lot of good wine on a Thursday evening – ideas that moved my own thinking along because they offered a challenge, or inspiration, or an idea for something new to read, or the suggestion of a different way of conceptualizing a problem, or reassurance that an old way was not as stupid as I had feared. From this perspective I could see what a description from outside was unable to capture, and what I saw allowed me to understand the point – the value, the significance – of an institution like Wiko. The people, the conversations, the varied projects and their interconnections, had become meaningful. I no longer imagined the projected books and articles merely taking up shelf space; instead I could think myself into the worlds of enquiry to which they belonged and anticipate the interest, even eagerness with which they would be read. Some of them I knew I would certainly want to read myself, some of them I was now well on the way to writing myself. The somewhat distant, cynical, reductive attitude I had taken at the outset to the whole Wiko enterprise had given way to a view in which I could see the importance, interest and significance of the intellectual and creative work that we were, individually and collectively, trying to accomplish.

There is plenty to be said from the outside perspective about what had happened and why. We had, as I said above, become a social and intellectual community, and we had done so for reasons of which I can give only a sample: a happy mix of personalities and intellectual interests among the Fellows and their partners, an inspired choice of the year's speakers in the persons of Kamran and Anne, a number of Fellows who unofficially played very important roles in bringing us together (here I have to mention especially Behrooz), a lively social network among the children that helped reinforce connections among the parents as well, and of course the constant and unobtrusive efforts of the Wiko staff to create a framework in which communication could flourish, whether in the Tuesday and Thursday colloquia, the evening concerts and other events, or – perhaps most importantly – the dining room, where we were made to feel so comfortable and welcome that some of us ended up lingering in conversation for hours after the meal was over. But such a description from outside, no matter how detailed, would inevitably leave

something out. What it could never hope to capture, and what I cannot hope to capture in this report, was what the Wiko year was like from the inside: the significance, the meaning of the interactions that membership in this community made possible. Is there something to be said about this from the inside, an analogue to the true but uninformative statement that the word “green” means *green*? Perhaps only this: Thanks to all of you – Fellows, partners, Wiko administration and staff – for a great year.