



FOUR MONTHS IN ARCADIA  
JEREMY ADLER

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Professor (emer.) of German at King's College London. Studied English and German at Queen Mary College (University of London) and wrote his Ph.D. (on Goethe) at Westfield College. A former scholar of the Herzog August Bibliothek and a sometime Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Institute of Advanced Study (1985–86). Fellow of the German Academy of Language and Literature. His books include *“Eine fast magische Anziehungskraft.” Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften und die Chemie seiner Zeit* (1987); *Text als Figur: Visuelle Poesie von der Antike bis zur Moderne* (third edition, 1990); (ed.) *Friedrich Hölderlin: Selected Poems and Fragments* (1998); (ed.) *Franz Baermann Steiner: Selected Writings*. 2 vols. (1999, with Richard Fardon); *Franz Kafka: Illustrated Life* (2001); (ed.) *Elias Canetti: Party im Blitz* (2003); (ed.) *H. G. Adler, Theresienstadt 1941–1945: Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft* (2005); (ed.) *Friedrich Hölderlin: Essays and Letters* (translated with Charlie Louth, 2009). – Address: Department of German, King's College London, East Wing, Strand Campus, London WC2R 2LS. United Kingdom.  
E-mail: jeremy.adler@kcl.ac.uk

The Arcadian Institution

Returning to the Wissenschaftskolleg after a quarter of a century for a stay of four months, I placed high hopes in the institution and my Fellow scholars, but my expectations were more than exceeded. The stay was blissful and, in both human and scholarly terms, in many ways the happiest time of my academic life.

People asked me repeatedly how the Wiko of 1985–86 compared with the Wiko of today and I could only answer that it had been perfect then and was even more perfect today. Like a well-oiled machine that has been fully run-in, everything seems to operate more smoothly than before. The staff, the institutional structures, the physical apparatus – everything from the reception to the kitchen and administration to the library and the IT provision were as good as they could possibly be. Everyone was dedicated to making study at the Wiko an optimal experience, everything was designed to further intellectual goals, though not in the narrow sense of the *Leistungsethik* that prevails in the modern academy – the presence of a composer in residence and another great musician made the stay at the Kolleg an education in the traditional sense, i.e. rounded, humane, an end in itself.

Certain changes between the 1980s and today were determined historically, both within subject areas and more widely. I'll single out just seven. 1) Interdisciplinary studies were still something of an innovation in the 1980s. Today, almost every scholar at the Kolleg seemed to be engaged in interdisciplinary research; what had to be fought for in the 1980s could therefore be taken for granted today and formed the premise of every discussion, rather than the goal. 2) There was a relatively narrow range of subjects selected in the 1980s, and fairly few scientists; the range has increased enormously, as has the number of scientists, making for a mix that more accurately reflects the wider academic community; this greatly enhances the likelihood of productive serendipity and successful chance debate. 3) Feminism had not yet made itself so widely felt in the 1980s. Women were in a distinct minority in the Kolleg in the early days, but now they were far more strongly represented, whether as Fellows or as partners (who – in another innovation – play a more active part in the community today) – making for a richer, livelier, more rounded community at the Kolleg. 4) On my first stay, we were assigned secretaries, or shared secretaries, who typed our work into word processors. This was a luxury in those days, but it was a time-consuming business. The advent of the personal computer and the World Wide Web has made communication quicker and livelier than ever among Fellows and among Fellows and staff. This directly affects the quality of the exchanges. 5) The same development has also affected the library system quite dramatically; indeed, library ordering now works so quickly, it often seems that one only has to think of a book, and it arrives on the shelves. This has a major impact on research, as finding books has now become as quick as thinking itself, hastening the speed of productive work. 6) The 1980s were a much more authoritarian era than the 2010s, and this was noticeable in the

Kolleg, too. The hierarchical social structures of the second half of the 20th century were mirrored in the Kolleg and the top-down system. Today, the scholarly republic is much more in evidence. Relations between Fellows and between Fellows and staff have become more fluid, more open, more informal and hence also more personal than before. This has a beneficial effect on the working atmosphere. 7) In the 1980s, Berlin was still a divided city, and the political tensions made the Kolleg an edgier, more confrontational place than today. That had advantages in the sharpness that it cultivated. But the city was not the welcoming place it has become today. The sense of being enclosed has given way to a new openness. – These seven changes came together to make the Kolleg I visited in 2012 a more accommodating, more democratic, more efficient, more vibrant community than ever before. However, I must stress that the actual quality of the best exchanges between scholars in the 1980s were no less exciting than today. What has changed is their number, their range, their frequency. Hence partly for historical reasons, partly for academic reasons and partly for institutional reasons, which are often a response to events in the wider world, a perfect institution has become more perfect over time.

### The Research Topic

Although Goethe's importance for the intellectual life in the English 19th century is well known – one thinks of Coleridge, Carlyle, George Eliot and Matthew Arnold – there has been next to no research on Goethe's importance for Henry James. A short book on James and Germany, and an article comparing *Die Wahlverwandschaften* (Elective Affinities) and *The Golden Bowl*, are pretty much the sum total of studies undertaken so far. Yet there is rather more to explore.

An analysis of Goethe and James reveals a complex relation to German culture: Goethe remained a prototypical artist for James, whereas he treats Germans and Germany in an increasingly negative light, notably in his critical view of post-unification Germany and his horror at the aggressive Germany behind the Great War.

In "The Great Good Place", Goethe is invoked as one of the three major figures in Western culture, alongside Plato and Beethoven, and Goethe's impact on James was commensurate with this view. In his early twenties, James studied Goethe and Schiller whilst learning German in Bonn, acquiring a knowledge of some extremely difficult texts, including *Die Wahlverwandschaften* and *Hermann und Dorothea*, and he continued to show an interest in Goethe in later life, e.g. in his lengthy review of a reissue of Carlyle's

translation of *Wilhelm Meister*, his defence of Goethe against Dumas and a late letter on *Die Wahlverwandschaften*.

James's literary reception of Goethe can be seen at crucial points in his career, beginning with his first successful novel, *Roderick Hudson*: strands from *Werther*, *Faust* and *Wilhelm Meister* can all be found in what is essentially a tragic "Künstlerroman"; then, at the end of the middle period, *The Tragic Muse*, with its subject of the theatre, recalls *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as a "Theaterroman"; and throughout the late period, *Die Wahlverwandschaften* provides a model for James's scenic style and dramatic structures, whilst the idiosyncratic language of *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* may have helped inspire his late style.

The key themes of art and the conflict between art and life that run through so many of James's tales come straight out of German Romanticism and originate in Goethe – *Torquato Tasso* is the model for all later writers from Novalis and Hoffmann to Thomas Mann and Kafka. James belongs in this tradition and his selection of this motif arguably makes much more sense when considered in the German context than when read alongside contemporary English and American writing. Born from this dialectic, the naturalistic theme of *life* ("Live all you can: it's a mistake not to!"), so typical of James, stems directly from Goethe ("Life is life's highest good ...").

Arguably, the transparent structure and the moral ambiguity of *Die Wahlverwandschaften* also played a part in helping to fashion the transparent complexities of the last three novels, the crown of James's achievement, *The Ambassadors*, *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove*. Moreover, James's treatment of "the international theme" throughout his career closely echoes Goethe's call upon writers – as in his correspondence with Carlyle – to produce what he called "Weltliteratur".