



SURPRISING SERENITY: THREE SPRING  
MONTHS IN GRUNEWALD, WITH DIDEROT  
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That I was born in the “American Occupied Zone of Germany”, 37 months after the end of World War II and four days before the introduction of a new German currency (the D-Mark), has clearly shaped my mind – and my life. In 1989, I became a Professor of Literature at Stanford University, between San Francisco Bay and the Pacific; and since the year 2000, I have been a citizen of the United States of America. But hardly a week in California passes without somebody more local than us asking my wife or me “Where are you guys from?” and thus reacting to a very noticeable German accent in our otherwise

American English. My teaching and writing on the West Coast have probably been more influenced by past German traditions and present German debates than they ever were before my departure from the country of my birth. Martin Heidegger, for example, has become uniquely important for me – although he was an author whom I had never read until 1989, out of a kind of “historical repulsion” that kept me from taking him seriously during my German years. Strangely, therefore, coming to Berlin for three spring months in 2012, that is, spending, for the first time in my life, more than just a few days in the former and present German capital city where the fate of that nation took its tragic and guilty turn, had foreshadowed itself as an ambiguous adventure for me. Of course I knew about the distinction of the Wiko as an intellectual (rather than “academic”) institution, and I had no doubt about the resources for the mind that the city of Berlin offers today; on the other hand, I was wondering whether this partly oedipal reaction of a deliberately ungrateful son of Germany would be strongly reactivated between late March and June 30, 2012. I was surely ready for three months without teaching and administrative obligations, but was I ready to live in Berlin?

As I had announced to the Wissenschaftskolleg, my main working project for that spring was to lay the foundations of a book on Denis Diderot, who, through a proseminar in my first semester at the University of Munich (in the Winter of 1967/68), had become the gatekeeper for the academic middle of my life, and who, among the great protagonists of European Enlightenment, is the one whose “Weltoffenheit” may be most appealing to our early 21-century situation. My Berlin-specific plan was to become familiar with the everyday minutiae of Denis Diderot’s life and to find those details that make up the salt of every biography – by reading through slowly, while taking notes, the 16 edited volumes of his correspondence (plus three volumes of letters to his woman friend Sophie Volland). I managed to fulfill this self-assignment – which is an admittedly undramatic but (in my own life) unusual achievement (for I tend to jump on new intellectual opportunities and fascinations rather than to quietly lay the necessary groundwork).

After two-thirds of my Wiko stay, I had an opportunity to present my complexified view of Diderot’s work and life (and I am deliberately using this old-fashioned formula) and a first outline of a possible book to the august assembly of Wiko authorities, Wiko Fellows, and some outside guests. My image of Diderot had gained new contours: a certainty, for example, that his work had no center – which was a side-effect of his absolute openness to the world. Diderot wrote hundreds of entries for his and d’Alembert’s “Encyclopédie”, for example, on topics from “butcher” to “mind”. There is, as a counterpoint to

such infinity, the spatial concentration and limitation of Diderot's life to the larger city of Paris – with only one dramatic exception late in life, i.e. his journey to St. Petersburg, where, for a few months, he would have almost daily afternoon conversations with Catherine the Great. Above all, I became fully aware of the often euphoric intensity in Diderot's reactions to his environment, often with an obsessive attention to seemingly irrelevant detail. Due to my concentrated reading in my Wiko office, I had reached a point where I was able to present a complex, lively, captivating, and hopefully innovative image of Diderot, without knowing yet what the exact outlines of a possible book would be – so that I left Berlin with the impression of an “intellectual mission accomplished”.

A somehow surprising result of numerous interactions during my Wiko months, with condensation in the discussions following the Diderot-colloquium, was the impression that I had inadvertently become, over the past decade, an eccentric (not to say simply strange) presence in the academic world. Already while I was presenting my ideas on Diderot, I could feel that there were two very different reactions in the room – and this feeling was later on confirmed by numerous individual conversations that I had: many of those Fellows for whom the German concept of “Wissenschaftlichkeit” is a guiding value in their work, found what I had to say “too literary”, too “outrageous”, and in some cases straightforwardly “arrogant”. At the same time, I believe and hope that some of the more positive reactions came from Wiko Fellows from the Arts-side of the “Humanities and Arts” – for example, from my eminent friend, the composer Mauricio Sotelo, or from the great Alfred Brendel (a surprise that made me proud). In its ambiguity, this was both a shocking and important experience, an experience that, without any doubt, will have an impact on the form and the tone of my work in the dawn of a career that indeed is no longer exclusively academic.

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There was another aspect in the relationship with my immediate Wiko environment that I had by no means anticipated. Over the past decade, it has become part of my life to actively participate in German feuilleton debates, especially (but not exclusively) on the pages of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, with the core of this activity being my weekly blog under the title “digital/pausen”. Now, spending time in Germany must have clearly meant that I was more synchronized with the local discussions because, week after week, my blogs had a much greater number of readers (of “hits”) than they do when I write

them in California. There is, however, one Berlin-highlight within this dimension that is not associated with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. Early on during my Berlin stay, and in anticipation of the European Soccer Championship in Poland and the Ukraine (which took place at the end of my stay in Berlin), I wrote a text in praise of the German center-fielder Mesut Özil (born in Schalke and playing today for Real Madrid) which was published in the soccer magazine *Elf Freunde*. The title of the text was “Özil’s Aesthetic Minimalism”. Some weeks later, in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Özil was asked whether he knew of my text – and he answered that he had indeed read it and was in full agreement, “however little he had understood”.

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After only a few days, and to my surprise, I realized that I had begun to like the Wiko. What I loved (more than liked) right from the start was my fourth-floor attic apartment with its beautiful views of the local lakes and its relatively old furniture (which, in my opinion, should never have been replaced this summer); but I told myself that my feeling of pleasure could not just be the effect of an apartment and of my two daily seven-minute, one-cigarette-long walks from this apartment to my Wiko office in the “Neubau”. Thinking about the reason for my incipient euphoria, I discovered that what impressed me most was the consistent competence and friendliness of each member of the Wiko staff. Whatever eccentric concerns I could come up with (soccer tickets, FedExes and mailings to Stanford, electronic incompetence), my wishes were taken care of as if, beyond the Wissenschaftskolleg, they mattered to Humankind. Someone from outside the institution then told me that this effect was famous and that it was a lifetime achievement of the Wiko’s “Verwalter”. To add one detail: I could hardly believe that, after only a few lunches, the restaurant staff knew of my specific gastronomic preferences (and bad habits – for which I was always forgiven).

To be honest, I have doubts about the “present-day pertinence” of the institutional format to which the Wissenschaftskolleg belongs, which in America we like to hyperbolically characterize as “think tanks”. My question is whether, in the age of electronic hyper-communication, we still need what think tanks produce best, namely environments of inspiration (“Anregungen”), or whether our problem has not increasingly become that the accumulation of inspiration coming from different directions will turn into an effect of intellectual dispersion and a difficulty to concentrate. This is not a criticism – but

I believe it could become the topic for a worthwhile internal discussion, and thus perhaps a starting point for the Wissenschaftskolleg to again occupy an avantgarde position in changing our academic and intellectual environment.

For all my academic skepticism, however, I have no ambiguity, as I said, about the calm, the friendliness, and even the friendly anonymity of the Wiko staff. And while I understand that this short text is not a place to talk about personal issues, I simply need to mention that, halfway through my Wiko-months, I was hit by the perhaps-most-challenging personal crisis of my life. Retrospectively, I am convinced that this friendly anonymity of the Wiko staff was the best possible environment for me in such a challenging situation. One evening, after a long day of work, despair, and depression, I was waiting for a taxi on the Wallotstraße when the Wiko-“Verwalter” walked by. “How are you?” he asked (in German of course). “I am fine,” I said. “But you are not fine,” he replied: “it is evident, I can see that in your face. If I can ever be of any help for you, please let me know.” With these words, he went to the “Hauptgebäude” and we never talked about my problem again. Without any doubt, this was the most impressive moment during my Wiko stay, a moment that I will never forget and for which I will be eternally grateful.

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When I left Berlin on June 30 (a Saturday), I did not anticipate that my crisis would ever be over – but I had laid the foundation for a new book, I had learned a lot about myself, with not only pleasant insights, and Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus had organized an unforgettably intimate birthday lunch for me in the Wiko garden with my two very best friends; above all, I had not folded in that crisis. On the contrary, I had been able to react with the resoluteness (“Entschlossenheit”) that was needed – and I believe the Wissenschaftskolleg gave me a new *serenity* without which I might not have overcome those weeks. I flew back from Berlin to Cornell University (in upstate New York) and, five days later, to the Pacific Coast and Stanford with a feeling of being more relaxed than ever about and more reconciled with Germany, also because I had arrived in Berlin just early enough to become friends with Yehuda Elkana. This is what the days in Grunewald had done to me. My panorama is without any importance for Germany – but huge, no doubt, for the rest of my life.