



ELFENBEINTURM
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Separation

This was one of the most painful separations in my entire life. Multilingual, of all possible ages, representing a variety of genres and disciplines – from fiction and literary studies to the sociology of law – they were a major, structurally important part of my environment. Both material and intellectual. I had to return all the books. MY books.

In the 2010s, an early-career academic has to move house regularly, sometimes with an unsettling frequency. The community I see myself belonging to could be appropriately described with the French legal term used to refer to some kinds of nomads – “les gens du voyage”. In the summer of 2014, when I was preparing my move to Berlin, my personal library counted three branches. Imitating a fashion house style, I could simply subtitle it: Moscow – Paris – Oxford. What might sound fancy was, in fact, a logistic nightmare. Hence my decision to give away most of the books inhabiting my office at Wellington Square before leaving Oxford for Berlin (via Paris, bien sûr). A wise decision, but ...

My personal library is very much a research library, with highly specialized books often unavailable in even the largest European libraries. In addition, I had a sort of Feng Shui reason. How does one make a place his or her own when one moves into a new house? Especially when everything is ready for one to live and work comfortably, as at the Wissenschaftskolleg? I did not need to change curtains or to buy a chair for my Wallotstraße 19 apartment. Everything was there; only the bookshelves in my office were invitingly empty. After I found the closest supermarket, I started ordering books at the Wiko library.

In a couple of months, the bookshelves in my office reflected my state of mind: I had a self-portrait built with books (as if Wolfgang Lazius did not need Arcimboldo). I very quickly discovered that Fellows used the same technique of mimesis to introduce their peers, projecting book covers on the wall of the Seminar Room at the Tuesday colloquium. A self-portrait in miniature, based on the similar principle of metonymy, is, in fact, what stays at the Wiko on the shelves of the Fellowbibliothek after Fellows have to leave. Ordering new books, I was actively investing in my quasi-permanent stay in Grunewald. And predictably enough, I was too ambitious about what I intended to produce.

The unfortunate exception amongst my cohort (there were, in fact, two of us, weren't there?), I ordered 535 books and articles during my year in Grunewald. And I had to return some three hundred copies just before leaving my apartment in mid-July. I was in distress. I had structured my mini-library, “peu nombreuse mais choisie”, as Samuel Formey had put it, according to various topics of my on-going research and the writing I was simultaneously pursuing. The majority of these books had my page markers inside. I did not have time to start reading many of them. I waited until the last moment to start returning them. And I owe the library team an explanation for the year-long hassle.

Fragmented Identity

My first order was Marina Ritzarev's *Eighteenth-Century Russian Music* and the last one Edmond Biré's *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris pendant la terreur*. These titles encompass the evolution of my research tasks during the Wiko year.

I moved to Berlin at one of those moments when you don't want to move: the manuscript of my revised thesis on francophone theatre in 18th-century St. Petersburg was almost ready to be submitted for a peer review, but I still needed a couple of weeks of full concentration to clean it up. Fortunately enough, concentration was exactly what the Kolleg offered me in late August 2014: I moved into a flat with an office in it, to live with as little distraction as one can imagine. My only – self-imposed – duty was the daily German course, where the first circle of Wiko friends formed. I was trying to speak German in the morning and I was writing in French in the afternoon. With occasional conversations in Russian with friends who happened to live in Berlin, in linguistic terms my day looked very much like that of my book's protagonist, Russian empress Catherine II.

My first monograph tells a story of state-sponsored social engineering in 18th-century Russia. Theatre in general and prestigious French performances in particular was one of the key tools in this process supervised by Catherine II personally. I had decided to explore how political authorities articulated the importance of theatre and organised various aspects of its work, from actors' recruitment to the choice of plays to be performed. Trained as a literary scholar, I ended up writing about the court calendar and the way it structured everyday practices of the ruling elite, about the space in the palaces and about social hierarchies and the display of emotions. As soon as I dispatched my 130,000 words to an anonymous peer, I had to switch to another book project.

In the meantime, the Wiko year was moving on. Dinner parties, the genre I thought I was well acquainted with after two years at Oxford, turned to hours-long debates about, say, social Darwinism (hi, Fun table!). I was discovering the importance of German idealism for the academic culture of my host country. Do you know that in Germany civil servants, including academics having the Beamter/Beamtin status, cannot go on strike? I was ordering more books. And I was finishing earlier projects instead of starting the new one.

Fortunately enough, my earlier projects kept supplying new experiences. During my Wiko year, I had the pleasure to co-edit, with Andreas Schönle and Andrei Zorin, a collective monograph on the creation of a Europeanized elite in Russia – a result of two years of work by an international and multidisciplinary team. While the subject of this volume

was not too distant from my freshly accomplished book, the objective, the research methods and the technology of its production were distinctively different: we were investigating the subjective world of the Russian nobility, focusing on the period between 1762 and 1825, aiming to produce new historical knowledge with a team led by literary scholars. My library orders reflected the collaborative nature of the project and its troubled disciplinary identity: Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750–1850* (for one of my own contributions – on a Russian courtier whose wealth and “merchant” origin disturbed his peers); Kirsty Carpenter and Philip Mansel (eds.), *The French Emigrés in Europe and the Struggle against Revolution, 1789–1814* (for another chapter of mine telling the story of the problematic coexistence of local and foreign elites in St. Petersburg in the 1790s); Hans-Joachim Torke, *Das russische Beamtenum in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (to check for the general bibliography of the volume), etc.

And yet, the new project had to be launched! I came to Berlin as a EURIAS Fellow. The theme I had submitted for the competition was social representations in European theatre from the Napoleonic wars to the Russian Revolution, and I must admit that I abandoned this topic before I boarded the plane from Charles De Gaulle airport in Paris. Instead of conducting research on dramatic representations in 19th-century Europe, I had decided to continue exploring French theatre, performing a triple move from my first book: geographical, as my subject was now located in France; chronological, as I’ve expanded the studied period up to the late nineteenth century; and methodological, as I was now venturing into bringing together theatre history, social history and the history of emotions. A new load of books, including studies in musicology and sociology of emotions and a number of primary sources. In terms of historiography and primary sources, I had to “limit” myself to the French Revolution, one of the best-explored periods of French history. I typed in my book request form: Susan Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution*; Wilhelm von Wolzogen, *Pariser Tagebücher und Briefe 1790–1793* (with special thanks to Thorsten Wilhelm for the reference); etc. etc.

Institution and Environment

I had heard some positive appreciations of the Institute before the start of my Wiko year, but I am particularly fond of one of them. In the early nineties, a Russian colleague came to Berlin to visit Konstantin Asadowski, philologist and translator, a 1990/1991 Wiko

Fellow. They were walking in Grunewald together, enjoying the landscape with lakes and beautiful, occasionally hilly forest. The storyteller recalls swans skating on the quiet surface of a lake. “Yeah, it is nothing like Magadan here,” said Asadowski thoughtfully. Magadan is a city in the Far Eastern part of Russia, but in this context, it is primarily one of the centres of the Soviet penal system, founded in the 1930s in the Kolyma region. In 1981, Konstantin Asadowski was sent to a camp in “Magadan”, charged with drug trafficking. The case had been fabricated – in 1993 the reason for prosecution was officially identified as political. I like this anecdote for its exaggerated contrast between Soviet camps and the wealthy suburb of a recently reunified Berlin. And for its sharp contrast with my own experience.

I came to Grunewald from Oxford. My mother, who came to visit and stayed at Wallotstraße 19 for a week, found that the setting looked pleasantly similar (with the exception of Oxford’s medieval architecture). Indeed, just like northern Oxford, where I had mainly stayed, the Wissenschaftskolleg is surrounded by villas and quiet streets with little traffic and robust trees. In both places, academic distinction is associated with a socially exclusive setting. They both suggest that high-level research happens at some distance from the tensions of an institutional environment and social world.

Like many colleagues, I am not enthusiastic about the division of labour one can observe in many departments in Europe, where some post-holders mostly do research and buy themselves out of teaching by securing external funding, while others – often, but not exclusively, early career academics with temporary appointments – perform large amounts of teaching and administration with little or no time left for research. There is no need to remind anyone that “research-led” teaching is a necessary element of most universities’ public image and everybody talks about outreach.

Wiko could seem to be a paragon of intellectual isolation, Ivory Tower as it is – a friend of mine who lives in Neukölln constantly teased me using the German equivalent of the term, *Elfenbeinturm*. It is, however, very easy to understand why even those who might have their doubts about the state of intellectual segregation it helps to perpetuate are so enthusiastic about the year spent there. Dispensed from institutional decision-making, exposed to delicately structured (by meals and social events) and most often friendly communication with active researchers from other disciplines, welcomed in the socially exclusive area of a culturally rich city, Fellows are freed from many tiring constraints. No wonder “paradise” is, perhaps, the most frequent epithet for the Wiko. (To continue the parallel in the vein of an alternative sacred history: one could imagine a paradise where a

new Adam and Eve move in every year, after the previous couple has committed the original sin and had to leave. God would then look like a stubborn experimenter: what if these ones don't eat from the forbidden tree this year?) A paradise in which I sometimes felt lost.

Perhaps this unsettling feeling had to do with my position as an early-career academic in a distinguished and highly protected environment. I knew the comfort was temporary, and I was right: I am writing this after having spent an unplanned month in Moscow waiting for a work visa for my next job, worrying about accommodation and other practical things that Wiko's wonderful "preparing-your-stay" team took charge of (thank you so much, again, Corina and Andrea!). Unlike our tenured co-Fellows, a few early-career people were applying for jobs, went to job interviews and wondered where they would end up next year. Combined with fascinating talks, incredibly enriching conversations and other exchanges, this made my Wiko year very challenging.

And yet, I am determined to remember this experience in all its complexity. More specifically, I want to remember the contrast between the charming fiction of intellectual autonomy and the real precariousness of our status. The tension between these two aspects reached its climax sometime in June. Berlin became then ostentatiously beautiful. I kept applying for jobs. And then, suddenly, I had to return my books. One of the most painful separations in my entire life – separation from my books, from fiction, and from those who worked hard to supply me with all this.