



REIMAGINING THE ARCHITECTURE
OF COMMUNICATION
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I came to the Wiko with two projects.

One was a traditional print book on a topic that historians of medicine had largely overlooked: the critical role of tense presence in the history of the European body. My aims in this study were to illuminate: 1) how the presence of life, mind, and agency was long associated in Western medicine and psychology with intuitions of *tension* (vital tone, muscular tonus, attention, intention, etc.); 2) how these intuitions in turn were tied to the imagination of an object that was so familiar for so long that its artificial nature was habitually forgotten, namely, the musical string; and 3) how the early twentieth century saw a remarkable reversal, whereby, seemingly overnight, tension came to be shunned as a dangerous pathology, and relaxation was touted as its necessary cure.

My other project was an e-book on the history of the body in European and East Asian medicine. My goal here was to compose a work that would not only spotlight hitherto neglected aspects of this history – especially the comparative evolution of embodied experience and the relationship of that experience to styles of writing and picturing – but also, and even more notably, exemplify a new form of scholarly storytelling. I wanted, concretely, to explore the possibilities of a “book” that would blend written text, spoken narration, animation, images, and sounds and would incorporate elements of ludic interactivity as well.

The year in Berlin inspired two changes.

First, I concluded that my tale of tense presence, like my comparative history of the body, might be more effectively told as an e-book. Its central puzzle, I realized, could be presented in a ninety-second synopsis, and the gist of its solution could be condensed to brief multimedia meditations (of 3–4 minutes each) on three icons: a second-century doctor contemplating a bird gliding in the sky, a 20th-century woman slumped in a chair, staring vacuously into space, and a tautly stretched string crafted from the guts of a sheep. In less than twelve minutes, a “reader” could thus survey the arc of my story and achieve a basic understanding of: a) why the virtues of tense presence long held sway, b) how relaxation emerged as a vital ideal, and c) how the ancient paradoxes of tension continue to shape our lives even now.

But the synopsis and three-part overview represented just the apex of a pyramid. Those who wished to learn more about particular elements in the explication of an icon – who became curious, for example, about the story of the slumped woman, about a frog that died in the Netherlands in December 1664, or about a blindfolded 19th-century American mentalist who read minds from muscles – could delve into a deeper layer of commentaries elaborating on their context and significance. And those who were intrigued, in turn, by certain details in these commentaries – for instance, the theological interpretation of ant ovaries in the story of the Dutch frog – could probe even deeper layers of texts and narratives pointing to further related topics and promising, but neglected sources.

The pyramid thus served as a sort of narrative microscope, allowing scrutiny of a tale under ever-higher resolutions. Perused horizontally, the episodes in each layer retold the same story, but each lower layer dramatically transfigured the version above it by offering finer granularity, adding subtle nuances and unexpected twists. Recast in this way, my book could flexibly accommodate a wide range of readings and offer a resource for

advanced researchers as well as an introduction for the casually curious. In under a dozen minutes, any reader could comprehend the main outlines of the history of life and presence, distilled to three memorable icons. But those who became intrigued and wished to learn more could probe much more deeply and explore the layered ramifications of this history for hours, while always being able, at any moment, to zoom out and recall the place and meaning of an odd detail in the overarching argument. Here, I came to think, was the real power of the digital format: the ease with which readers could start from concise, accessible lessons and absorb at their own pace and, following their particular paths of interest, explore ever more complex networks of connections.

My conception of e-books had changed. This was the second, more basic shift that occurred during my Wiko year. I arrived in Berlin with the assumption that the chief and yet largely unrealized potential of electronic publishing lay in the unique expressiveness of different media. I had experimented with multimedia exposition for some years and had been fascinated by how juxtaposing words with images, animations, and sounds created startling new textures of academic argument. But as I took apart my original manuscript on presence and began restructuring its elements into an e-book, my preoccupations came to focus increasingly on what one might term the architecture of learning. My goal became to design a structure that would maximize understanding and retention by responding flexibly to differing interests and rhythms of attention.

The knowledge that can be presented in a ten-minute talk is much less than can be conveyed in an hour lecture. That much is obvious. But if we turn from presentation to communication – from the knowledge that is expressed by a speaker to the knowledge that is actually grasped and remembered by listeners – the difference is far less clear. Scholarly communication is not like writing on a blank slate or like transporting boxes into an empty warehouse. It is not a simple transfer of information. It is the cultivation of a new understanding. It is more like gardening: plants need water and nutrients, but they also need time to appropriate them. Give a plant a year's worth of water and nutrients all in one day, and you are more likely to harm it than to accelerate its growth or enhance its size. Much the same goes for a lecture or a book: present too much unfamiliar detail at once, and you are less apt to enlighten than to overwhelm and discourage. Pacing is crucial. This was the idea that I hoped to translate into the design of my e-books.

My study of German reminded me of this daily. I came to the Wiko eager to improve my knowledge of the language; and thanks to Eva von Kügelgen, who introduced me to a series of beautiful, but accessible novels and listened with saintly patience to my mangled

commentaries on them, my German improved steadily. Nonetheless, at year's end, my oral expression and aural comprehension still had far to go. Although I now understood vastly more than before, the crucial turns in German lectures and *Krimis* alike often remained tantalizingly just beyond my grasp. Had I devoted more time to language study, I could doubtless have advanced further. But probably only somewhat further: there were only so many rules and idioms that I could absorb in one sitting, and they each took root only gradually. Only over the course of weeks and months did more and more of the baffling sounds around me become lucid meanings that I could understand without effort or thought. There was a necessary rhythm: meals of new vocabulary and grammar had to be followed by periods of digestion and assimilation. Incorporating new habits of ear and mind takes time.

Which leads me to conclude with a small suggestion. My Wiko sojourn was delightful in every way, and I cannot express enough my gratitude and admiration for the graciousness and professionalism of the Wiko administration and staff. The extraordinary care that they devoted to organizing our stay was plain in every detail. My one modest proposal concerns an alternative format for the Tuesday Colloquium: instead of devoting two hours to listening to and discussing one Fellow's work, one could, perhaps, try featuring *two one-hour presentation-discussions* by two Fellows. Each long-term Fellow could then be heard twice, once in the fall-winter and again in the spring-summer.

Most immediately, this would address a limitation of the current arrangement, whereby we hear the presentations of some colleagues only near the end of our sojourn. Having relatively in-depth knowledge early on of everyone's research would enhance what the Fellows can learn from each other at meals – the more one knows about a colleague's work, the more pertinent questions one can ask – and also increase the chances of their discovering shared interests.

But more significantly, splitting Fellows' presentations into two could, I think, encourage more serious interdisciplinary engagement. Listeners need time to mull over an unfamiliar approach and to appreciate, truly, the nature and extent of its foreignness. The various questions that must be worked through in order to grope toward a new understanding occur to us only in fits and starts. Speakers, for their part, can only know what is confusing or obscure to listeners by actually trying it out in a presentation. For listeners and speakers alike, then, a second chance to converse together, after some months of reflection and informal chats over meals, might well prove more fruitful and enlightening than the current second hour of a single session.

Is such a change possible? In academic life, as in life more generally, second chances are rare. But in the enchanted realm that is the Wiko, where fortunate Fellows dwell together for a year, they could be realized without extra costs or additional colloquium days, and would entail just a slight, sly tweak in rhythm. It may be worth a try. The effect could be magical.