



THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE FOREST
FINBARR BARRY FLOOD

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Arriving in Grunewald in early September was something of a culture shock. Moving from New York to Berlin for a year, I had somehow imagined gritty urban landscapes, bustling multicultural neighborhoods, street noise, and intermittent sirens. Having arrived in the city in August to teach at a summer school at the Humboldt University, I spent most of that month living in Mitte district, which (for better or worse) fulfilled many of these expectations. Despite having made one brief previous visit to the

Wissenschaftskolleg, the process of establishing a home in the sylvan seclusion and villa life of Grunewald required significant adjustment, especially in the first few days and weeks.

Those were filled with learning and internalizing the culture of a complex but welcoming institution. Inculcating the rituals and routines (both explicit and implicit) that would structure life for the cohort of neophytes during the coming year required a partial surrender of autonomy, and further readjustments. Among them was a terrifying return to the other side of the classroom for the first time in years under the guidance of the always encouraging and ever-patient Ursula.

As we began to settle into the preordained rhythm of colloquia, dinners, and lunches, a residual unease at the absence of urban life persisted. The turning point, when it came, was abrupt and potentially calamitous. Cycling back from Kaiser's supermarket one afternoon, a red squirrel ran across my path. Although native to Ireland, where I grew up, there red squirrels had long since succumbed to their more aggressive and successful grey cousins. As a result, they remained elusive, creatures known from photographs or nature documentaries. To have a first glimpse of such a mythical creature as it darted across one's path was almost a mystical experience. Absorbed in the elegant details of the autumn forager, its small, pointed ears and fog of fine red hairs clouding into a tail, I took my eyes off the bike path and sailed straight into the trunk of a roadside tree.

There were to be many sightings of these enchanting creatures over the coming months; although common, they never became commonplace. This first encounter with nature was soon followed by a host of other wildlife experiences, including routine encounters with the many foxes of Grunewald, a brief glimpse of a beaver, and the, ultimately unrealized, promise (or threat) of glimpsing a wild boar. In retrospect, it is clear that the trajectory of the year was marked as much by the natural rhythms of the forest, lakes, and their inhabitants as it was by the welcome rituals of daily lunches, Tuesday colloquia, and Thursday dinners.

In the first weeks, I established a working space in the Villa Walther that provided a spectacular vantage point overlooking the Herthasee. By October, the entire room was suffused with a fine yellow light, filtered through the dying leaves at the treetop level outside my desk. By November, the trees were almost bare, their thin trunks and branches populated by tree creepers and woodpeckers. As the days grew shorter and grayer, days at the laptop passed with the regular and welcome interruptions of small, colorful birds whose increasingly assertive and noisy appearances at the bird feeder outside my window

often drew my attention to the living world beyond the text and footnote. Soon, the days only felt complete when the passage of the swans along the canal under the window was glimpsed, graceful gliders whose domains shrank pathetically as the waters froze and when the first winter ice and snow transformed the Grunewald landscape. As winter set in, 2016 was welcomed watching over the foggy dampness of a wintery Berlin from a perch at the windows of an apartment high in Villa Walther while the bells tolled the end of the old year.

As is often the case in academic institutions, it was the informal meetings and unplanned coffees, the dinner table conversations and random encounters at the copier or scanner that offered the greatest opportunities for productive exchange. The frequency and intensity of such conversations mirrored the growing sense of collegiality, closely allied to the pleasures of commensality. The highly developed culinary skills of many Fellows were offered generously and repeatedly, especially by those with homes in Berlin, whose perpetual open-door hospitality did much to cement the bonds of fellowship and open horizons onto aspects of the city that lay beyond institutional life.

That city was not left unexplored. Outside the world of Wiko, new friendships were made, academic collaborations plotted, conferences and workshops attended, exhibitions and museums visited, objects studied, and full advantage taken of Berlin's rich musical offerings in both canonical and non-canonical forms. Early in the year, Clärchens Ballhaus in Mitte emerged as a favorite haunt for meeting with both Fellows and civilian friends, at least those willing to brave the dedicated and highly competitive milieu of the dance floor on a Tuesday night, Tango night.

As the year progressed, fellowship and friendship also mapped increasingly onto the topography of the Grunewald and its environs. Elective affinity and shared intellectual interests combined to forge bonds inseparable from the experience of ideas shared during long walks in nature. Damp winter walks to the Jagdschloss Grunewald followed by spells in cozy café haunts. Leisurely strolls to the compelling if sinister lure of the Teufelsberg and its eerie Cold War ruins. An outing to the palaces of Potsdam just as the leaves were returning and spring lilies were appearing around the banks of the lakes in Grunewald. A sultry summer excursion to the exotic world of the Pfaueninsel, with its whiff of alchemical histories, live peacocks, and neo-Gothic fantasies. These memorable excursions taught much about the history of the city in its most compelling and disturbing aspects, an ongoing process of personal enlightenment dependent on the patient willingness of colleagues to educate one remarkably ill-versed in the finer details of German history.

Among the many boons of the year, the opportunity to explore something of Germany, Switzerland, and Central Europe from a point of remarkable proximity was particularly welcome. Such explorations accompanied invitations to speak in venues such as the University of Basel or the Institute for Advanced Study in Budapest and to advance small research projects on topics such as marble in modernism, which necessitated several visits to the Czech Republic. The year was also punctuated by several short trips to the Middle East, India, and West Africa to deliver lectures or attend conferences, among them an exhilarating first visit to Beirut in April to deliver a series of seminars to a group of contemporary artists from the Middle East and beyond.

On these excursions, I began to anticipate rejoining a world of calm seclusion in Grunewald that at some indeterminate point had come to feel like home. This sense of sanctuary was heightened by the unfolding of a serious family illness through the course of the year, necessitating regular weekend visits to Dublin. After weekends spent in hospital wards, returning to Berlin and to the calm of the lakes and woods on Sunday nights was a balm that I came to relish.

This constant movement between poles of abjection and privilege invariably raised larger existential questions about what exactly we do, why it matters, and to whom. Similar questions arose from the accident of being present in Germany at a moment when the civil war in Syria reached new levels of cruelty, precipitating a mass migration of refugees whose pathetic passage across a hostile Europe was tracked day by day by an increasingly unsympathetic media. At times, it seemed that the transnational implications and humanitarian dimensions of Europe's greatest refugee crisis since 1945 were sidelined in favor of rather scholastic debates on the finer points of German immigration law.

The unfolding of these events led to unanticipated detours away from the major project that I had come to Wiko to work on. This was a critical rethinking of the so-called *Bilderverbot*, a *longue durée* study of material and textual sources that might help historicize the development of normative attitudes toward figurative imagery in the Islamic world and their relation to material practice. While a Fellow, I completed a long historiographic section of the book that surveys etic representations of Islamic attitudes toward images from the time of the Prophet Muhammad to the present day; this formed the basis of an *Abendkolloquium* at the Wissenschaftskolleg in May. The project was initially conceived as a response to the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban regime of Afghanistan in 2001. As events in the Middle East took their course during the academic

year, I undertook the writing of a short essay analyzing the role of images and iconoclasm in the propaganda of the Islamic State/Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

As this suggests, throughout the year I indulged in what I gather is a common failing among Wiko Fellows: juggling multiple projects simultaneously. This was an “error” that proved especially fruitful for – along with my major book project, which advanced by leaps and bounds thanks to the extraordinary helpfulness of the Wiko librarians – I was able to gather materials for two subsidiary projects, one on medieval Ethiopian architecture as an index of early globalism, the other on magic, healing, and talismanic practices in the Late Antique and early Islamic world. In addition, having access to such extraordinary library resources enabled me to complete a number of articles on topics ranging from the adoption of Turkic dress by medieval Georgian and Tibetan elites to the materiality of Qur’anic inscriptions in mosques as understood by medieval Islamic jurists.

The latter project reflects a long-term interest in the relationship between Islamic law and material culture. This is an emergent field of interdisciplinary study with few practitioners, and one of the great pleasures of the year was the presence of Leor Halevi, a pioneer, as another Wiko Fellow. Thanks to the generous support of the Wissenschaftskolleg, in June we were able to co-organize a workshop in Islamic law and material culture, bringing together for the first time a small group of international scholars drawn from the disciplines of Art History and Islamic Law for two days of exploratory discussion and exchange.

By then, however, the end was already in sight. In fact, it could even be scented in the sudden intensity of the Linden blossoms, a new aroma that sweetened the final weeks, as if in compensation for the looming melancholy of approaching departure.