



A YEAR WITHOUT WRITING ADRIÁN GORELIK

Adrián Gorelik (Mercedes, Buenos Aires, 1957) is an architect and Ph.D. in History (both degrees from the Universidad de Buenos Aires). He is a Full Researcher of CONICET and Full Professor at the Universidad Nacional de Quilmes (Argentina). His fields of research are the History of Urban Culture and Intellectual History in Latin America. He held a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2003 and was Simon Bolívar Professor at the University of Cambridge in 2011/12. Among other books, he has published *La grilla y el parque. Espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires, 1998); *Miradas sobre Buenos Aires. Historia cultural y crítica urbana* (Buenos Aires, 2004); *Das vanguardas a Brasília. Cultura urbana e arquitetura na América Latina* (Belo Horizonte, 2005); and *Correspondencias. Arquitectura, ciudad, cultura* (Buenos Aires, 2011) and (together with Fernanda Peixoto) edited *Ciudades sudamericanas como arenas culturales* (Buenos Aires, 2016). – Address: Centro de Historia Intelectual, Departamento de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Roque Sáenz Peña 352, B1876BXD Bernal, Provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina. E-mail: agorelik@ung.edu.ar.

In Buenos Aires, soon before traveling to Berlin, I had the opportunity to meet Franco Moretti, who was in the city presenting two of his books that had recently been translated into Spanish. Thanks to a friend in common – José Emilio Burucúa, an ex-Wiko-Fellow himself – I managed to chat with Franco and catch a glimpse of the pleasant moments we would share in Berlin, every time he came to visit – fortunately, quite often. If I mention it here, it is because this was a revealing, almost premonitory meeting: as soon as he got to know about my prospective stay at Wiko, Franco produced a sentence I initially took for

a *boutade*, although its echoes would come back to me during my whole stay: “There is no worse plan for taking advantage of a stay at Wiko than to try to write a book.” At that moment, though, I only managed to smile in complicity, as if I knew what he was talking about – we had barely met, and I would not let his well-known provocative style catch me off guard. I obviously didn’t mention the fact that my plan was precisely that – what else would a scholar expect to do when offered a year-long period, free of academic commitments, in an atmosphere of intellectual work that everyone who had been at Wiko coincided in describing as idyllic? The fact was that Moretti’s sentence was far from a *boutade*: first, it worked almost like a curse; later on, it became a redemptive prophecy.

As soon as I arrived, I was immediately struck by the contrast between my prospect of productive seclusion and the intensity of intellectual exchanges that were offered to me at every step. It was a contrast that plunged me into a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Since I had begun my stay a month late, I initially thought that such a situation was the consequence of my difficulty keeping up with the rest of the Fellows, who seemed settled and comfortable with the Wiko lifestyle. But I soon realized that there were deeper reasons for my state of mind – reasons shared by many Fellows, whose apparent “comfort” was simply the distorted effect of my anxious perspective. It was not simply a matter of lack of time, but rather of an incompatibility between two types of spiritual and intellectual attitudes: openness to the new and the need to concentrate in order to fulfill a writing task. I realized, in sum, that a book – and not any other piece of writing, but *a book* (and here Franco’s phrase resonated once and again) – requires a certain degree of isolation from the world.

My book project, thus, continued, but the world in front of me offered too many temptations. To begin with, each conversation with Wiko Fellows entailed a fascinating trip to a double geography: that of their places of origin, loaded with social, political, and cultural experiences, and that of their regions of knowledge and expertise, full of resources that enlarged one’s own. Second, Wiko’s library, available for all the sorts of curiosity aroused by those conversations and experiences. Third, the German classes, in which our phenomenal teachers, Eva and Ursula, introduced us weekly not to a language, but to an entire civilization – indeed, it was in those classes that I gathered the core of my first group of complicities: Lena, Frédéric, Emily, Marina, Claire, Hitomi, Jihwan, Jennifer, John, and obviously Graciela. Finally, of course, Berlin itself, an endless urban experience. If these temptations generated during the first months a disturbing state of mind, in which the thrill of experimentation could not be easily differentiated from the guilty

awareness of the hours I was stealing from writing, it was thanks to Franco's dictum that I eventually managed to see the situation as a dilemma that had to be solved: I abandoned the book entirely and indulged without reservations in the exploration of the new.

I mention here only three of its territories. I devoted myself to reading, to the point that I realized how much the academic world would improve if it recovered some of Jorge Luis Borges's attitude: "Let others boast of pages they have written, / I take pride in those I've read" (*In Praise of Darkness*). In times when scholarly written and published production is reaching an unmanageable – and dubious – scale, and academic institutions lightheartedly remain within the productivistic logic according to which they make quantitative evaluations of texts that nobody could ever manage to read, it might be wiser – and, why not, revolutionary – to write much less and much slower, so that we can make sure that every word we add to the world deserves its place in it. In other words, to apply a principle of "slow science", which I embraced since my experience at Wiko.

Reading is hospitable to stimuli: it welcomes and multiplies them. Yet, its base, the roadmap that on that occasion guided me to the construction of a new personal library, came, as said, from continual intellectual exchange with the closest Fellows. This state of continuous conversation led me to reflect more seriously about an essential dimension of the experience at Wiko: the question of translation. It was not simply a matter of the translation across the different languages we used – with all my limitations to do it properly. What was most stimulating was, rather, to be forced to think and express myself in terms that could be understood by this set of demanding interlocutors who didn't have the implicit knowledge my research topics presupposed. The translation effort required to reframe my research in broader cultural terms led me to rethink it critically. I certainly have to acknowledge dear Fellows like Lena, Giacomo, Marina, Alberto, Esther, Mary, Cornelia, Frédéric, Asef, Linda, David, Mike, Barbara, Andrea, Carey, Claire, Rogers, Susan ... – some of them close friends, others not as close as I would have desired – for their empathy and for the rigor they imposed on the task.

Last but not least, I devoted myself intensely – or *we* did, I should say, including Graciela – to Berlin. It is well-known that any city can be understood as an open-air museum of its society's history – as a cultural cartography. But Berlin takes that general fact to an extreme and exquisite degree of fulfillment. I don't mean here simply the massive evidence left by the conscious work of memorialization that distinguishes this city: in Berlin there is almost no spot without history, nor any piece of history that has not been turned into a *lieu de mémoire*, and that has not been the object of harsh controversy concerning its

monumentalization (I have always found the *Stolpersteine* project the most subtle and moving case of this type of process). I mean also that Berlin, being more than any other city the epicenter of the destructive violence that characterized the 20th century, managed to leave material traces of each of its past epochs, thus allowing the observer to reconnect its pieces and – like someone who can read the lost order of the world in a geological cross-section – to rewrite the city’s history simply by walking its streets. It is worth mentioning that I did not have the systematicity nor the insane genius of Michael, who devoted himself to plot the entire city in his walks – a plan that, I confess, I envied as soon as I got to know about it. My experience was more modest, but I like to think, equally intense.

This was my third time in Berlin. My first two stays, however, had been shorter, only allowing me to consciously and conscientiously survey its main museums, its theaters, and its most notable urban and architectural sites – from Schinkel to the interwar *Siedlungen*, from Scharoun to the 1980s’ IBA. It felt as if I had gathered all the dots on the plan, but without the lines that convey meaning to it. This time, based on that prior knowledge and favored by the length and the conditions of my stay, I was able to have another type of experience, putting into practice the famous motto that opens *Berlin Childhood*: “Not to find one’s way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one’s way in a city, as one loses one’s way in a forest, requires some schooling.” The very fact of living in Grunewald – something I initially disliked, since I felt it exterior to Berlin proper – acquired new meaning: it was the heart of Benjamin’s Berlin, the West around which his worlds orbited. Or, at least, it was the point of departure from which I could plan an overall attack on the city: to walk towards Mendelssohn’s Schaubühne, or even further up to Shklovsky’s Zoo; to take the S7 that opens the entire East to you; or the M19, combining with the U2 in Wittenbergplatz or getting straight up to Kreuzberg; all these were means not simply to get somewhere, but rather to let oneself be carried away, getting off at any point and randomly walking through the different neighborhoods, in a journey of discovery and appropriation.

With typical surrealist wit, Guy Debord once mentioned the experience of a friend of his who had used a map of London to ramble through a German city. It is an anecdote that contains much of the situationist program: the transgressive and ludic use of the city through the disorientation and the denaturalization of the given. It is a program that Georges Perec would use to produce the best of his literature and that I have always found exciting. Yet, I discovered this time in Berlin that such a program is valid only for locals, who need to become estranged from their own city in order to understand it. Instead,

when we go through a city as actual strangers, denaturalization is our natural state: we always carry with ourselves – in our heads, but even more strongly below our feet’s soles – other cities and, first and foremost, our own. So, we establish spontaneous parallelisms, made out of constant and minuscule comparisons and contrasts, which somehow make the situationist game redundant and, more importantly, useless. In contrast, if there is anything I can congratulate myself on from this stay in Berlin, it is that – thanks to a strenuous work of naturalization, thanks to the fact that this time I did not set out to “get to know” the city, but rather to become one with it – my mind, and especially my feet, managed for some few and sublime moments to forget Buenos Aires.

But now I’m back home, and I can finally begin to write the book I didn’t write in Berlin. I am confident that all I have done and learned through my year at Wiko will somehow become palpable in my writing. I am certain, in fact, that it is already perceivable in my post-Wiko life. And, most importantly, I now know what to recommend to any prospective Wiko Fellow: “There is no worse plan for taking advantage of a stay at Wiko than to try to write a book.”