



DEVOIRS DES VACANCES
GIANNA POMATA

I was educated and trained in Italy, but most of my professional life as a historian has been divided almost equally between Europe and the United States. Before joining Johns Hopkins University in 2007, I taught for many years at the Universities of Bologna and Minnesota. My research interests include early modern European social and cultural history, with a main focus on the history of medicine. I have worked on the history of epistemic categories, genres, and practices in early modern medicine, with particular attention to medical empiricism and its role in the history of scientific observation. I have always been fascinated by the history of the doctor-patient relationship, and particularly by those aspects of medical knowledge that deal with the patient as an individual human being. This is why I have developed a research interest in the history of the medical case narrative – the topic of the book I am currently writing. A cross-cultural approach to the history of medical genres and epistemologies is a central feature of my present research work. – Address: Institute for the History of Medicine, Johns Hopkins University, 1900 East Monument Street, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA. E-mail: gpomata1@jhmi.edu.

I go over the pages of my Wiko notebooks, which had remained closed ever since I left Berlin, and a whiff of distinctive air comes from them – an air that I used to breathe in my school-age childhood, the infinitely sweet air of my *devoirs des vacances*.

Compiti delle vacanze, or better said in French, *devoirs des vacances*, were the assignments that schoolchildren would be given for the summer vacation when I grew up. The assignments accompanied our July, August, and September, were taken to the beach and to the countryside, got stained with seawater, gathered sand and pine needles, until they

acquired the smell of summer, and with it, summer's irresistible, boundless charm. I was a child who loved school passionately, and just as passionately, I loved its polar opposite, the magical emptiness of summer, the suspension of effort and pressure that she (benevolent female deity) held in her gift. The *compiti delle vacanze* solved the tension for me, coupling my two loves harmoniously, without contradiction.

This is what I found at Wiko: a place where *otium et negotium* are reconciled and held together in miraculous balance – a place where everything is set up for intense, serious work, and yet every day has a festive air. Busman's holiday: when happily, unexpectedly, a routine task takes on the delightful quality of leisure. I came to Wiko burdened with the anxiety of finishing a book that has been many years in the making: the anxiety of making the most of a period of respite from the incessant round of academic duties; the anxiety that comes with age, and the growing sense of one's limits that comes with age. Like poor Edward Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, I felt encumbered with a task so ambitious that it seemed at times oppressive, almost crushing. I expected my Wiko Fellows to be similarly weighed down by the same anxiety – each of us frantically trying to concentrate on the achievement of a major, long-protracted goal. So I expected a monastic community and yes, I found it – but it was the Rabelaisian Abbaye de Thélème, whose rule, as you may recall, was “do as you please”: “Fais ce que voudras”. The appropriately named Thélème is the locus of *θέλημα*, the deep will, distinct from the superficial will that is at the beck and call of external demands. So Thélème is the place where one can connect with what is truly essential in one's goals, the deep core at the center of oneself, instead of being tossed here and there by the distracting requirements and allurements of academic life. This is what one is asked to do at Wiko: follow the rule that comes from deep within yourself, your *θέλημα*.

This is what Wiko did for me. I came to Wiko with a book project that is more ambitious than any other book I ever wrote, and that has been troubling me with a disquieting sense of dangerous overconfidence, even hubris. I have been writing a history of the medical case history (the report of the course of disease in an individual patient), a form of medical writing that we find in various cultures and times. I decided long ago to trace this history from antiquity to modernity, from the origins of this medical genre in Hippocratic medicine all the way to the threshold of modern medicine in the Romantic age – two millennia of history. As if this weren't enough, I was intrigued by the presence of a rich literature of case narratives in Chinese medicine, and I decided to compare the development of the genre in the two medical traditions, European and Chinese. To put it in the

jargon of academia (and grant applications), I'm engaged in writing a long-term and cross-cultural history of the medical case narrative. Such a wide-ranging enterprise cannot but be a source of anxiety for any historian in her right mind, any historian, that is, who's got the sense to know how very difficult it is to do good comparative work and to study the long duration while avoiding superficiality. And a sensible, modest, ordinary historian is all I am and ever want to be – that is, no more no less, my *θέλημα*. So I faced my task in this book with determination mixed with a great deal of trepidation (and sometimes practically nothing but trepidation). Do I dare write such a book? I came to Wiko with a fervent yes to this question, but the fervor was tempered by frequent visitations of self-doubt. Wiko gave me the confidence, the energy, the *élan* to tackle the task.

This happened quite early on in the year, in a Tuesday Colloquium, the weekly presentation and discussion that is possibly the best of all good things at Wiko, a weekly feast of the mind to which I became addicted (and which I sorely miss). This was Michael Jennions' colloquium. In our *Thélème*, Michael played the special role of truth-teller: he would always say exactly what he thought, irrespective of academic proprieties and etiquette. "You social scientists study just a tiny corner of the world", or words to that effect, said Michael candidly in his Colloquium. Shocked silence in the room. "But surely one can do much, in the way of advancing knowledge, even by working with a fine brush on a little bit of ivory", I retorted silently inside myself, fiercely defensive of my calling. Nevertheless, Jennions' words stayed with me, worked their way through me, and had in fact a liberating effect. They made me more comfortable with my very broad – all right, perhaps even too broad – canvas, more accepting of my craving for spaciousness, and, why not, intellectual daring. Moreover, and more importantly, as I worked out my rejoinder to Michael in my head over the following months, a central aspect of my book became clearer to me. The scientists' passion for casting the net very wide, that is, for generalizations that capture complexity, prodded me to bring attention to another way of capturing complexity, by particularization, not generalization – a cognitive mode that has been important especially in medicine, and of which the history of the medical case narrative, with its focus on disease in the individual patient, offers ample and fascinating evidence.

The interaction at Wiko between the humanists (like me) and the biologists (like Michael) was full, I'm sure, of similar episodes of mutual challenge and inspiration. Of all the intellectual stimuli to which I was exposed, in a year that was full to the brim with mental adventures and excursions of all kinds, the contact with the life scientists was central. This in spite of the fact that such contact was not really something new to me,

since my home institution is the Johns Hopkins Medical School, and contact with medical researchers and practicing physicians is something I treasure and actively seek. But the way the contact happens at Wiko has a special quality. It is not occasional, intermittent; it is a regular feature of the intellectual fare. Each week, in our Colloquium paper, we all – humanists and biologists alike – were expected to lay open our projects to each other, together with the huge intellectual and emotional investment we put into them, and translate our work for each other, so that its *raison d'être* would appear clear even from a distant perspective. We were making a “distant reading” of our own work possible, to use the concept of fellow Wikonian (and best of Thélémite) Franco Moretti. Of all the opportunities that beckoned to me at Wiko, the mix of practitioners of the human and the natural sciences was the one I most eagerly anticipated and observed with the keenest curiosity. Were the practitioners of the “two cultures” truly going to communicate? Did the mix work? It is impossible here to analyze the ins and outs of what happened (and did not happen). But this should be said, that just the possibility of constant dialogue and mutual observation was extraordinarily engaging.

Then there were the novelists, the filmmakers, the artists, a photographer with the true artist's eye – the kindest and sharpest eye I've ever met – dear Frédéric Brenner. From them also I learned daily – in snippets of talk over our communal table (*al volo*, as we say in Italian), in leisurely walks in the peaceful greenness of Grunewald, accompanied by just as leisurely conversation. It is impossible to acknowledge it all – the energy, the friendliness, the generous outpouring of ideas, suggestions, references that I received from each one and all of my fellow Wikonians. More than any specific help, support, or contribution, of which there was plenty, what stays in my mind as indelible memory is the caressing quality of the air we breathed as we all genuinely tried to understand each other's projects – as we sensed, underneath disciplinary demarcations and limits, the beautiful unity of the human mind in its quest for knowledge, whether in literature or in science.

So here I was, between the twin splendors of science and literature – where history has always been located – very conscious and appreciative of their splendor and yet happy to return to my more modest task as a historian. I went on with my work. The book took shape gradually, chapter after chapter. The leitmotifs running through it became clearer to me when I had to explain them to healthily skeptical biologists, economists, novelists, instead of the usual sympathetic audience of historians and anthropologists. My sense of belonging, of fitting in, of moving in a congenial and nurturing medium increased daily and sped up my work. When I wrote my Colloquium paper, I came to realize how much

I owed to present and past Wiko Fellows. To name just a few: Paul Unschuld, whose foundational work on the history of Chinese medicine has made possible the work of comparativists like me; Shigehisa Kuriyama, who has given us an exquisite model of what such comparative history should and could be – a true magician at the art of historical comparison; Franco Moretti, whose work on “distant reading” gave me the courage to paint on a broad canvas, and whose ability to ignore the fictitious boundaries between the natural and the human sciences is unparalleled; and Lorraine Daston, whose lifelong work on the history of probability, objectivity, rationality, and rules has opened up unprecedented routes into the history of knowledge.

I realize I’m drawing what may seem a far too idyllic, too rosy picture of life at Wiko. But in fact, Wiko is no ivory tower where one is cosseted and screened from a rough world. 2016/17 was a terrible year in Europe and in Berlin. A year of horror, epitomized for me by the terrorist attack on the Weihnachtsmarkt in Breitscheidplatz, which left me inexpressibly hurt and shocked – perhaps because it was a deliberately brutal attack on Christmas rituals, so an attack on the child in me. Here also, in helping me make sense of a world that is becoming increasingly and atrociously senseless, Wiko gave me so much. Whether disagreeing with Rogers Brubaker on how to understand contemporary movements labeled “populist”; listening with rapt attention to Lena Lavinas on financialization and Mary O’Sullivan on contemporary capitalism; or – truly a moment of revelation – learning from Dieter Grimm about the legal mechanisms that have turned the path of the European Union in undemocratic directions: on all these occasions, I felt that Wiko was giving me precious tools to better understand the bewildering world in which I live. Of all these moments, perhaps the most moving was the account of the human costs of globalization powerfully expressed by Fellow Shaheen Dill-Riaz in his documentary *Past is Present*, which brought tears of understanding to my eyes.

It was the sense of a frightening, chaotic, brutal external world that enhanced my perception of Wiko as a place of order and beauty in the midst of wilderness. To me, in the terrible year 2016/17, Wiko was the home that the poet William Butler Yeats wished for his daughter: “a house where all is accustomed, ceremonious”. A house devoted to the customs of intellectual hospitality, conviviality, and friendship. May Wiko long be a reincarnation of the Abbaye de Thélème, a utopian community that holds up the fragile values of scholarship and wisdom, reason and reasonableness, above the rushing waters that are surrounding us. May this well-ordered and ceremonious house be long-lasting. I give thanks for all I received there.