



BERLIN ENCHANTMENT  
JAMES SIMPSON

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I teach a course at my home university that contrasts utopian philosophical schemes, from Plato to Marx, with more skeptical literary accounts of how the road to hell is paved with utopian intentions, from Euripides to Chekhov. My course asks American undergraduates to treat utopian schemes with due caution. When I return to teaching in Fall '18, I will be obliged to teach the course a little differently, since now I know that not all utopias end badly: the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin is as close to an intellectual utopia as I will ever get, and I will remain forever grateful for its radiant generosity and for its dedicated promotion of the intellectual life.

But even if the Wiko is indisputably a kind of *Zauberberg*, one was consistently conscious across the year that the Wiko is but a preparation for return to a disenchanted world. Any world would feel disenchanted after the Wiko, but the consciousness of challenges ahead this year was especially pressing. Ours is, and our year at the Wiko was, to cite the English title of a book by Daniel Schönplug, *A World on Edge*. In fact we all felt the pressure of that disenchanted, not to say often brutal world to which we will soon return very directly: many of our Fellows were under threat from their own governments. In my view, many of the colloquium discussions we had were marked and enriched precisely by a difference between two sets of Fellows. On the one hand, some of us read and experienced history from the conviction that we belonged to roughly coherent historico-legal communities; on the other, some of us experienced history at the sharp and painful end of illegitimate governmental action aggressively targeting scholars, among many others. There were many shades between the obvious cases at either end of this spectrum, each one with very specific and often arresting contributions to make.

For me personally, this was primarily a year of writing rather than reading. Of course the Library was indispensable for checking materials. (The rapidity, efficiency, and friendliness of the library system stand at the heart of Wiko's flourishing formula.) I arrived with 12 or so first draft chapters of a book written (*Permanent Revolution: The Reformation and the Illiberal Roots of Liberalism*), a book about early modern European modernity and religion. I leave with 18 chapters fully written, accepted by Harvard University Press, and to be published in January 2019.

In addition, I wrote or wrote up a number of articles: on the late medieval traditions of representing the Trojan War; on early modern paintings of church interiors, and their implications for memory, by the 17th-century Dutch painter Saenredam; on late medieval-early modern English literary historiography; on English translations of Alain Chartier's brilliant early 15th-century text about France in civil war, the *Quadriologue Invecitif*; and about Whig historiography's persistent errors about the Reformation and its understanding of work. So energizing was the context, and so ready was the Library to foster my work, that I also embarked on my next book project. This is focused on the representation of recognition in works of European literature and our own cognitive experience of recognition as we read those works. I sketched the whole book and wrote the first three chapters. On the edge of all this work, I made significant headway with an edition of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer that I am co-editing.

In sum, this was a hugely productive year. Many contexts made it even more productive. The presence of evolutionary biologists changed my thinking about the relation of the humanities and the life sciences. The presence of Fellows from Eastern Europe had me focused properly and with nuance beyond the frontiers at which I usually stop in Europe. I learned a great deal about German medieval poetry from a delightful weekly “poetry slam”, at which another Fellow and I swapped texts from the German-speaking and Anglophone traditions. My German classes, which ran throughout the year, gave me a much richer understanding of German history and culture, as well as a good reading knowledge of the language.

In addition to the astonishing intellectual richness of the Wiko, this was also, I say in closing, a thoroughly delightful year. How could it not have been? Very easily in fact: were it not for the utterly professional, dedicated, ever-cheerful staff of the Wiko, this remarkable institution would not be magical at all. The social life of the Wiko, with its regular common meals, is no less at the heart of the Wiko’s success than the library system. All of us walked on water across the entire year, or so it seemed. But just below the surface the astute and accomplished direction and staff, at every level, without exception, lightened and energized our way.

My wife Luisella and I will remain forever grateful to the Wissenschaftskolleg for its gift of an extraordinarily productive, profoundly illuminating, and utterly delightful year.