



TAUSEND STÄBE, KEINE WELT
ANTHONY OSSA-RICHARDSON

Anthony Ossa-Richardson is a literary and intellectual historian born and raised in London. He was educated at Bristol University, the University of York, and the Warburg Institute and now teaches English Literature at University College London. He has published two dozen articles on a diverse range of historical topics from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries and is the author of two monographs: *The Devil's Tabernacle* (2013), on early modern ideas about the oracles of ancient Greece, and *A History of Ambiguity* (2019), an account of how readers from Antiquity to the present have posited, denied, conceptualised, and wrestled over the existence of double meanings in texts. In 2023 he will publish (with Richard Oosterhoff) the first new English translation in four hundred years of Johannes Leo Africanus's 1526 *Cosmography and Geography of Africa*, the first modern book about Africa in a European language. He is currently engaged in two book projects, one on the intellectual context of post-war British architecture, the other on the problem of communication in Elizabethan literature, although these are on hold while he tries to unravel the conspiracy at the heart of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. – Address: English Department, University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom. E-mail: a.ossa-richardson@ucl.ac.uk.

I have no desire here to record all my memories of the Wissenschaftskolleg over the past year, and, in any event, you would not believe them if I did. (I'll just let that sink in for a moment.) Only in hindsight am I beginning to make sense of it all; the owl of midnight flies only at – no, the owl of, what was it? Something like that. It is remarkable just how differently I interpret in recollection the stray gesture, comment, or joke, with all that

I now know. Nothing could have seemed more innocent as we sat by the lake on the “pontoon,” as some illiterate wag dubbed the measly strip of concrete with the table and benches on the waterside below Villa Walther. I ought to have known something was up, but I couldn’t have guessed just how many were in on it. I was amazed by the colloquia each week, and especially by the standard of questions for an hour afterwards, from people who had no right to any cognizance of the topic in question. I knew, of course, that everyone there had been handpicked from across the globe and assumed their insights reflected only a superior class of scholar, you know, not the typical riffraff that passes for the academy these days. That reflected well on me, too. I was delighted that somebody had finally recognised *my* talents after my long labours in thankless obscurity. Perhaps that is always the case: nobody suspects a thing, because to do so would compromise one’s own self-esteem. So we have all just been sitting around thinking ourselves very clever indeed.

I do not remember exactly when I first guessed that the colloquia were not what they seemed: that they were a coded means for the conspirators to exchange plans and ideas. Some were subtler than others. One woman was so acute at discerning a paper’s problems or contradictions that I now wonder if the papers were designed precisely for her to interrogate in that manner. By contrast, another of our colleagues almost gave the game away with his clumsy questions. Then again, it may be the variety itself, carefully staged, that was designed to throw me off the scent. Poring over the talks again now – I have the recordings, although some of them, I’m convinced, have been tampered with, and others are missing altogether – I’ve begun to make out the patterns, the slips, the disguised allusions, and to catch at the lineaments of the whole design. I know now what they meant by “global,” by “reality,” “penetrating,” “entanglement,” “Hegel”... even “camel”; some of their watchwords were, it must be said, pretty goofy.

But now that I am putting the pieces together I realise it can all have only one meaning. This work has consumed me in a way that my academic pursuits never did, and I must confess that the project with which I arrived in Berlin, as brilliant as it is, has fallen by the wayside in my pursuit of the secret. Let the others, to the extent they were who they said they were, plod on with their niche projects on urban design or animal feed, democracy, migration, or the history of fashion; I have bigger game in my sights, and have no intention of succumbing to distraction now that the sinister dream of Grunewald is dissolving behind me. This time, I will not be denied.

The truth is simple: several Fellows present in the first few months suddenly disappeared, like the woman on the train in that Hitchcock movie. Not all at once, but

sporadically. And just as spookily, each person who vanished was quickly replaced by another. Nobody else seemed alarmed by this, and not a soul complained or even spoke to me of it. Was I the only one to notice? These ambitious young stars were never seen again. I tried to make enquiries at their putative home institutions, but met with polite dismissals. I tried to warn the new arrivals. It was no use. None of the Fellows cared, and why should they? Our life was so comfortable there, with the verdant surroundings and the hubbub of chat around our interminable daily gnocchi, our veins coursing with plonk from the college's cornucopian cellar. That wine must have been extremely potent, and possibly spiked with something stronger; there are certain nights I ill remember, and nights I recall with shame at my own drugged behaviour. But I thank my creator that I was hale enough to withstand its heavier effects; no doubt this poison was a crucial component in the cabal's machinations. I can only surmise that it was those poor dolts unable to hold their liquor whose participation was so abruptly and mysteriously curtailed. "If your wish be to close me, / I and my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly," and so on.

Nobody – *nobody* – was quite sure how the whole lavish operation was funded. Would it be rash to suggest that these *desaparecidos* hold the key to that mystery? Was their property simply expropriated and sold off, or were they themselves ransomed? Or trafficked to – no, I dare not speculate on that front. If murdered, where did the bodies go? Buried in the forest? Concrete shoes at the bottom of the Halensee? Served as roulade? What exactly was inside that hideous fountain installed in the garden by the survivors of last year's cohort? But the true question is – *who knew?* Our warm, elegantly turned-out hosts, of course. I know talent and competence when I see it, and they frankly projected authority. Excellent historians, too. I don't trust a historian. One of them was even kind enough to introduce me to the phenomenon of printing, which for some reason had escaped me; I had always wondered how so many people had managed to read my work. You see, these were astute operators; no such conspiracy could possibly have escaped them. The question is rather of the Fellows themselves, as I mentioned. Did all know, or only some? Who were the ringleaders, who the cowards and cronies maintaining *omertà*, and who utterly clueless? I have my hunches. The dissident Russian literary critic K. – he was high up. The fiery Italian philosopher based in England – high up. The woman who studies epidemics at Princeton – high up. Two-faced, the lot of them. The Californian hyena – crony. The self-confessed witch – crony. The demographer who didn't even know how many demographers there were – crony. Damn them all, and damn their damnable ideas. It would be so important for them to hear that. But the political theorist

with a taste for the *avant-garde* – innocent. (I have doubts about his elusive wife, though.) The photographer and the playwright – clueless, both too honest, too handsome. You wouldn't want to point the finger at someone with actual creative *talents*. About others, such as all those inaudible mumblers, I must for the moment remain agnostic.

As for the mastermind of the enterprise, my suspicions lie with one of the shiftiest coves in the whole rum gang, an “artist” from a large country it would be circumspect of me not to name. He showed me his work, nothing but obscenities, politicking, and waffle. No wonder I'd never heard of him. His so-called colloquium, ostensibly the offering of an idler, comprised nothing more than a tissue of recordings from previous talks. It is obvious in retrospect, however, that it was not really a colloquium at all, but, as I said, a message to his henchmen, a summary of the main points of the plan to date as expressed in their own presentations. The most important instructions were even repeated several times to ensure compliance. It was an infernal, hypnotising performance worthy of Dr Mabuse.

Halfway through the year, I decided to get close to the artist so as to keep a better eye on him. I would venture to say that we actually became friends. His wife, an inveterate doodler, was entirely charming, as she ought to have been. I hardly trust her more than her husband. Their flat, high up at the front of the Villa, had a balcony adorned with grotesque, engorged stone *putti*, from which a dictator might have harangued adoring crowds in the street below. We saw them many nights, most nights. There was a group of us, in fact, and we drank together almost every evening, dabbling, so to speak, in the minestrone. We even travelled to Prague for a long weekend, probably a pretext for the little band to scout for victims beyond the confines of Grunewald, or else to meet contacts with whom to conduct their nefarious business. As it happened, I only ran into one of the other Fellows, a Bavarian innocent mostly interested in collecting Czech beer steins.

Innocent alike was another member of our troupe, a shy and retiring young novelist, not a Fellow herself but a partner. I was initially suspicious of her friendliness: for instance, she claimed to want to read the *Inferno* with me – ironic choice of text! And who ever heard of tagging along with somebody to an archive for the sake of a story? My guess then was that she ran counter-surveillance on the artist's behalf, allowing him to preserve an aura of mystery with his cryptic text messages and inexplicable fascinations. I had to rule this theory out. You see, I hadn't considered the possibility that her writing might be any good, but one night she passed around one of her pieces, a vignette of autobiography from her childhood. She denied it was autobiographical of course, but that is just what writers do. It was full of feeling and purpose, and, as I think I said already (do I repeat

myself? Very well then, I repeat myself), I trust an artistic talent. As if to reinforce my change of attitude, she demonstrated herself, unlike the philosopher and the cloth-eared Russian critic, alive to the richness of English rhyme. One makes the occasional mistake, but you can rely on someone with an instinct for language.

I had hoped to spend this year in paradise exchanging ideas and reading lists, getting on with my important project, and meeting senior professors who might prove useful to me in my future career. If this did not come about, it is no fault of mine. I gather from looking at past yearbooks that it is customary for Fellows to lament their lack of progress on their projects, and I have no choice but to continue that ignominious tradition. But unlike the dozers and shirkers and partiers of yesteryear, I can be proud of what I am at last beginning to accomplish. The task is not yet complete, and time is dwindling. I have already sacrificed so much, not least that flighty, desultory woman I have long called wife. For sure, the other entries in this book will paint a gay and trivial picture of academic bonhomie, with nary a suggestion of malpractice. I hope you will see through that charade, read between the lines. But to any future Fellow who may peruse these pages, I say – *beware!* If my luck runs out, perhaps you will be able to stand on my giant shoulders and bring the whole corrupt edifice crashing down, engorged *putti* and all.