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Michael Gorra: The Bells in Their Silence

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Cultural Capital

Hamburg, Hannover, Göttingen, and Kassel. There were other trains: the tracks to the dull marshy west toward Bremen and Osnabrück (change for Amsterdam), or the maddeningly slow and infrequent service to Berlin, whose cars were always crowded with students. There was the boat-train north to Denmark and the local to Lübeck. But this was the one we took most often from our temporary home, the white and bullet-nosed InterCity Express that dropped south at a speed America could only dream of—Hamburg to Frankfurt in three hours and a half, Munich in just over six. Though today I wasn't going quite so far. "*Griissen Sie Thüringen von mir,*" the happy pink-faced conductor had said when he punched my ticket. Say hello to Thuringia for me. He was young and plump, with a ginger mustache; I had trouble with his accent and wondered when he'd left.

In the café car, I spread the *Herald-Tribune* under coffee and rolls and looked up from "Doonesbury" as, south of Hannover, the north German lowlands began to ripple into hills. I finished my breakfast and the ripples turned into folds, the hills began to offer something like a prospect. A landscape has to be uneven before you can see it—the bands of fields and forests, the villages settled in valleys, confined and bordered, framed, and yet because

of that open and legible, in a way that the flat countryside around Hamburg almost never is. Then the train was at Göttingen, the university town of the Brothers Grimm, unvisited. And then Kassel, where six months before Brigitte had led me around the Documenta, building after building of oddly undemanding contemporary art. Kassel: change for Weimar. It was a slow train now, along rivers and through tight-packed hills, a postcard landscape with every town tucked neatly in a bend of the stream, unbombed and old-fashioned and no longer quite so gray as they would have been when this was still the East.

And then Weimar. I wheeled my bag downhill from the station, past the set of brooding administrative buildings that the Nazis had built, along the tree-lined Schillerstrasse, through the crowded Marktplatz with its vendors of fruit and *Fleisch* and blue Bohemian pottery, and into the lobby of the Hotel Elephant. And so began my jog around this small and architecturally modest city that has nevertheless figured on the traveller's shopping list for two centuries and more. Every reader of German literature knows the story: how the Dowager Duchess Anna Amalia of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, widowed young and ambitious in a way that her son's small realm couldn't satisfy, started inviting poets and thinkers to make their home in his capital. Wieland came, to serve as tutor to Anna Amalia's son Karl August, and Herder took over the city's largest church. The most important invitation, however, was that extended by the young duke himself, who in 1775 picked out the day's hottest talent and asked him to visit, a writer who though only in his twenties was already a bestseller, a notorious maker of taste and of fashion. Goethe came, he saw, he stayed. He picked up a title, supervised Weimar's finances, established the theater, chaired the War Commission, oversaw the duchy's mines, and always, always kept his pen moving. Schiller joined him 1787, and long after Goethe's death the place remained attractive enough to become Liszt's base of operations.

Now you can buy their faces on plates and mugs, and in Goethe's case on much more besides. He has, for example, given

his name to a popular mark of brandy, whose labels carry a detail from the portrait that his friend Tischbein did in Rome: the poet in a wide-brimmed gray hat that turns him into something like a German *gaucho*. In fact Tischbein's Goethe is as much an icon in Germany as Gilbert Stuart's Washington is in America. I've seen it on the sign of an Italian restaurant in Berlin and on a mirror advertising a brand of beer, while Andy Warhol once modeled a poster on it, whose hot pink and yellow make the poet look as though he were his own acid trip. It is in truth a very bad picture—not in the handling of the face, where Tischbein has perfectly caught Goethe's long straight typically Teutonic nose, but in the body, whose legs are comically out of proportion. Much better is the simpler portrait that Angelica Kauffman did on that same Italian journey, in which Goethe looks both less grand and more interesting, full-faced and with his brown hair pulled back, hatless and dark-eyed and shrewdly sensual.

The Weimar of today isn't the city in which Goethe lived, but it *is* an elaboration of it, a town decked out with memorials to the one he lived in. I've never been in a place so small that had so many statues and monuments. Goethe and Schiller, standing in bronze together in front of the theater; Karl August on horseback, done up as though he were Marcus Aurelius; the plaque put up for Bach, who spent almost a decade here: all these one understands. Yet Shakespeare? Did he visit too? Indeed the whole atmosphere reminds me of Stratford—no, that's unfair. Stratford can offer nothing beyond the bare fact of Shakespeare's birth and death. He lived and worked elsewhere, and not much is known about any of it; so the city, having only what Henry James called "The Birthplace," in all its odd mingling of presence and absence, has rushed to fill the vacuum with that peculiar English genius for the tacky souvenir. Weimar has almost nothing tacky about it, there's hardly even any kitsch beyond those plates and something called a "Goethe barometer." Nor has the town's poet given his name to an undistinguished bit of chocolate-covered marzipan, as Mozart has in Salzburg. There are souvenirs aplenty—but they

sit next to full racks of books, and it's the latter that seem to have the quickest turnover. For there is no vacuum here. Imagine a Shakespeare about whom *everything* was known: his letters to his parents and his notes to Jonson or Donne, his wife's relations with some third person, a secretary's record of what he thought about Marlowe and said to the Queen, or even what he ate on Thursdays.

Imagine that and you will have the six thousand pages of Robert Steiger's *Goethe's Life from Day to Day*, a documentary record, in eight volumes, of the letters Goethe wrote and received, the hours of statecraft, the conversations with Eckermann and others, the poems he worked on and the guests he saw. Goethe was from a very early age a tourist attraction in his own right: everybody who came to Weimar wanted to meet him, and everybody wrote about it, as though he were the Colosseum or Niagara Falls. Of all the reminiscences, the one I like most is that of Thackeray, who arrived in Weimar in 1830, two years before the poet's death. The *Engländer* was just nineteen; he had left Cambridge without a degree and was busy squandering his fortune. Drifting through Europe he found that he liked the statelet's relaxed approach to morality and stayed for six months; it later became the "Pumpnickel" of *Vanity Fair*. He thought the court's sense of protocol absurd, but for any visiting Englishman who seemed (still) to have money, it was nevertheless "most pleasant and homely," and so he worked away at flirting in German and bought a sword alleged to have been Schiller's. Eventually, with what he called a "perturbation of spirit," he found himself presented to the genius of the place. He must have been one of the last Englishmen to have seen the poet plain and wrote that he could imagine "nothing more serene, majestic, and *healthy* looking than the grand old Goethe," noting in particular the "awful splendour" of his eyes. But he added, in a letter to his mother, that the German, though "a noble poet . . . is little better than an old rogue" and was both astonished and "somewhat relieved" to find that he "spoke French with not a good accent."

Twenty years later, another English writer who wasn't yet famous came to Weimar. Marian Evans had just run away with G. H. Lewes; it was 1854 and it would be a few years yet before she turned herself into George Eliot. They spent three months in the town, while Lewes worked on his still-readable biography of Goethe, three months in a place that, though there were as yet few statues up, was already busy turning itself into a memorial. They met Clara Schumann, whose husband had just been shut away, and Liszt, whose playing made her feel that "for the first time in my life I beheld real inspiration." But for Evans — Eliot — Weimar had "a charm independent" of the great names associated with it. Even allowing for the fact that she was on her honeymoon, I'm inclined to agree and to locate that charm precisely where she did: in the park that lies along the Ilm, Weimar's little stream, and which ran from the Duke's *Schloss* in town to the rococo hilltop villa called the Belvedere a few miles to the south. It's laid out on an English model, and its planning seems reflected in the discussion of landscape architecture in *Elective Affinities*, where Goethe writes that one should try to "take advantage of and enhance every existing good feature . . . of the landscape in its original natural condition." In Eliot's mind that illusion of artlessness had met with complete success, producing a park "which would be remarkably beautiful even among English parks . . . the walks are so ingeniously arranged, and the trees so luxuriant and various, that it takes weeks to learn the turnings and windings by heart." It remains a pretty piece of landscape still, dotted with small buildings, each of them with a folklore of its own, like the Roman temple built for Karl August, or the garden house in which Goethe spent his first Weimar years.

As for Goethe himself, Eliot's account of Weimar makes her sound surprised by reports that he was rather fond of sausage; it didn't fit her conception of what such a man might eat. (In fact the local *Thüringer Bratwurst* are among Germany's best, fat and juicily seasoned, much choicer than a grape for bursting against a palate, however fine. I ate one for lunch on the market square

within a few minutes of my arrival, holding it in my fingers and dunking the bitten end in a pool of sharp mustard.) She visited Goethe's large house in town and found herself sharply critical of his heirs, who hoped to turn the place into cash and had curtailed the tourist's access. And like all visitors who write, she was profoundly moved by Goethe's study and library, "with its common deal shelves, and books containing his own paper marks," shelves that now indeed sag under the weight of those books; a library designed for use, not show, marked not by fine bindings but by cramped corners and bookcases squeezed in at odd angles to save space. They made her pensive, these rooms, reminding her "that the being who has bequeathed to us immortal thoughts . . . had to endure the daily struggle . . . [and] sordid cares of this working-day world." And so she looked "through the mist of rising tears at the dull study with its two small windows," this woman still inclined to hero-worship, who could not yet know that out of her own workroom in Regent's Park would come the greatest of all English novels.



It seems I have always known the "Erlkönig" in Walter Scott's translation, but like most readers of English I have otherwise come to Goethe late and only in part. *Elective Affinities*, yes, and the "Novelle" and even the "Conversations of German Refugees," but I haven't sorrowed with young Werther and remain innocent of *Faust*. The Goethe I know best is instead the man who — traveling alone and under an assumed name — jumped into a mail coach in 1786 on the first leg of the sabbatical from power that would become his *Italian Journey*. "I slipped out of Carlsbad at three in the morning," he writes, "otherwise I would not have been allowed to leave"; and if he exaggerates the danger of his friends detaining him, he nevertheless did have to write Karl August to ask for his belated permission to go. Goethe's sense of

escape seems real, and it grows with each mile he moves south. The degrees of latitude tick by, and his mood improves long before he reaches the Alps: “I am writing this on the forty-ninth parallel . . . a glorious day . . . the air is extraordinarily mild.” In Munich he eats his first figs, and once over the Brenner Pass is thrilled by “the first hillside vineyards . . . [and] a woman selling pears and peaches”; later there will be the richly-laden olive. “How happy I am,” he cries, “that, from now on, a language I have always loved will be the living common speech.” He hopes for a kind of inner renovation, asking himself if “the grooves of old mental habits [can] be effaced,” wondering whether he will indeed begin to “look at things with clear, fresh eyes.”

It’s an oddly reassuring book, one that gives a kind of license to enthusiasm; if even Goethe can admit to being “overwhelmed . . . swept off my feet,” by the grandeur that was Rome, then how can anyone play it cool? A month before visiting Weimar, I’d joined a long line at Hamburg’s Fuhlsbüttel airport, waiting on a cold March morning to check my bag for a flight to Milan. It was a Friday and there were, it’s true, a few gray suits around me, carrying their briefcases and not much else, setting out for a day’s work building Europe. I myself was moving on to Venice for a conference. But most of the people around me looked headed for a pleasure unmitigated by even the illusion of work, and they wore an air of relaxed expectation. It was a line of loose suede jackets and open collars, of sunglasses and fine silk scarves, and nearly everybody in it had already put in a few hours at the tanning salon. Two couples traveling together and laughing; whole families with the parents in jeans. Nobody looked worried, fathers seemed patient with their teenaged children, and I remembered Dr. Johnson’s claim that “the noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees, is the high road that takes him to England.” So perhaps, I thought, the happiest moment in any German’s life today is that in which the Alitalia ticket counter comes into view. Goethe himself had wanted a break from Germany, though he

was hardly the first: the medieval emperors, those Ottos and Heinrichs and Friedrichs, had all preferred sunning themselves on the Adriatic to shivering on the Rhine.

Nor was Goethe the last—even leaving Alitalia aside. Twenty years after the poet’s exhilarating trip, a young Frenchman who would eventually call himself Stendhal dreamt of Italy while working as a civil servant in Braunschweig, a lesser position than Goethe’s, but in the service of a greater master. And when after that master’s fall, the now-unemployed Henri Beyle decided to write up the time he’d spent in the land where the lemon trees bloom, he took for his name that of a Saxon town and depicted himself as a cavalry officer setting out from Berlin: “I open the letter which grants me four months leave—I am transported with joy, my heart beats faster!” Yet if their elation at the moment of departure seems similar, Goethe and Stendhal are in almost nothing else alike, and in comparing them it’s possible to locate a set of contrasting desires and beliefs that even now determines the range of the traveler’s responses—and not only about Italy. To Stendhal the peninsula is above all the site for “pure pleasure.” In Milan, La Scala puts him in a “feverish daze” of delight, though he also claims that “there is no pleasanter occupation . . . than walking aimlessly about.” Consistency is for Stendhal no virtue, it plays one’s momentary perceptions false, and Italy is for him “in truth merely an occasion for sensations.” Above all, for the sensation of beauty—or rather, that of happiness. For in one of his most famous aphorisms, the two seem to merge, making “beauty . . . nothing more than the promise of happiness,” and, of course, the beauty that most attracts him is that of Milan’s woman, beauty so overwhelming that it “obliges one to turn one’s eyes away,” as if he could hardly bear such joy. Still, the pursuit of the one is that of the other as well, and if we catch the euphemism that makes “happiness” a synonym for sexual fulfillment, we may also hear an echo of Jefferson in this admirer of written constitutions and “bicameral government.”

One could hardly imagine a greater contrast to Goethe, whose

attitude toward pleasure and indeed toward Italy itself seems considerably more ambivalent if not necessarily more complex. In Rome, Stendhal tastes the delight of “wandering almost at random . . . without thinking about [his] duty to see.” Goethe will have none of that, and reminds himself that “I am not here simply to have a good time, but to devote myself to the noble objects about me, to educate myself . . .” For “like true Germans, we cannot refrain from making plans to work,” and Italy isn’t a place for pleasure so much as it is for *Bildung*—though that education can itself produce a “joyous composure” and the “presence of such noble objects makes me feel very happy.” Nor can those objects, those buildings and statues and paintings, ever lose for him “their freshness . . . for I did not grow up with them.” Goethe’s visual sense awakens, and he feels “the moral effect of having lived in a larger world,” one that has changed him “to the very marrow of [his] bones.”

Stendhal travels, as Dennis Porter writes, “to be ravished by the spectacle of beauty”; Goethe to locate himself in relation to the past. “My purpose in making this wonderful journey,” the latter writes, “is not to delude myself but to discover myself in the objects I see.” It would be easy to read that sentence uncharitably, to hear in it the traveler from the north projecting himself onto the warm landscape of the south and finding in it some analogue for his inner life. That is what Graham Greene did in his *Journey Without Maps*, turning West Africa—“the past from which one has emerged . . . [the] true primitive source”—into an emblem for all the fears of his own early childhood. But I don’t want to see Goethe’s statement as such an act of appropriation, even though he quite consciously presents himself as an awestruck inheritor of Rome’s never-vanished glory. He doesn’t impose himself on Italy so much as he hopes that Italy will impose itself on him. He wants to be flooded by it and to use his experience of the place as a way to test himself. Just as he finds it “impossible to understand the present without knowing the past,” so he hopes to discover his own soul through the contem-

plation of the great city around him. St. Peter's makes him "realize that Art, like Nature, can abolish all standards of measurement," and it is precisely through such struggles to apprehend a world outside his own experience that the poet comes to know himself.

The French writer doesn't test himself in that way. He does, admittedly, test himself as a lover, seeing how well (not well) he can manage what he already knows how to do, but he doesn't have Goethe's sense of discovery. Not at any rate about the self. In making other kinds of discoveries, however, the advantage is all Stendhal's. Goethe writes that "What I want to see is the Everlasting Rome, not the Rome which is replaced by another every decade," and that sense of the everlasting does indeed dominate the *Italian Journey*. He describes the Carnival and offers a memorable account of Neapolitan street life, but his primary interest lies in monuments, not manners. Stendhal's concerns are very different. Most tourists, he argues, content themselves with giving a reliable description of works of art, but he is bored by such counting of columns and wants instead to capture "the inner, secret life of Italy." Some of those secrets are, of course, political ones. His *Rome, Naples, and Florence in 1817* is marked by republican longings in a time of reaction, and Stendhal himself was expelled from Italy in 1821 because of his involvement with the *Carbonari*. He doesn't want an everlasting Italy, he wants a new one, and the very specificity of his title suggests the possibility that the country may soon be different. But in the meantime, and in the absence of political change, he is content to limn the moment—fascinated by the everyday life that Goethe eschews, noting down the details of this year's clothes, music, manners, love affairs.

Pleasure, learning, monuments, mores—it's perhaps a sign of the complex and richly varied role Italy plays in the European imagination that both their approaches should seem equally plausible and equally valid. Nevertheless these very different writers do have one crucial thing in common. To each of them, Italy provides the opportunity for both an expansion and a rec-

ord of the self. Travel writing may take many forms. It can describe a journey of adventure or discovery, of exploration and endurance, the kind of trip that involves physical risk, whether those risks are the product of nature or of politics. At one extreme, as Porter writes, it may tend toward an act of political witness, and at another toward the fieldwork of ethnography. Taken together, however, the Italian journeys of Goethe and Stendhal do provide a norm for a particular kind of traveler's tale, for the account of a journey made in safety if not always in comfort, the tale that neither bears witness nor depends on reliable reporting so much as it provides an idiosyncratic record of one's own individual experience. Yet what about the land from which Goethe in fact and Stendhal in fiction had set out? What possibilities, and what problems, does Germany hold for the traveler, and the travel writer?



I made the stations of the tour: stopped in the church where Herder preached and saw the Cranachs in the museum that now fills Weimar's large shambling *Schloss*. I waited in line, the only American, with a busload of elderly Germans, to admire the Borromini-like curves of the bookcases and stairs in the ducal library. I saw the building where the Bauhaus had gotten its start and found to my surprise how little Weimar had to do with Weimar—that is, with the Weimar Republic, whose 1919 declaration here owed less to cultural history than to the city's relative isolation and calm. I hiked to the Belvedere—not worth it—and saw Goethe's house with its pretty back garden and wide handsome staircase, and the library in which Eliot had found herself so moved. But she was less impressed with the rest of the place, finding that Goethe's "collection of casts, pictures, cameos, etc. . . . is utterly insignificant except as having belonged to him." And perhaps that judgment can stand for one of Weimar itself. It's charming enough—indeed more than that as one walks

through the park — but it’s interesting because of what happened here and not because of any physical remains. Eliot herself wrote that it “does *not* shine in its buildings!” Which makes it rather curious. The town lives on its past, and yet that past left its principal relics not in the form of things you must go there to see but rather in that of words, which you can read anywhere. Do we actually need to visit a writer’s haunts and houses, do they ever really tell us anything that the work itself cannot? Weimar doesn’t have much to say about what gave Goethe his range and his strength, though perhaps — perhaps — the Frankfurt of his childhood could, the free city that fostered what Thomas Mann called his “middle-class love of order . . . a carefulness and caution.”

And yet the one piece of architecture that quickened into life for me did seem to have some explanatory power. When she passed control of Weimar to her son, Anna Amalia moved out of the ducal *Schloss* and into the *Wittumspalais* — the dower house — in the city center. It was just a few minutes walk, but several centuries away in the ease and informality of its rooms. The Rococo was beginning to lighten into the spare clean lines that would be called Biedermeier, and there, in rooms furnished with comfortable tables and chairs, where the walls were painted a delicate lime-sherbet green, on floors of simple polished boards, beneath ceilings of a moderate height — in rooms that would have suited a German Jane Austen, were such a thing conceivable — the Dowager Duchess served coffee to her friends. They are rooms in which you want to stay and talk; and many people did. I looked hard at the portraits of Anna Amalia that hung in the *Wittumspalais*. She was still in her teens when her husband died, a young woman and pretty, and though Weimar’s manners were lax enough, one still wonders what her life would have been like. Was it all invitations to poets and supervising her son’s education, or did she have the chance for affairs that weren’t of state? Standing before her picture, and thinking of this city that she more than anyone

else had made, I found myself hoping that she had had a good time.

I don't know what kind of good times my hotel might have been able to produce, though it did offer some curious cable channels, but I didn't at all enjoy staying there. The Elephant sits on a corner of Weimar's main square, holding down a spot where you can imagine there's been an inn for as long as there's been a city. Certainly it was already old in Goethe's time. Its corridors provide the setting for a part of Mann's *Lotte in Weimar*, his 1939 novel about the writer whom he saw always as both his model and his competition; while Thackeray borrowed its name for Becky Sharp's disreputable Pumpnickel lodging, where she lives happily in a society of students and tumblers. Such raffish ease is now long past, though the hotel's long hallway was indeed full of theatrical memorabilia, souvenirs of the guests who had come to play at Weimar's state theater. And I appreciated the fact that the hotel put its history on display, that it sought to cultivate a sense of its own past. Or a part of it anyway, for the Elephant has another and much more oppressive history, not the stuff in the display cases but the one that seemed to shout from every detail of its construction.

Because the Nazi leadership, all the way up to Hitler himself, liked the Elephant so much that they remade it in their own image, gutting the old building and replacing it with one of a severely rationalized modernity. Even my locally published guidebook admits that "the relation of the hotel . . . to the plain block architecture of those years cannot be denied." I had already had a taste of that architecture, walking in from the train station past what was called the Gauforum, the headquarters for the Nazis' regional administration, and which still today houses local government offices. Long lines of low and absolutely regular archways, balconies that could double as reviewing stands, a plinth that must once have supported a swastika, and all of it with the stone left slightly rough from the saw — the Gauforum's style was

unmistakable, and though the hotel's plain stuccoed front wasn't nearly so scary, its hallways and public rooms were. Smooth marble walls, groups of rigorously angled brass-studded leather chairs, burnished metal balustrades, a dining room in black lacquer—the Elephant was a perfectly preserved piece of sleek Art Deco design, but it was also the point at which Radio City shakes hands with Albert Speer.

And this is where Weimar—where traveling in Germany—cracks open in a way that makes it impossible to maintain the light ironic tone in which I've so far described it. I can't go on inconsequentially quoting from the accounts of earlier visitors, using the long history of touristic commentary as a lens through which to focus my own response. I can't continue to treat its history as though it were merely picturesque, a cabinet of curiosities in which it's a pleasure to dabble. I can't describe Weimar as though it were a place in France or Italy, some Chenonceaux or Siena in whose past one might take an amused if admittedly simplistic interest. Not because I think we should turn away from monuments to concentrate, as Stendhal suggests, on contemporary life; not because our interest in the Weimar that changes with each decade should supersede our fascination with the city everlasting. That's not always the case, and if it were, one might simply evade the problem of Weimar by noting the details of its present: the smell of coal fires, always odd for an American; or the fact that during my visit the city was full of dust, with half its sidewalks and streets torn up, in the process of being replaced in preparation for the city's role as a cultural capital of the European Union; or that almost a decade after unification, the restaurants and cafes remained cheaper here, in the former East Germany, than they were in similarly sized cities in the West.

No, the problem is more stubborn than that, more intractable—even, perhaps, unsolvable. For the city doesn't mean what it used to, and speaks now of something more and other than Goethe's time, its meaning complicated, altered, made multiple and troubling in a way that Eliot and Thackeray could never

have imagined. Weimar is often called both the best and the worst place in German history, but people sometimes skip over the worst, and the day after I got back to Hamburg I heard a TV commentator describe the town as the capital of the German spirit. It made me shudder because his words *weren't* ironic or double-edged, because he was indeed thinking only of Anna Amalia and her friends. Yet to describe Weimar in that way is to risk forgetting that, in the beech woods on the nearby Ettersberg hills, the Nazis had found the site for a small enclosure: though even they tried sometimes to forget what they were doing, or at least to hide it from themselves. Party members in Weimar decided to call the place after the trees, rather than use the one by which it had always been known, for Ettersberg was a name too fondly associated with the memory of Goethe himself, a place where his plays had been acted in the open air.



“Gedenkstätte Buchenwald.” It is the strangest direction I have ever given to a cab driver. But I didn’t need the word *Gedenkstätte*—memorial—even though it is now a part of the place’s name. Was there some other Buchenwald? And in retrospect my insistence on the full name seems absurd, a bit of pedantry produced by my sense that there was something wrong, something entirely too comfortable, in arriving at a concentration camp by taxi; something I could make right by the formality with which I over-specified my destination. Of course, the pony-tailed cabbie found nothing strange about it, and he didn’t bother with the qualifying term. “Buchenwald, Jawohl,” and as we drove out of town the name appeared again on road signs next to those of nearby villages and towns, a matter-of-fact directional listing: turn here.

We went north through the hills, and each curve in the road seemed to open up a pastoral landscape, with distant fields gone yellow in flower. The woods here are full of beech trees still,

though most of them now look young, and as we drove I thought about the place I was going to see. Buchenwald speaks, in Saul Friedländer's words, of a history that is both "too massive to be forgotten, and too repellent to be integrated into the 'normal' narrative of memory." It is no longer a part of the city's daily life, of the Weimar that, to borrow Goethe's words about Rome, "is replaced by another every decade." One balks, however, at seeing the place as a part of the city "everlasting," even as one knows that in some sense that's precisely what it is, a weight the city must eternally bear. Few critics would argue that the world of the *Weimarer Klassik* has been vitiated, invalidated, by the region's later history, though that might be true of a place like Bayreuth, whose custodians, Wagner's heirs, called Hitler their uncle. Nevertheless the Nazis did try to claim Goethe's legacy. Or maybe just to neutralize it. "What better way," as James Young has written, "to commemorate the obliteration of Weimar culture than to seal it in barbed wire, to turn it into its own prison?" And while Young's words point specifically to the Weimar Republic and the culture of the 1920s, they do still evoke the Nazis' attempt to control the memory of that older city as well. So today Weimar carries a double meaning, one elegantly summarized by Timothy Garton Ash as the problem of the "Goethe Oak . . . the ancient . . . tree . . . under which Goethe had supposedly written his sublime 'Wanderer's Night Song,' but which was then enclosed on the grounds of the Buchenwald concentration camp." In fact the tree made it until near the end of the war, the nightmare's mocking—or sustaining?—bit of greenery, before catching fire in an air raid; now all that's left is its ruined stump, halfway between the disinfection chambers and the crematorium.

Any student of German culture must learn to negotiate the contradictions and connections that the Goethe Oak implies; must worry at the question of how one might get from the poet to the prison, and back again; must worry at the question of their coincidence in something more than space. Even my own trouble in moving from a description of Weimar into an account of a visit

to Buchenwald is a version of that problem. Down the hill I could take a Stendhalian pleasure in thinking about the past. Here I couldn't, and indeed there seemed a kind of injunction against thinking of it as being, in fact, the past. Never forget. As we drove I thought of Primo Levi and Paul Celan, the camp survivors who many years later had killed themselves, and also of Faulkner, for whose characters the past is not even past, who live on as their own ghosts in the long aftermath of the moments that have determined their being. Something similar seemed to be happening here. There may always, as Eric Hobsbawm has written, be "a twilight zone . . . between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as part of, or background to, one's own life." But Buchenwald's resistance to anything like a "'normal' narrative" pointed to something more than that accustomed tension between history and memory. It suggested a past that had so outlived its own time that it seemed even now to tingle with the pain that an amputee feels where his arm used to be.

Paul Fussell has argued that travel narratives always draw an implicit comparison between the writer's own freedom—his freedom of movement, his freedom of thought—and the more circumscribed lives of the people through whose land he wanders. But here? How, I wondered, as I paid my cab and bought a guidebook at the guards' barracks that now serves as a visitor's center, how could I possibly graph that model onto this place? Today everybody who arrives at Buchenwald comes either as a visitor or to serve them. Nobody—I hesitate to use the word "lived," and yet it's the only one—nobody now lived at Buchenwald, but that only underlined the difficulty of describing it. Even if I hadn't arrived in a taxi I would still have been ludicrously, painfully free to come and go in comparison to the many thousands who suffered here, to the Jews and homosexuals and Communists and Gypsies and Jehovah's Witnesses and political prisoners and Russian POWs who had been imprisoned or executed here. And though I was certainly a visitor, only the cruelest of definitions would

describe each of those thousands as the visitor's binary opposite: the resident, the inhabitant, the native. That term might apply with justice only to the SS guards. The prisoners were precisely not natives; neither had they been in any sense visitors.

Such chopping of terms demonstrates the moral limits of the assumptions on which most travel writing depends. None of the ways in which I customarily described a place seemed as if they could apply to a concentration camp. The site beggared them and yet in doing so produced a decorum of its own, one that makes it impossible to quote from the memoirs Buchenwald's survivors have left behind in the way that I have from the touristic impressions of Weimar's Victorian visitors. I can't treat the narratives of Bruno Bettelheim or Jorge Semprun as though they were a form of cultivated table-talk; let me leave them instead as a kind of gap in my text, a gesture toward what is here, at any rate, unsayable. Of course, that sense of language failing has in itself become one of the standard features of the rhetoric with which we try to describe our reaction to the Holocaust. So too is our awareness of the gap between that time and this one, the victim's experience and our own. "I tried," Ian Buruma has written of Auschwitz, "to imagine what it had been like inside . . . I found it impossible. It was like trying to imagine extreme hunger or having your fingernails ripped out. I knew about the suffering, but could not imagine it. . . . The idea that visiting the relics of history brings the past closer is usually an illusion. The opposite is more often true." Even at the camps we fall back upon the conventional formulae of description and sentiment, though that does not necessarily mean such conventions are in themselves untrue.

Still, an awareness of that conventionality does suggest why some of the most sensitive accounts of visiting Buchenwald, such as those by Buruma and Young, stress the mediated quality of the experience: the way in which the choice of what to preserve and what to display, the terms in which the camp's victims are defined, the nature of its monuments, all serve to organize our memory of what happened here. To me the camp tells two funda-

mentally different stories, a difference best defined as that between the largest and grandest of its memorial sites, on the one hand, and the camp enclosure, on the other. They lie some distance away from each other, and on opposite sides of the hill; neither offers a view of the other. The memorial is the more familiar image. A walkway sweeps down the slope toward a broad terrace that's known as the "Road of Nations," a road marked by eighteen black pillars, one for each country whose citizens died here. Look out over the pillars and you'll see a patchwork of fields and forest, Thuringia's countryside at its prettiest. Turn around and you'll find that something else shares your view, a set of eleven enormous bronze figures. The group commemorates the prisoners who in April 1945 rose up against their guards and—as some versions have it—liberated themselves in advance of the American Third Army's arrival. A few of the figures wave and point, as if beckoning the future, others brandish weapons, and yet another holds up a flag; only one of these giants is depicted in the act of falling. Behind them rises a bell tower, and the ensemble as a whole has some of the triumphant spirit of the Iwo Jima memorial, however differently its statuary is modeled—in Young's words, "a spreading victory wedge of dignified fighting figures unbent by their travails."

Two things seem especially important in understanding the story this *Gedenkstätte* tells. The first is that, while the Nazis did murder over 50,000 people here, Buchenwald was not an extermination camp like Auschwitz. It began as a camp for political prisoners, and only near the end of the war did the persecution and killing of Jews become one of its primary tasks. The second is that Weimar lies in the region that after the war became East Germany. So Buchenwald, in which many of that short-lived country's rulers had been imprisoned, became a central feature in the DDR's founding myth, one in which the inmates' Communist-led underground became identified with the officially antifascist nation itself. In consequence, as Young writes, "the state museum and memorial at Buchenwald were not intended to mark

the loss of life so much as to illustrate the glories of resistance—and to celebrate the socialist victory over fascism.” If the monumental “Road of Nations” honored the victims in terms of their national origin it did not identify them in other ways; so far as the DDR was concerned, the Jews who died here died not as Jews but as political prisoners of French or Dutch or Polish or—often—German origin. Perhaps that emphasis is just as well, for with its heroic statuary and self-conscious grandeur the monument’s guiding aesthetic seems so close to that of Weimar’s Gauforum as to make you understand why Hitler and Stalin thought their nonaggression pact might work. But then Stalin saw Buchenwald itself as a good idea, he had his own need for such places, and until 1950 went on using the camp for his own purposes. After the *Wende* or “turn”—the term that has come to denote the opening of the Berlin Wall—the exhibits at Buchenwald began to note both the East German omissions and the Soviet crimes. I suspect that with time this particular memorial will come to seem less and less important, consigned to school groups and students of totalitarian sculpture, the relic of a discarded historiography.

The enclosure offers a different and more enduring narrative, precisely because it is the more painful, because it depends, in Lawrence Langer’s words, not on “the redemptive [but on] the grievous power of memory.” Yet even as one walks through its gate and begins to experience the camp as a physical place, a piece of land, a set of rooms—even here one cannot escape the question of mediation, of the way in which the camp has been presented, the story it has been made to tell. Buchenwald covered a lot of territory—work areas, railroad siding, mass graves, the SS quarters, the commandant’s riding stable—but the central enclosure, the barbed wire area in which the prisoners’ barracks were located, looks considerably smaller than the area taken up by the *Gedenkstätte*. My guidebook speaks of 48,000 people living in a space of about 40 hectares—100 acres—on the side of the Ettersberg hill, but the ground before me was not anywhere

near so large. Twenty acres, thirty? Maybe bigger, but still small enough so that when I stood at the entry gates I could see it all at once.

What I saw resembled nothing so much as the landscape that Auden described in “The Shield of Achilles”:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude.

“Barbed wire,” Auden adds, “enclosed an arbitrary spot,” and when I first saw the place it looked to me as if that was the only detail he’d gotten wrong. The spot had not been arbitrary at all. On one side the wire is in fact still up and has indeed been renewed, though it runs for only a hundred yards and encloses nothing. I stood beneath the camp’s main gate, whose roof line seemed like a parody of the Belvedere on the other side of the city, and looked out at a blasted plain. No, not a plain, for it sloped away from me. But it was indeed flat and even, with “no blade of grass . . . and nowhere to sit down,” a slope covered with stones, a surface that you could walk over only with difficulty, slowly, carefully—a place in which it would be impossible to run and impossible to hide. Utterly featureless it was for the first few hundred feet; this had been the “Mustering Ground,” on which that multitude had shivered for hours at the whim of their guards in the cold and the rain. Then beyond were the places where the prisoners’ barracks had stood, with the location of each one marked out in the stones.

Had stood. For the landscape I saw, the arduous ground over which I worked my way, was not the one in which the prisoners had lived, and the desolation that made me think of Auden’s poem was, in some sense at least, a postwar creation. Almost all of Buchenwald’s many dozen buildings have been razed. When the camp was in use it would have been impossible to see from

one end of the enclosure to the other, and though the crowds and the noise and the smells, the shouts and the shots of the guards, might have made it seem like hell, it would not have looked so null and bleakly empty. Yet what if the East German authorities in charge of landscaping the place had decided differently? One recognizes the dilemma they faced: what to do with a place so evil that you want to destroy it utterly, yet also a place of such human suffering that you simultaneously need to preserve it in commemoration? And their solution makes sense: demolish the buildings, or most of them, but note exactly where they stood. Suppose, however, that the buildings had been left standing? Or that the people who planned this memorial had done what the custodians of so many New World battlefields have and turned the camp into a park, planted grass and trees, installed benches? Gettysburg and Quebec now contrive to look peaceful; so too do many military cemeteries. Buchenwald does not. This wounded land has not been allowed to heal, and because the ground itself looks as though it has not forgotten, because that plain of stones looks like a place in which the barking orders could start again at any moment, we find it that much harder to forget ourselves.

The DDR's citizens were, of course, meant to see this scarred land in dialogue with that overblown *Gedenkstätte*, to see their juxtaposition in terms of a single meaning: look at what our liberation has saved us from. But in comparing the two, and even leaving East Germany's own peculiarities aside, it seemed impossible to believe that many people would have seen the redemptive vision of the one as an adequate answer to the other. They told fundamentally different stories, the monument and the enclosure, and the latter was by far the more powerful. Still, I wonder: the decision must at some point have been made that Buchenwald's atrocities would be best memorialized by this kind of landscape. And while allowing for the *Gedenkstätte*'s celebration of resistance, the ground within the enclosure itself has nevertheless been made to reflect a particular interpretation of the Holocaust, of the kind Friedländer has offered and on which I've relied myself.

By now, however, it is in itself one of that interpretation's chief constituents, a memory carved in the soil, a memory defined by the decision to leave this building standing and to knock that one down, to keep some of the wire up, to plant stones and not grass — decisions that in themselves now shape the terms in which we see the past. What if that land had been differently modeled? We might well have come to see the Holocaust in other terms, might have found ourselves — perhaps for good, perhaps for ill — with a rather different sense of its wounds and of its relation to our present lives.

For me the most affecting part of the camp was its small crematorium. I didn't count its separate bays or ovens — four, six? — but it could not have handled many bodies at once, maybe no more than a funeral complex in a large city. Even so it represented an enormous increase in the scale of death at Buchenwald: at first the camp had simply used Weimar's municipal crematorium. The building I saw went up in 1941, and its ovens, made by the Erfurt firm of Topf und Söhne, provided the prototype for those that would later be used at Auschwitz. But it wasn't just a place to burn bodies — the courtyard outside was regularly used for executions, and so was the basement, where corpses were stacked while waiting their turn for the incinerator. It must have been convenient, to kill on site that way, a thousand people and more in that basement room, with an elevator to take the cadavers to the fire upstairs. The ovens themselves were roughly cylindrical and nothing about them announced their purpose. They looked industrial and inscrutable, and if I hadn't known otherwise I might have thought they were used for making charcoal or firing a steamship, for any factory process that required flames and a chimney.

Two teenagers came in, a boy and a girl with their hands in each other's pockets, and stuck their heads inside one of the ovens, calling out to test its echo. I flinched and stepped away from them into the room next door, and then flinched again, for there was nothing inscrutable here. Old yellow tiles on the wall; a dis-

play case of rusty surgical instruments and a faucet over a large deep sink; a table, also covered in tiles, that sloped in from the sides to a central channel, and that sloped as well from the head to the drain at the foot. My throat felt as though it were shrinking inside me, shriveling tight and parchment dry. I have never been in a morgue; I know them only from televised detective shows. But I could recognize a dissecting table, and I knew what kinds of things had been done in this room. It was called the “Pathology Department,” but it didn’t look as though complicated medical tests could be performed here, and there weren’t the refrigerated lockers I’d seen on TV, in which a corpse might be stored until the coroner was ready. Here there had been no need for either tests or cold storage. The doctors who worked at Buchenwald already knew what their subjects had died of, and they knew as well that there was no need to preserve any particular body for long. There would always be another one ready.