

6-21-05

Dear Oisin,

I didn't know before this visit why this area was called the black forest. But it was gradually noticeable as we approached the heavily-forested mountains that certain of the trees were considerably darker than others. These were the fir trees, which are essentially the same trees they put up for Christmas, except the ones here have a considerably thicker layer of needles and are taller than most Christmas trees in Arizona. Of course no tree is really black, but the dark texture they give to the mountainside must certainly have inspired an imaginative description of the color. It reminded me of the black knight of the black lawns from the story of Gareth and Lynette. In that story, blackness in regard to the lawn refers to plants that have a dark hue (the only name I remember is black hawthorn) and can seem almost black if you look at them in the right way.

In folk tales and usage, this kind of poetic license appears quite often. All over the world you can find objects of nature coming with names suggesting some degree of nice exaggeration, like the red and black seas, or the White Mountains. An example I remember from Korea is that the grass is sometimes referred to as blue like the sky and sometimes the color of gold, depending on the mood (and maybe the season). Besides the issue of colors, the forest here is really very dense and variegated. In addition to the ubiquitous fir, there are beech trees, walnuts, pine, oak, and maple, just to name the ones obviously visible from my window. My room is on the third floor and one wall is entirely glass so that I can look out onto a clearing strewn with yellow flowers surrounded by

all the trees. I looked into a guide book from the secretary's desk here, and the expression used there for the area is a `sea of trees.' They listed quite a few wild animals living in the woods, like deer, wild pigs, and badgers. During the drive up, we could see some cattle grazing in the pasture. Many Germans are supposed to vacation here who enjoy hiking in the woods. The villages of Wolfach and Oberwolfach look very much like the picturesque German towns you see in picture books or illustrated fairy tale collections.



Wolfach

In fact, I've heard from other people that many German folk tales originate in the black forest, but I'm not sure which. Maybe something like Hansel and Grethel? The woods do give you the feeling that a goblin or a witch may pop out at any moment. Many houses are painted white around dark brown beams that criss-cross the facade and the roofs have a steep pitch with several levels of windows embedded

in the pediment. I believe this area is rather famous for its cuckoo clocks. As elsewhere all over Europe, many remnants of the Romans can be found in the black forest not far from Oberwolfach, including baths in Baden-Baden (literally, 'bath-bath'). This is the town that's still popular as a spa, and I had planned for us to go there together if we had all come to Germany.

One of the nicest things at this institute is the library. In the postcard I've sent to Niall, you can see it all lit up at night. Because we are staying right on the upper floors of the institute building, it's very easy to work there at any hour. In the daytime or in the evening glow, you can occasionally fall into a reverie as you look out through the glass panel at all the trees and the blue sky. They are very well-equipped with all the books and journals that you could possibly need, displayed in bookcases made of fresh-smelling pinewood. I mentioned the other day that there was a piano there, and I hear Guelsin again right now, hammering away at a sonata by Beethoven. The daily schedule will be the same throughout the week. In the morning a bell rings at 8 o'clock calling us to breakfast and we sit together around circular tables to eat granola, bread, yogurt, and an egg, usually. Maybe some fruits too. Just about when we finish our coffee the first lecture is announced. After two lectures, we are ready for a pretty heavy lunch. In the early afternoon, there are no lectures so that people can just talk to each other and share ideas. Around 3, we have tea, and then start the afternoon lectures at 3:30. Finally, the day ends with dinner at 6:30.



Library of the Mathematical Institute

I saw Jean-Marc Fontaine this morning who asked about you and mommy and Niall. Then he gave the first lecture of the day. He is always in a terrible hurry when he lectures because he has so much material he wants to tell us about. He tells me that he and some others in Orsay had discussions with Mr. Bourguignon who manages the IHES. It turns out that there definitely will be a summer school for Asian students there next June, with students from China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. It's a bit of a bother to organize it, but I think my Korean students will be very happy. Remember how they came to visit me twice at the IHES in spite of the considerable inconvenience and money it cost them? Now at least they can visit once or twice without the hassle of having to make arrangements themselves. It is very nice that Jean-Marc and others are going to the trouble of inviting them.

Mr. Coates from Cambridge is here, although only for one day. In the afternoon, I explained to him and a nice lady named Ramadorai Sujatha from India the little progress I had made since last month. He

is showing a very kind interest in the work, and all three of us may end up doing something together.

One person it was really very nice to see is named Annette Werner. I first met her in Boston around thirteen years ago, when she took one of my courses. She was then a student from Germany visiting the university where I was working and I was a very young teacher. (As you know, now I'm old and feeble.) In the years since then, she received her Ph.D. and went through temporary positions at several different universities. Just recently both she and her husband managed to find good jobs. It is common in many countries for young couples who study for many years and wish to work at a university to take a while before they find stable positions that they can rely on. They have to go through years of apprenticeship, like they had for artisans in the middle ages, and then some more years of wandering the world. She is now a professor of mathematics at the University of Stuttgart. Her husband is a philosopher and is teaching at the University of Frankfurt. I told you already a bit about Frankfurt. It is one of the biggest cities in Germany and it's where Haraboji is organizing part of that big book fair. They had a very energetic group of philosophers working there in the 1920's and 30's that came to be known as the Frankfurt School. They had names like Mr. Horkheimer, Mr. Adorno, Mr. Fromm, and Mr. Marcuse. They studied very deeply ideas of Mr. Marx, and tried to use them in a philosophical way to study the structure of society. They wanted to figure out the basic principle that made society function the way it does, so that they could apply that knowledge to make the world a really better place. Many people would like to make the world a better place, but the Frankfurt school was a rare instance where a

group of thinkers tried to approach the problem in a manner that was very philosophical, but simultaneously committed to action. Unfortunately, the school went through hard times with the coming of the great war, when most of the philosophers there had to take refuge in America. But apparently, the tradition of the Frankfurt school exerts some influence at the university to this day. This inheritance helps them to maintain a very vibrant community of philosophers, so Annette's husband is very happy to work there. For much of his life, he himself studied a very different methodology associated with what's called the 'philosophy of science' but he enjoys arguing about these differences with the other philosophers in Frankfurt. Since Annette has also had two children in the meanwhile, 6 and 3 years old, we had a lot to talk about: mathematics, reading stories to children, comparison of schools in Germany and the US...

So all in all, it's been a calm day with very little to report. But I thought I should write something anyways since I hardly described to you in yesterday's letter the snug place in the mountains I find myself in.

Here is a very well-known poem by Mr. Goethe:

The night song of the wanderer

Over all the mountaintops is peace.
Upon each treetop you can feel
hardly a breath.
The birds are sleeping in the woods.
Just wait. Just wait, and soon
You too will rest.

I walked outside for a minute just now to take a deep breath and the spirit of that poem really came

alive. Of course he could have gone on to describe the beautiful night sky filled with the waters of the Milky Way, or a silvery moon gleaming over the horizon. But sometimes, a poet wants to keep the lines very simple, because he is simply enjoying that particular moment.

Good night Mr. O.

Mr. D.

