

6-25-05

Dear Oisin,

I am now back in Bonn. The day for returning home is now so near that I'm not sure this letter will reach you before I do. I took the train back and arrived just a few hours ago. The small group of people that were left at the institute (a rather large number left last night) took a taxi together to the station at Wolfach following a simple breakfast. From there, we all took a small train to Offenburg, bidding farewell for the time being to all the thick woods and pastures and the silvery streams of the black forest. And then, we broke up into three groups. Most people were going towards the Alsace region of France, to Strasbourg, and from there bound for Paris. They will attend together Luc Illusie's birthday conference. I remarked that they were rather like medieval pilgrims, moving from one holy place to another with little bits of luggage. Illusie is a very beloved mathematician, so I think the birthday is going to be a genuinely festive event. I will relate to you one story about Luc that I heard from Fontaine yesterday. Both Fontaine and Luc have been going to China for the last two years or so, to lecture to students in Beijing. I remember two years ago Luc preparing very assiduously by taking Chinese lessons. You might also recall how he tried to speak to mommy in Chinese. Fontaine was remarking that Luc has learned the language already so much better than himself, even though Fontaine goes to China more often. For example, they ran out of drinking water in their apartment in Beijing, which needs to be replaced by the water company. Apparently, Luc was able to make a call for the replacement, giving precise instructions on how many containers he needed, where they had to come, who he was, and so forth. The locals there were

tremendously impressed that an elderly gentleman from France was speaking to them in their own language. Luc evidently loves to learn things. He is very good at the piano, but still takes serious lessons once a year with a group of people much younger than him.

One of the people going to Paris was Takeshi Saito from Tokyo. I've known him since about 18 years ago when we were both young men, and we've seen each other many times over the years. I still remember the first time I saw him. I was visiting a university in Boston called Harvard, and he was also visiting from Tokyo. At that time, I was still a student while he had finished his Ph.D. in Tokyo a few years before that. He gave a lecture at Harvard for the professors and students, and I remember being very much impressed. The mathematics he spoke about was very interesting, but I was struck mostly by his confidence. At that time he was quite young, and I think it was his first trip to the US. Nevertheless he spoke with no hesitation, very obviously knowledgeable about his subject and not in the least intimidated by the audience, many of whom were much older and more experienced than him. Perhaps I have such a lasting memory of his lecture because I had to talk in front of pretty much the same audience about two years after that, and really did a terrible job. I was very timid and shy, and it was hard for me to speak in front of a large room. I once mentioned to Takeshi my memory of his talk, and he could barely remember. Some people are just better than others at public speech even at an early age. Anyways, he is a very jolly and friendly fellow now and I've come to know him rather well. We always have fun conversations when we meet. I think I mentioned to you that there will be a summer school for Asian graduate students in Bures-sur-Yvette next summer. Takeshi Saito will be bringing the students from

Japan for that event, and I will bring students from Korea, so we hope to have a lot of fun.

A few people went towards Muenster, which is the town where Christopher Deninger works. This group included a young man named Elmar Grosse-Kloenne. I had a very good discussion with him this morning, about which I will say more later on in the letter. It reminded me one more time how much I like talking to people and getting to know what's on their minds on the occasion of these conferences. It's almost more interesting than the mathematics. This time it was especially like that because I was so focused on my own work that I couldn't really make myself follow even the drift of the lectures. Most of the time, I was wrapped up in my own thoughts as the speaker was writing on the board and saying something or other. But at meal-times, I could forget about work for a little while and get to know people. Sometimes, talking to people can require patience. People mostly would rather just say funny things and relax, which is OK too. But I have to admit that on these occasions, I like better to surreptitiously turn the conversation to more serious topics so that I can find out what other people think about them. Even though it's usually not phrased in that way, the topics I bring up tend to revolve around that question again that we've learned from Socrates of what a good life really is. You see, I really would like to know what various people from many different parts of the world think about this issue and how they carry these thoughts out in their everyday lives which, after all, must be somewhat different from mine in the details. But, as I said, because people often find such issues too heavy to discuss over meals, one needs to sneak them in, almost like a joke. Even then, there are people who won't tell you what's really on their minds, or only have rather predictable things to say. But if you press and

question patiently, it is usually possible to eventually understand something worthwhile from these exchanges. What often happens is that at first everyone is reluctant to discuss serious issues. But, then as one sneaky comment or question after another is put forth at irregular intervals, one person then another, and then another after that admits that they too are curious about such things. After that it turns quite easily into full-fledged discussions, which one can then just sit back and listen to. I had several such conversations during the course of this week, and I will presently tell you more about them.

From Offenburg, I myself got on the train for Mannheim, where I had to make a change to a train bound for Bonn. Once again I had to help a lady with her bags, this time without much incident. I didn't write on the train on the way back because something about watching the rails below and the wires above intently at the beginning as they shimmered and undulated with the motion of the train made me feel a bit queasy. So I reclined in my seat and just looked at the scenery. It was just as well because a little past Mainz, we were in the Rhine valley again and this time, I could look at the sights a bit more carefully. For example, I found out that there were not a few beaches where people were swimming in the river. The church that I told you about on the small island turns out not to be one, or at least I don't think so. It looked this time rather like a chateau of some sort. The mystery remains of why it was built on such a small island. There are, in any case, many thin strips of land in the middle of the river as you go along often lined with trees planted in the sandy terrain. I wondered if they had taken root on such precarious ground naturally. Life is quite tenacious after all, as we know from living in the desert. I was able to confirm that the rocky hill I

saw on the way down was indeed the Lorelei. This was on two accounts. For one thing, that Brentano poem I told you about starts out 'At Bacharach on the Rhine...' and so when the train passed the little town of Bacharach (which I hadn't noticed going the other way, even though I knew the name from long ago from a book by Heine called 'the Rabbi of Bacharach') I was able to look out for the Lorelei rock. Another reason was that a mathematician named Peter Schneider told me that there is a stone marker on the river bank right in front of the hill with the name written on it. So a little north of Bacharach I was happy to see again the conspicuous cliff and check that there was indeed a concrete sign at its feet with 'Lorelei' painted in black letters.



I dozed off for a while after that, so that it didn't seem long at all before we were pulling into Bonn Hauptbahnhof. The queasiness I had felt disappeared after I arrived at my apartment and ate a bowl of spicy noodles that halmoni had sent me. I have to admit that I had missed a bit spicy food during a whole week of German meals.

As it turns out, after writing the previous paragraph, I stepped outside for a little dinner. I went to the Korean restaurant next to the Beethovenhaus. I don't remember if I mentioned it before. It wasn't there the last time we were together in Bonn. It's run by a Korean family, and I presume they chose that location because all Korean tourists in town must go to the Beethovenhaus. I found that it's really nice to be back in Bonn if only for a little while. This area of town where the institute is, called the pedestrian zone because no cars are allowed in, is such a pleasant place to walk in the evening. It's been a hot day, but there's a nice breeze blowing now through the cobbled streets. Today again, many families are out walking or sitting and eating ice-cream. As I approached the plaza with the Beethoven statue, I could see the tall steeple of the Bonn Minster gloaming in the darkening sky. Right behind the institute building, there is a very pretty row of tall oak trees. As with many other things in Germany, they reminded me of a poem by Heine:

I once had a beautiful fatherland.
The oak tree
Grew there so tall, the violets nodded gently.
It was a dream.
I was kissed in German with words too that were German.
You can hardly believe
How good it sounded, those words 'I love you so!'
It was a dream.

As you might guess, it was written when he was living in Paris. I think I mentioned before that Heine had to live in Paris because he was in a lot of trouble in Germany. These were years when the Holy Roman Empire had recently been broken up by Napoleon. But there was still a lingering group of statesmen surrounding the former emperor (one very famous one was named Metternich), who were very afraid of radical attempts to destroy the power of the nobility. They did quite a few things to keep the general population and poor folks under control. In many places, when powerful people want to control the population, one of the things they do is to stop people from reading certain kinds of books or listening to the kind of teachers that might make them critical or discontent. This was the reason, for example, that haraboji was in jail for a little while in Korea about twenty years ago. It was also the reason that the princes and dukes of Germany didn't allow people to read Heine's books and didn't want him back in the country. (Germany at the time wasn't quite the single country that it is now, by the way.) They were all feeling very threatened by the ideas unleashed by the French revolution. On top of that, Mr. Heine was even a friend of Mr. Marx's for a little while. These days, for all these reasons, people tend to view Heine's longing for Germany as not being entirely sincere. They think maybe he is exaggerating. Some might even think that in a poem like this one about the oak tree, he is actually making fun of other people who are too much in love with a Germany that is ruled by rather mean people. But I actually do not agree with this view at all. Heine grew up in Germany and German was the language he spoke. Even in the political writings where he does criticize German institutions rather severely for their 'conservatism' (at the time, this roughly meant holding on to the structures of

the deceased empire) he describes very lovingly its beautiful landscape of mountains and trees. Even when he criticizes some of their practices, it is clear to me that he really did love the people of the land where he grew up, and missed them a whole lot. So in the poem above, I don't doubt for a moment that he is expressing at least in part a genuine longing for the oak trees of Germany and the companionship of the people who spoke his native language.



I've had many nice conversations over the last few days and learned a few things. One day at lunch, I sat with a group of Russians who were not part of our conference. The institute at Oberwolfach also gives space to mathematicians who would like to work together but do not live in the same place. They can then apply to visit the institute at the

same time for a few months. The institute gives them an apartment and space to work peacefully. At the table were Mr. Dmitry Fuchs and Mrs. Fuchs, and Mr. Sergei Tabachnikov. Mr. and Mrs. Fuchs now live in California, and Mr. Tabachnikov in Pennsylvania. They both grew up in Moscow, Russia, and came to America around the same time as Mr. Gabrielov. As usual, I liked hearing about their experiences in Russia, and how they came to move to the US. The stories are usually pretty similar to that of Mr. Gabrielov. They were part of the wonderful mathematical community in Russia but had to move away from their home when the economy became really bad at the end of the communist period. They settled very far from each other in the U.S., so they looked very happy to be able to meet again in a remote place in Germany. In fact, it turns out that Mr. Tabachnikov was formerly a student of Mr. Fuchs, so they knew each other really well in Russia. Mr. Tabachnikov came to the institute with his nine-year old daughter Sasha. She seemed to be quite good at roaming around the buildings entertaining herself with books, and talking to the grown-ups while her father was working.

On Wednesday afternoon there was a brief break from all the lectures. I used the recess to go down to the village Oberwolfach-Kirche and buy a few things. I had intended to walk down a pretty trail that descends with the flow of a bubbling stream. But one of the secretaries, Mrs. Annette Disch, was very concerned that the shops might be closed, and that I would end up putting in a lot of effort for nothing. So she insisted on driving me. She is a very cheerful and very round middle-aged lady. As we got into her car, she proudly proclaimed that she lives in Oberwolfach but she drives a Japanese car. Then she asked if I was Japanese. I didn't want to disappoint her good humor, but I did have

to admit that I was Korean. She then announced just as cheerfully that there were many Korean cars in the village produced by a company named Hyundai. She has lived in that village all of her life. Her son was born there and still lives in the same house as Mrs. Disch and her husband. He repairs cars at a shop in a village nearby. 'He had a hard time in school, not like all of you,' she informed me, 'but he loves working with his hands.' She herself has worked at the mathematical institute for over 30 years. I thought that was really remarkable, given how easily people tend to change their workplace in the big cities. She says she just loves meeting people from all over the world year after year, and helping them a little bit when she can.

While I went into the shop she drove to a church nearby. She told me she had to tend to the graves of her parents. Because I was finished with my business in rather short order, I walked over to the church she had pointed to. The yard behind had a really pretty graveyard with little graves in long rows laid side by side, all of them with many colorful flowers growing out of small plots of soil. There really wasn't much space there (the different plots were just barely separated by low stone walls) but people had obviously put in an effort to make the whole area look gay. In particular, each grave looked very well-tended. As I hesitated near the entrance, I noticed Mrs. Disch skipping out with a pail. We went to her car together. This little outing was also fruitful because there was a very large and very leafy tree in bloom in front of a tavern across the street from the church. It looked suspiciously familiar and I was able to confirm with Mrs. Disch that this was indeed a Linden tree. You see, even after several visits to Germany, I was never entirely sure what a Linden tree looked like, and therefore,

wasn't quite sure if I had seen one. All I knew, again from a poem by Heine, was that its leaves are shaped like hearts. That isn't exactly a distinguishing characteristic as far as trees go, so many are the times I've stood looking curiously at a tree with heart-shaped leaves. I'm told that Linden trees are pretty common here, so I must have passed many unknowingly. But this particular one had a certain air about it that motivated me to inquire. It really was a magnificent tree with puffy seeds snowing down onto the ground at its feet. You could indeed easily imagine a poet finding some rest in its shade.



Avenue of Linden

At this point already the letter is getting long, and I haven't even begun to tell you about all the conversations and thoughts I've had over the last few days. Like some more mathematical discussions I've had with Mr. Coates, Mrs. Sujatha, and Mr. Guido Kings from Regensburg. I also enjoyed talking with Mr. Nekovar from Paris, Mr. Jannsen also from Regensburg, and two young men from America, Mr. Healy and Mr. Kisin. But maybe I'll skip ahead to a particular discussion last night involving Mr. Udi De Shalit from Israel. A difficult issue that always arises in relation to Israel, the country that Jerusalem is in, is the fighting going on there between the Israelis and the Palestinians. We've already discussed this briefly before. The Israelis are the people of Moses, while the Palestinians belong to the tradition of Mohammed and Saladin. As you and I concluded long ago, both sides are children of Abraham, and really shouldn't be fighting. But they are, and it's mostly because of land. Isn't it interesting how much of fighting between people ends up being on account of land? The story in this case is very long and people can easily get very angry about the issues involved. But I really liked the way Mr. De Shalit spoke about it, because he really believes strongly that the Israelis and the Palestinians are very similar people, who just happen to be fighting over land, almost by accident. Like when two brothers, for example you and Niall, fight over playthings when it should be so easy to get along. His analysis was also that the fundamental issues will not be resolved until the Palestinians become as rich as the Israelis. That is, you see, the current situation. They are living very close to each other, but most Palestinians are quite poor compared to the Israelis, and to some extent, the Israelis have been greedy in the way they've developed their part of the country. So Mr. De

Shalit believes strongly that the Israelis must share their wealth, and that the whole world needs to help with this. Only then will people become calm enough to stop looking for differences and start rediscovering their similarities. At that point, the precise determination of who should own which piece of land will become unimportant.

I especially enjoyed listening to him because in fact, he isn't the kind of person who likes to speak too much. He doesn't tend to express himself very glibly in public. So his words came out in a very heartfelt, hesitant way. I was told that even though he is an Israeli, he is very much involved in bringing better education to the Palestinian people by cooperating with professors from Palestinian universities. Another nice thing was that this conversation had also started in a rather superficial way, with many people expressing rather predictable, simple views about the situation and making jokes. But eventually, it settled into a discussion where we all thought seriously, and learned something, I think.

So somehow, when we gathered for breakfast this morning, the conversation was very easy, and we spoke again about many interesting things, such as the history of relations between Europe and Asia, the nature of Alexander's empire, archeology in Israel and Egypt, and the development of democracy in 19th century Europe, especially, how it compares with Asia in the 20th century. As soon as people relax a bit, it ends up being not at all difficult to talk about things that are rather serious. At some point, we were talking about the issue of religion in western countries like France, Germany, and the US. And that was when I ended up having a very serious talk with Mr. Grosse-Kloenne.

I realize at this point that I have never talked with you carefully about the more complicated

issues surrounding religion. But I also know that I have to sometime because you will encounter obvious questions in interactions with both children and grown-ups. Similar themes come up in relation to pretty much any religion, but I'll concentrate on Christianity since that's the religion most in focus in the countries we tend to be in. You see, one mistake that is very common is to think that there has to be a big difference between Christians and those who are not. I think you asked me at some point if I was a Christian. Probably, a simple answer is no, in the sense that this is the answer that people will usually give when they are not thinking too hard. But as usual, the truth is not so simple. Some people may say that it comes down to the question of whether or not you believe in god, but deeper thought reveals that it's not so easy to ascertain even the essential nature of belief. I don't want to go into too many details with you just now, because these issues can be very complex and we should have a more knowledgeable conversation at a later time. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are no easy answers to any of the deeper questions of life. So let us say that you and I are not Christians. That doesn't stop us from learning from the teachings of Jesus, or lighting a candle for Mary and sincerely praying for the poor people of the world when we visit a cathedral. Neither would people call us Buddhists, but we have bowed to the Buddha in many temples and thought for long periods on what it means to discard the illusory pleasures and pains of the world. There are even people who think that you can't be both Christian and Buddhist at the same time, but all you have to do is remember Sister Vietnam from Plum Village to see that that's not quite right. The truth is that deep questions about nature and humanity and a true love of the universe around us seems always to bring people to the same point, whether their favorite teacher is

Buddha, Jesus, Mr. Luther, St. Paul, Mohammed, or Socrates. So why is it that there are people who think that, say, a Christian and a non-Christian are fundamentally different?

I feel almost like I shouldn't even tell you that some people think this, since it's usually better not to know it. But judging from questions you've already asked me,

I probably can't avoid giving you a reasonable discussion of the matter. The reasons are complex, but I can give two answers at the moment. The first is that when people experience difficulties, they often try to find someone to blame. Now it's always possible for life to throw some trials in the path of good people, whether they live in ancient Rome, the middle ages, or in modern times. When people run out of patience in the face of such difficulties, they can easily turn against those around them, and look for someone to blame. This is a terrible thing, but it does seem to be a very human weakness. In the middle ages, when it was difficult to produce food, times of famine would often turn people against their neighbors, even for trivial differences. In modern times, when food is not (or shouldn't be) an issue, human society is still beset by many anxieties, greed, loneliness, degradation of the environment, and of course, simple accidents. This then can still bring out the tendency for some people to blame others for various misfortunes. Of course, this doesn't change the fact that most people are very well-meaning in their hearts. It's just that hard times, real or imagined, can make even good people weak and mean. So even in our times, people who believe in different gods can blame each other for the problems of the world, while the non-believers can blame the Christians or the Muslims. In general this is a very bad situation to get trapped into. But you see, my second answer to the question is

that people really do not believe so strongly in such fundamental differences. At least, not in their hearts. In my experience, it is rather rare to find someone who will hold fast to such a belief when they are questioned in a serious and patient way. But sometimes, people can say quite harmful things without really meaning to, simply out of habit. This is perhaps best illustrated with an example, not directly related to religion, that occurs frequently in the universities. As you know, I've worked in many universities around the world for different lengths of times and you would expect that people in universities would always be thinking very deeply about matters. Unfortunately, when they encounter the anxieties that society throws at them, the university people tend to react also with a great degree of fear and simplicity. So when discussing problems of the world, you will often find people in the university simply blaming them on those who are less educated than they are. This is another terrible thing. (People at the university, unfortunately, also often blame religious people.) Of course, I believe very much in the importance of learning. But the more we learn, the more it becomes evident that true understanding of anything is located at a point that lies beyond the knowledge of the material world. Studying the world through travel or in books can help us to walk right up to the door of truth, but the final leap into it requires people to look into their hearts and souls, and into a mystical place that defies words and concepts. So how can it be that trouble is created simply because not enough people have studied at the universities? Clearly it can't, and I don't think anyone even really believes it can. If anyone says he or she does, you only have to question them seriously, about the people they have loved and trusted in their lives, the ones they find themselves close in spirit to, and so forth. For

example, Chungminumma hasn't been to a university, but it's very hard to imagine her creating problems in the world on that account. Mrs. Disch's son wasn't so good at school and has never left his valley in the Black Forest, but from his mother, I would guess that he is a very good person indeed. Most people soon realize that a division of the humanity into the educated and ignorant is very unreal. The same goes for the division into Christians and non-Christians, or the religious and the secular. In the concrete details of their actual lives, most people can and do love and understand others, independent of superficial classifications. Nevertheless, careless ways of speaking can easily convince them, at least for short periods, that they understand other people much less than they actually do. This is the reason I don't like it at home when you use words like 'stupid'. This is one of those descriptions that it's really impossible to mean sincerely, but that can be genuinely harmful to everyone including the one who uses it. Anyways, to summarize, the same applies to all the imagined differences in the world. Of course people look different, have different talents, and speak in different ways. But there is no difference that is so great that people need to be divided on the issues that really matter in life. From that perspective, I don't think I really even want to answer the question of whether I am a Christian, or a Buddhist, or anything else of that nature.

But let me return to this morning's discussion. Mr. Grosse-Kloenne is a gaunt young man with fiery eyes. At some point he entered the conversation objecting to the way someone at the table was speaking about religion. It turns out he is a devout catholic, which is somewhat rare among mathematicians. I don't think I told you even that, but it is true that religious people are rather

rare in the universities. I think because he was aware of that, he was quite prepared for a rather unpleasant argument. We started discussing this and that. It really took me a while to convince him that I wasn't against Christianity, very far from it. I told him, for example, that many of my friends from Korea are very devout Christians, and that we often feel we share similar sentiments about the deeper issues of life regardless of what human words we use to express our beliefs. This point, by the way, is rather essential. The different words used to express inner worlds that are after all very similar can cause people easily to mistrust each other unless they take pains to be generous with interpreting what others say. Mr. Grosse-Kloenne was initially very reluctant to consider these possibilities. I suspect that he has really grown up in a situation where people are very used to exaggerating the differences between Christians and non-believers, so he was very unwilling to consider that he and I could have important things in common. He said so many times. Nevertheless, I think many things also were said on both sides in good faith. In any case, I did feel like he would have an easier time communicating honestly with non-religious people, of which he certainly must meet a lot of in departments of mathematics, if he would try to find common ground whenever possible. I couldn't tell what kind of an effect the conversation was having on the fellow. At some point, we had to conclude our discussion in the middle of a rather heated exchange because we had to prepare for our departure. But it was clear that he was in deep thought. We got on different taxis to Wolfach station, so there was no chance to speak again until we were in the station at Offenburg. He and Mr. Schneider were taking the same train as me up to Mannheim, although we had reservations in different cars. On the platform, we just talked about pleasant topics. I asked the two

of them some simple questions about a sign in German on the station wall, where I found advertised cultural events at a Baroque mansion in the town of Rastatt having to do with the 350th anniversary of a Count Ludwig Wilhelm. And then we were briefly interrupted by the lady who asked for help with her bags. Schneider was a bit reluctant because he was in car 5 while she had to get to car 3. So I quickly pointed out that I was in car 4 and could easily help her onto the train and get back to my own seat. She thanked me and sauntered off to a convenient location for boarding the train, trailing her heavy bags. At this point, the train could be seen in the distance. So I thought I had better follow the lady and started to bid them a good journey. What was very moving was that when we shook hands, Mr. Grosse-Kloenne looked at me intently, and grasped my hand with his thin fingers very firmly for about half a minute as though he wanted to communicate something. As I boarded the train, I couldn't help thinking back on that moment and suspecting that even with our short conversation, part of him couldn't help agreeing that we were not so different after all, even if I don't go to church.

And that's the way it seems to be. Somehow, we go from one place to another, encountering all these souls who are after all searching for the same things even when they seem unable to understand each other at all. We meet, communicate (sincerely) when we can, shake hands when we can, and create in very thin strips one at a time all those connections that will make up the eventual fabric of the one world that we often speak about. Of course, I have no real way of knowing what Mr. Grosse-Kloenne was thinking at the time or if our conversation had any real significance for him. But I do think I will remember his handshake for a

while as a good conclusion to this nice sojourn in the Black Forest.

Oh yes, I meant also to tell you that I have made at least some mathematical progress as well during this week. At least I understand what precise difficulties I have to overcome to solve the problem I've been thinking about. Narrowing down the difficulty is usually rather an important step towards resolving it. But I'll save that for another letter.

Good Night Mr. O.

Mr. D.

