

# Das Blatt

The American Goethe Society's Electronic Newsletter

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## The American Goethe Society's 2008 Klassisches Oktoberfest

Thomas Meindl, Cultural Attaché at the German Embassy, welcomed 60 AGS members and guests to the 2008 Klassisches Oktoberfest reception and dinner on Friday evening, 26 September. Then Erika Joyce, the new AGS president, introduced herself and Sharon Higgins, the new AGS vice-president. She next acknowledged Michael Hobson, who had served as our Web master for the past four years, and noted Irmgard Wagner's splendid leadership of the Society, 2004-2008. Could it really be true, as Erika noted in these introductory remarks, that we have come to the German Embassy House, for "half a decade" to begin our annual Klassisches Oktoberfest activities? Well, so it is, and the reception/dinner was as gemütlich as ever and another sell-out as well.

On behalf of the Executive Committee that has worked with Irmgard for the past four years, Barbara Alsip presented Irmgard with a pewter stein containing the following inscription: "Irmgard Wagner, President/ American Goethe Society/ 2004-2008/ *Dichtung und Wahrheit*."

This year's theme was "Literature and the Art of Landscape Design." As Erika noted, since Beethoven, Brahms, and Schubert wrote no songs with a park as a theme, we departed from our tradition of singing German songs after supper to listening to renditions of park poetry, beautifully interpreted by Sherie Day ("Park Monceau [Paris]" by Kurt Tucholsky, 1890-1935); Esther Elstun ("Komm in den totgesagten park und schau" by Stefan George, 1868-1933); and Leslie Weisman ("Im Park" by Joachim Ringelnatz, 1883-1934).

Saturday morning at the Goethe-Institut we met for an illustrated lecture on "Goethe's *Elective Affinities* (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*)" by Elizabeth Barlow Rogers. Elizabeth Rogers was the first Central Park Administrator and was appointed by then Mayor Koch. She is now President of the Foundation for Landscape Studies and the author of several books on landscape design. (Below is a condensed version of her keynote speech as it pertains to Romantic Landscape and Goethe's *Elective Affinities*.)

That afternoon we watched the Italian movie version of *Elective Affinities*. Several people had indicated after

watching the movie that they would want to read Goethe's novel at long last. Our Oktoberfest ended, as always, with an abundance of wonderful cakes and pastries from the Old Heidelberg for our Kaffee und Kuchen.

-- Barbara Alsip

## The German Romantic Landscape and Its Influence

Romanticism is a Western European movement that occurred roughly between the years 1760 and 1830. As a counter-movement to Enlightenment, it placed sensibility, or emotional response, on a par with intellectual reason. And most important was a new attitude toward nature. Romanticism abolished the rigid separation between the pleasure garden or park and the rural and wooded scenery that lay beyond their boundaries. The imagery of both rural and wild nature influenced the design of great estate parks as well as those open to the public.

Germans made profoundly Romantic contributions to the art of landscape design in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its philosophical underpinnings. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), an ardent admirer of the arch-apostle of Romanticism Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wrote about the aesthetic categories of the Beautiful and the Sublime in terms of landscape and garden: "Tall oaks and lonely shadows in a sacred grove are sublime; flower beds, low hedges and trees trimmed in figures are beautiful."

There is, however, a problem when we deal with landscape not as paintings but as actual design. Estate properties are seldom situated atop high mountain peaks or perched on a rocky ledge lashed by pounding surf, and landowners would probably be reluctant to summon up fierce tree-breaking storms, even if they could. It is therefore hard, if not impossible, to design a Romantic landscape that is truly Sublime in the eighteenth-century Kantian sense.

Other eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists, however, defined an intermediate category between the Beautiful and the Sublime: the Picturesque. It was first applied to the art of travel; a view or scene was considered picturesque if it resembled scenes of landscape painters. Then landscape designers appropriated the term as they imitated painting in their work.

The Picturesque landscape was imbued with many of the elements dear to Romantic hearts: hermitages, rustic huts, real or fabricated ruins, cascades, caves, and mysterious woods interspersed with sunlit glades. At the heart of Romantic landscape design lies the experience of the observer moving through space past these picturesque elements.

Literature, too, influenced the design of the Romantic landscape, and one cannot talk about the eighteenth and nineteenth-century garden without discussing the two great literary figures that tower over the Age of Romanticism: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*La Nouvelle Heloise*) and Goethe (*Elective Affinities*). In each novel a garden is both a Romantic metaphor and design prescription.

In Goethe's elegantly constructed plot of *Elective Affinities*, the action takes place to a large extent in a garden in which the author's personal knowledge of the principles of landscape design is evident. Expansive views are as important as secluded spots adorned with rustic structures. The building of the garden is central to the plot of *Elective Affinities*, and Goethe approaches the subject from both a poetical and a practical perspective.

Charlotte, one of the four protagonists, is the mistress of a Romantic garden. The opening scene in the book takes place in the newly finished moss hut she has designed. This feature is typical of the Rousseau-influenced garden conducive to imagination and reverie. But for Goethe, a good landscape design was more than a collection of charming, evocative features arranged in a naturalistic setting. With the entrance of another protagonist, the Captain, who is an experienced engineer, it becomes apparent that an overall plan encompassing the entire property should be made, with consideration as well of the views of its surrounding scenery. The Captain sets to work, and according to Goethe, "The topographical map on which the estate and its surroundings had been drawn in pen and wash—with graphic accuracy in a relatively large scale, its precision thoroughly checked by the Captain's trigonometric measurements—was soon finished." Eager to mitigate any slight Charlotte may have felt because her plans for the garden were being superseded, the men decide to—quote—"bring out those illustrated English estate descriptions."

Those books—whose author is undoubtedly Humphry Repton, the influential English landscape designer—revealed, according to Goethe, "in each instance a map of the area and a view of the landscape in its natural state, then on separate flaps the change artfully made to

utilize and enhance its original good properties. From this the transition to their own estate, their own surroundings, and what could be made of them, was an easy one. Now it became a pleasant task to consult the map the Captain had made, although at first it was hard to tear themselves away from Charlotte's original conception of the project." (Practical Charlotte frequently reminds them of the costs the new plan will involve.)

The consideration of the layout of paths in terms of the best views to be achieved as one moved through the landscape was of critical importance. In this regard, the fourth principal character in the book, Charlotte's beautiful ward Otilie plays a role: "Putting her finger on the highest part of the rise, Otilie said: 'I would build the summer house here. You wouldn't see the manor from there, of course, since it would be hidden by the clump of trees; instead, you would be in a new and different world, with the village and all the houses hidden from sight. The view of the lakes, toward the mill, the hills, mountains and countryside, is extraordinarily beautiful; I noticed it as we went past.' "

Thinking in terms of a comprehensive plan; retaining some Picturesque structures while opening the garden up to broad views of the countryside; partially hiding a village from view while integrating it into the overall scheme; understanding (if nevertheless disregarding) the high costs involved in executing such a grand project; reliance on Repton's books for inspiration; the consciousness that the scenery revealed by movement through the landscape is critical in large-scale park design, thus making the lay-out of roads and pathways of the essence—in these ways *Elective Affinities* is almost a treatise on landscape theory in the guise of a novel.

-- Elizabeth Barlow Rogers

### Remembering John Edwin "Ted" Mock

The American Goethe Society mourns the loss of our esteemed member, Ted Mock, on 24 September 2008. Born in Altoona, Pennsylvania and a graduate of West Point, Ted attained the rank of lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force and was stationed for many years in Wiesbaden, Germany. After completing his military career, he was appointed a senior executive in the Department of Energy during the Carter administration. A brilliant and modest man of great accomplishment, Ted held numerous advanced degrees in law, nuclear physics and patents. In retirement, the study of German was only one of his many pursuits. Wise, warmhearted, witty and generous, he was always ready to share his vast store of knowledge, whether in Irmgard Wagner's informal German study group or at AGS executive

committee meetings where he contributed his legal expertise. Ted was truly an officer and a gentleman and will be greatly missed. The AGS extends heartfelt sympathy to his daughter Susan.

-- Sharon Higgins

### **Introduction to the Book Conversation, *Earthquake in Chile***

Our October book conversation centered on Heinrich von Kleist's famous novella 'Earthquake in Chile', written in 1807. In his story, Kleist refers to the events of a disastrous earthquake in Santiago de Chile from 1647, but takes his ideas from a later, equally catastrophic earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 which had an enormous effect on European intellectuals.

On All Saints Day, November 1, 1755, a huge earthquake shook Santiago while people attended mass, destroying much of the city and burying people by the thousands. News of the disaster quickly spread throughout Europe. The notion that natural phenomena might have caused the tragedy was soon discarded. Instead, catholic countries blamed the protestant heretics resident in Lisbon as the root cause of the disaster; the protestant north claimed that it was the infamous inquisition headquartered in Lisbon that had led to divine retribution.

Philosophers, scientists, kings and poets soon realized that their belief in the basic tenets of the Enlightenment was seriously shaken. Central to Enlightenment thought had been the celebration of reason through which one could understand the universe. The goals of rational thinking were those of knowledge, freedom and happiness, and the success of reason depended on its correct application and methodology.

Leibniz had first developed the idea of theodicy stating that despite an imperfect world the Supreme Architect had nevertheless chosen the 'Best of Worlds.' Kant, who had once given his approval to this idea of Optimism, rejected it and all attempts at theodicy in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake and finally the French Revolution.

In France, Voltaire and Rousseau engaged in a long controversy over the events of the Lisbon disaster. Rousseau was convinced that much misery could have been avoided if the people of Lisbon had only remained in the countryside instead of living in a crowded city atop a hill. Voltaire ridiculed his opponent as well as Leibniz in his satire *Candide* to the delight of King Frederick II of Prussia.

The effect of the earthquake of Lisbon certainly resonated for generations in European thought and culture. When Kleist came to write his novella, he purposely set his story a century earlier and in a place far removed from Europe, mysterious and exotic perhaps for the audience he had in mind.

-- Erika Joyce

### **Book Conversation: *Earthquake in Chile (Das Erdbeben in Chili)*, October 22, 2008**

Participants marvelled at Kleist's economy of style; in a mere eleven pages a story of stunning intensity unfolded that posed as many questions as it answered. Agreement developed on the scale of human value; heroic behavior gets highest marks with Don Fernando at the top, who at the risk of his own life defends the adults and especially the infants entrusted to him. The navy officer who slinks away when bravery is needed was linked to Kleist's own negative experience as a military officer in his younger years. Similarly the demagoguery of the priest and the violent reaction of the lynch mob were connected to Kleist's anticlerical and especially anti-Catholic views. But a deeper skepticism regarding human nature in general was obvious in the inhuman brutality and relentless violence exhibited by the populace versus the youthful sinners and their offspring. It appeared clear therefore that the apparent idyll of universal reconciliation and peace among mankind in the middle of the story was just that: deceptive appearance and illusion; a Rousseau-like utopia that history had reduced ad absurdum in the Terror of the French Revolution.

-- Irmgard Wagner

### **Deutsch am Dienstagmittag**

This new program of German culture-and-conversation is offered by the Goethe-Institut and led by our ex-president, Irmgard. Three times since September, once a month at noon on a Tuesday (usually the second), groups of sociable German speakers have assembled for presentations of various topics and thoughtful discussions. At the first meeting in September, it was introductions all around. In October, AGS member and film journalist Leslie Weisman introduced the sci-fi film classic, *Metropolis*, with its recently discovered lost scenes. Viewers-listeners were entranced since the film was new to them in its entirety, not just the "lost" scenes. In November (on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday, since the Goethe-Institut was closed on the 11<sup>th</sup> for Veterans' Day), AGS member Professor Francien Markx (George Mason University) presented two compositions, by Goethe-friends Zelter and Reichardt, of Goethe's deeply moving 1809 ballad, "Johanna Sebus," about the 17-year-old girl who drowned while trying to save others from the flooded Rhine. (You can visit her monument

on the Web.) Attendees bring their own lunch and are treated by the Goethe-Institut to beverages and Plätzchen (Gutsle, cookies). The next *Deutsch am Dienstagmittag* is scheduled for Tuesday, 9 December. AGS members who would like to practice their German are welcome to attend. Just RSVP to Irmgard at [iwagner@gmu.edu](mailto:iwagner@gmu.edu).

-- Irmgard Wagner

**Celebrating Goethe's Geburtstag at Cafe Mozart, August 30, 2008**

We had a surprisingly large attendance for this event, especially at the last minute when our reserved room at Cafe Mozart was filled almost beyond capacity. A selection of poetry from Goethe's travels was presented, with numerous references to his "Italienische Reise."

Sharon and Scott Higgins had recently returned from a visit to Germany and brought excellent photographs of many places Goethe had visited and admired. We especially liked the photograph from an old sign near the Heidelberger Schloss with the inscription: *Goethe war hier*.

In the midst of or lively conversation, the birthday cake with candle in honor of Goethe's 259th birthday was ceremoniously brought in, and even the most ardent dieters could not resist having just a tiny taste. Goethe would have enjoyed our party as much as we did that afternoon including the divine Nusstorte, 1000 calories a bite.

-- Erika Joyce

**Lunch mit Lyrik, November 15, 2008**

Those of us attending Lunch mit Lyrik at Cafe Mozart on November 15th agreed that this gathering turned out to be especially successful and enjoyable, due perhaps to the theme of "Food and Drink" and the wit and humor to be found in poetry relating to an excessively good meal. Despite the initial complaint about how difficult it was to find "anything suitable" on the Internet, everyone was nonetheless perfectly equipped with an array of humorous, often hilarious poems. There were hoots of laughter after each example, ranging from The Rat in Auerbach's Keller to a spoof on Bacchus to an ode on The Cheese. We delighted in an elegy on preparing the perfect roast, as well as the tragic tale in verse of Suppenkasper. Finally, the ballad of Herr von Ribbeck auf Ribbeck im Havelland and his famous pears was presented to great applause.

-- Erika Joyce