

## Revisiting Halberstadt, July 1997

JOHN RUSSELL BROWN

The idea was simple compared to the event: an international symposium on "A Place Revisited," to be held at the Gleimhaus library-museum at Halberstadt, the town in rural Saxony where the founder-editor of *Connotations*, Professor Dr. Inge Leimberg, had grown up before moving to the other side of the East/West divide. In the German Democratic Republic, such a meeting of scholars and critics from around the world for open and historically conscious discussions of literature in English would have been unthinkable. Now, once conceived and presented, the project attracted funding from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and the Kultusministerium des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt. Invited members of the symposium were warmly greeted at the Gleimhaus whose staff offered every possible facility and help.

Nothing could have prepared us for this visit. Halberstadt has been bruised during the centuries but is still a city of fabulous riches. At the head of a long open space surrounded by lime trees, stands a great Gothic cathedral, built on the site of two previous ones and presided over by a huge crucified Christ. Its treasury has a temporary roof replacing that blasted away during an air raid that shattered the town in 1945 during the very last days of the war when the American army was advancing as rapidly as it could to meet the Russian forces coming from the East. We were fortunate to be let in to the double cloisters on its south side by an aproned caretaker and then to hear the first guide-tour to be given in English by her young and knowledgeable colleague. Dust lay in the great church itself, a place of worship unused for more than fifty years and with little chance of ever being used again for its intended purpose. We had

time and silence in which to look up into its roof and along the aisles, to gaze at a pair of twelfth-century tapestries each about thirty feet long, and sculptures and paintings by masters of the late middle ages and Renaissance, to study meticulous workmanship in gold, silver, ivory, and precious stones.

On the Sunday morning of our visit, late in July, I entered a calm and spacious church in another quarter of town to find a white-haired congregation of thirty or so people, mostly women, gathered together in the sanctuary at prayers. A little later, in the cathedral there was no one at all. The great square before it was almost empty at mid morning: two or three parked cars, a couple of bicyclists, and one portly, elderly man sweeping the stone steps at the front door of a handsome and decaying eighteenth-century house. On my return an hour or so later, he was sat on the top step with his broom beside him staring across the street at the twin towers of the Church of our Lady which dates from the year 1005.

That night a concert was given in this Romanesque church by a forty-member choir of singers in their twenties and thirties, dressed in urban dinner jackets and black dresses of very individual styles. They were on tour throughout united Germany and sang mostly early and religious music well-suited to the lofty and hugely arched nave built with experienced skill and used for worship by former generations who rated holiness the highest human good. Sounds seemed to be perfected in that space.

Each day of the symposium papers were read and discussed about literary revisitings: by poets, Spenser, Marvell, Keats, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Eliot, and Californian Buddhists; and by novelists, Dickens, James, Conrad, Joyce Carol Oates; and varied works by other writers and some painters, from recent and much earlier times, over centuries shared by this magnificent town which was offered to our appreciation. As our discussions examined the interfaces between persons and places, and between the world of the mind and that of daily business and affairs, the huge question of what should be done with our great inheritance of thinking and living as evidenced across Europe during the last thousand years was bound to fill our minds. That was a conjunction of place and

study we did not anticipate and our new awareness of it will now help to direct our next steps through on-coming time and the building of a new Europe and a new world fit for generations unlike any that have come before.

We were revisiting a Europe from before the last war. Papers prepared for a scholarly attempt to deal with the writings of past times were read in a place that led thought toward the future when Halberstadt will be developed and exploited as other beautiful towns have been. As educators as well as scholars, we knew we were all, in some small way, responsible for what had happened and that we might, in still smaller or at least less noticed ways, be able to have some influence on the next generation that will make that future. How will Halberstadt find means and inspiration to use that great cathedral and its other inheritance of gracious houses, of winding streets with companionable wooden-framed houses and shops, of craftsmanship and art, and of the bomb-cleared building sites in the process of redevelopment as part of adventure capital's competitive programmes? As we considered where we were, our discussions about revisitings were also about all our futures.

The University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor