

Residency Report | AIR Krems | 16 July – 15 August 2011  
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Project name: Hidden Stone

I planned to use the time of my residency at AIR Krems to write the draft of a long poem for which I had been taking some notes for the previous several months. Because of the time normally required for me to fulfill my teaching duties, I have less time for creative work than I would like. I mention this to say I was anxious to begin to work from the moment we arrived in Krems.

The poem I drafted, called “Hidden Stone,” is the cornerstone for a book-length series I have been working on for the past year, provisionally entitled “Earth Is Best.” The poem merges the account of a foray to hunt for porcini mushrooms (*Boletus edulis*; or *Herrenpilze* or *Steinpilze* auf Deutsch) in Oregon that I made in 2009 with an oblique history of esotericism, with special emphasis on the themes and terminology of alchemy. I relied on notes and memories for the mushroom-hunting foray. These I amplified with a careful reading of *Soma: The Divine Mushroom of Immortality* by R. Gordon Wasson, a book that posits the origins of organized human religion in a ritual to consume the mushroom called *Amanita muscaria* (*Fliegenpilze*), which includes a mildly hallucinogenic toxin. Alongside, I conducted a careful reading of Carl Jung’s essay “Religious Ideas in Alchemy: An Historical Survey of Alchemical Ideas” (from *Psychology and Alchemy*, vol. 12 of the Collected Works in English). I was guided in the composition of this poem by the famous alchemical dictum: *Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem*, translated into English: Visit the interior of the Earth and discover there the hidden stone. The dictum is also an acrostic: the first letter of each word spells VITRIOL, which is the corrosive agent used in alchemical processes to get to the essence of a substance. I was focused on the idea of the “hidden” or “secret” stone, which is understood to be the *lapis philosophorum*, or philosopher’s stone, of alchemical quests, the perfect stone that reveals the nature of reality. My imagination followed at least two converging vectors: mushroom hunting is a secret activity – essentially esoteric. Which is to say, it involves an investment of the imagination in the generative reality of secrecy: you hunt mushrooms in private, you do not tell anyone where you find your mushrooms, and mushrooms themselves are silent – “hidden in plain sight,” as an expression in English has it. The other vector is one of the names of *Boletus edulis* in German: *Steinpilz*. It is so called because the cap of the mushroom resembles a smooth, rounded stone.

AIR Krems was an ideal place for me to draft this poem, which I am happy to say I completed shortly before the conclusion of my residency. In addition to being a terrific work space – I was able to use one of the desks in the studio (Top 20) as a writing desk, as well as the table on the outdoor deck, which was my preferred place to work, Krems und Stein and the Wachau more broadly, was a superb environment to unspool my thinking. Typically, I would spend the mornings with my two sons (I’m grateful that because of the size of the studio I was able to come with my whole family), buying groceries for the day (I really loved the daily farmers’ market in Krems where Eierschwammerl and even Herrenpilze were on sale every day!), and then exploring the old town and the hills above Krems und Stein. Then, after some lunch, I would read and write for a few hours, taking notes from the two books I mentioned and sketching out ideas for my poem, followed by a two-to-three hour walk in the vineyards and woods. After preparing dinner for my family, I would work for another few hours, pulling my poem together.

These daily walks became essential to my creative work. In the month we spent in Krems, I walked many dozens of kilometers through the vineyards and hills. This included walking to Gottweig one afternoon (with one of my sons!), walking to

Dürnstein three different times, walking up to the Seehohe several times, and especially walking and exploring the hills above Stein that rise up around the Hubertushütte to be found at the end of the excellent Naturpfad created by the Stein Nature Verein. I was especially enchanted by the hand-painted signs of all the different mushrooms to be found in the woods. Alas, it was too early in the year for me to find any Herrenpilze, but on my walks I found many other mushrooms (which I typically took photographs of, except the one time I came upon a patch of Eierschwammerl; those, I picked!), as well as all kinds of birds, dozens of Schmetterlinge I had never seen before, and even deer scattering across the hills. On these walks, the contents and ideas of my reading and note-taking would jumble together and re-arrange in fortuitous patterns of language and idea, reassembling in my imagination such that I could write them down and use them in my poem.

As I said, this was, for me, an ideal work situation. Furthermore, I was constantly helped and supported by the staff at AIR Krems, especially Sabine Güldenfusz, who helped connect me to some of the other resident artists and who offered advice for renting bicycles, visiting Vienna, and renting a car. The entire time I was in Krems, I felt at ease and comfortable, thanks to Sabine, Elke, and Karin. Though sad to see my time in Krems come to an end, I've tried to carry the benefits of that time forward as I re-immense myself in my ordinary life back here in Chicago.

When my poem is completed (for me, this process typically takes 9-12 months), and when it is published in book form, it will be my pleasure to acknowledge AIR Krems as the point of origin for this poem.

I am truly grateful for the time I spent in what was for me the immensely productive work space of Top 20, AIR Krems, and the glorious Wachau. Many, many thanks.

Peter O'Leary, August 25, 2011, Chicago