June 4, 1978

Dear Bill,

Breen called Friday to ask if I had heard from you. He was anxious to have a clearer idea of what we would talk about. I hadn't heard from you, and still haven't decided what I should say, and so I couldn't be of much help to him. However I dropped by the IHES today to check my mail and found your letter. I now believe that I know what you will discuss, namely, the conjectures in general. Is that right?

That leaves two possibilities for me. I can either show how one verifies the conjectures in specific cases, using my letter to Rapoport, or I can discuss some simple cases of very hard reduction, namely, those occurring for quaternion algebras over real quadratic fields. Which do you recommend? If the first will be a useful supplement to your talk, I will choose it. Perhaps you could give me a call from your office, if UBC will pay for the call. My number is 907-42-79, Bures s/Yvette.

To tell the truth, Rennes has become a nuisance for me. I really want to try to think about cycles on algebraic varieties. It is not that I expect to be able to do anything, but simply that I find the problems interesting, and am disappointed at the scepticism and lack of pluck that prevails among algebraic geometers. Unfortunately I have been like the ass between two trusses of hay, and have managed to do nothing effective.

I rather liked your "chicken coop" metaphor. I had just seen a movie in which was shown a huge barrack filled with rows of chicken cages crammed with hens gobbling grain from one trough had laying eggs that rolled into another. It took me a while to recall what problems you were referring to, and then I recalled that I had commented on Serre in the last line of my card. It was even longer before it occurred to me that your "chicken coop" was related to my "cock of the walk". The new image was so vivid that it effaced the old.

There are no real problems. In fact in many respects this has been one of my more profitable stays in France. I have had a little more to do with day-to-day mathematical life than before. The only drawback is that, as things turned out, Charlotte cannot come until the sixteenth of June, and so I will have had to spend two months alone, and that is far too much. We are both too settled in marriage to enjoy being long apart, and so I am having second thoughts about Wales. My impulse now is simply to make a quick trip to Helsinki, returning to the cabin as soon as I can. But I will wait to see how you feel. I would still like to take a walking trip with you sometime.

I wish I had some good advice to offer you about the Kostant affair. Your advice to me after Tate's Princeton talk was among the best I have ever been given, and saved me a lot of pain and resentment. It is one thing not to be given adequate credit for one's efforts. One can learn to do without that. It is another to see it go to someone else.

You and Gregg will have learned the obvious lesson. Be careful with whom you talk! You both like to talk, and are slow to write things up, and put yourself into the hands of technically powerful people with few ideas of their own. This is not a first for either of you. Can't you salvage the situation simply by writing your paper. I assume that Kostant

acknowledges that you had done something first, and so even the appearance of his paper would not preclude the publication of yours. Besides those who are likely to use the results are close to you, not to him, and will be aware of this situation, and inclined to refer to your paper. I know that you both have other things to do, but try to find time to get the paper out. You seem to have a new typewriter, and you can let your fingers fly over the keyboard.

Borel is already gone; to Switzerland I believe. I was explaining the proof of my paper on automorphic representations to Deligne, and he caught a blunder, which I then had to repair. Unfortunately I did not get the corrected paper off in time, for I have just received the proofs following the original version. I hope the AMS will not balk at having to reset two pages.

Yours,
Bob

Compiled on November 12, 2024.